

# Special Report: The “Where” of Campus Expression

Payton Jones, Ph.D. & Kevin Price

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## The Campus Expression Survey

Since 2019, Heterodox Academy has been conducting the annual Campus Expression Survey (CES) to learn more about how free expression is experienced on university campuses in the United States. The CES is a survey that represents various universities and aims to understand open discussion, diverse viewpoints, and constructive disagreements in classrooms. It tries to answer questions like:

- Who is hesitant to share their opinions?
- What topics do students avoid discussing?
- What are the potential consequences students fear when speaking up, and who do they worry about (fellow students or professors)?

Answers to these questions are analyzed in annual reports released by the organization.

## This Report

Traditionally, our annual reports have delved into the “who” and “what” of campus expression, but one crucial aspect has been notably absent — **where**.

Curious readers of the CES have consistently requested answers to pivotal questions like:

- Does the challenge of campus expression predominantly afflict **elite** institutions?
- Is the issue more pronounced in **major research (R1)** universities?
- Do limitations on expression manifest more prominently in **coastal urban centers** or major cities?
- For parents aspiring to provide an environment conducive to free expression, does the choice between a **private** college and a state school matter?
- Do students feel more comfortable discussing controversial ideas in **small groups**?

In this report, we seek to group the 2019-2022 CES data by college and region to understand answers to these important questions.

## Understanding the Measures

**Reluctance** In this report, we will report on college students’ reluctance to speak about controversial topics. What does that mean?

The CES includes questions with the following format:

- Think about discussing a controversial topic about GENDER in a class this semester. How comfortable or reluctant would you feel about speaking up and giving your views on this topic?

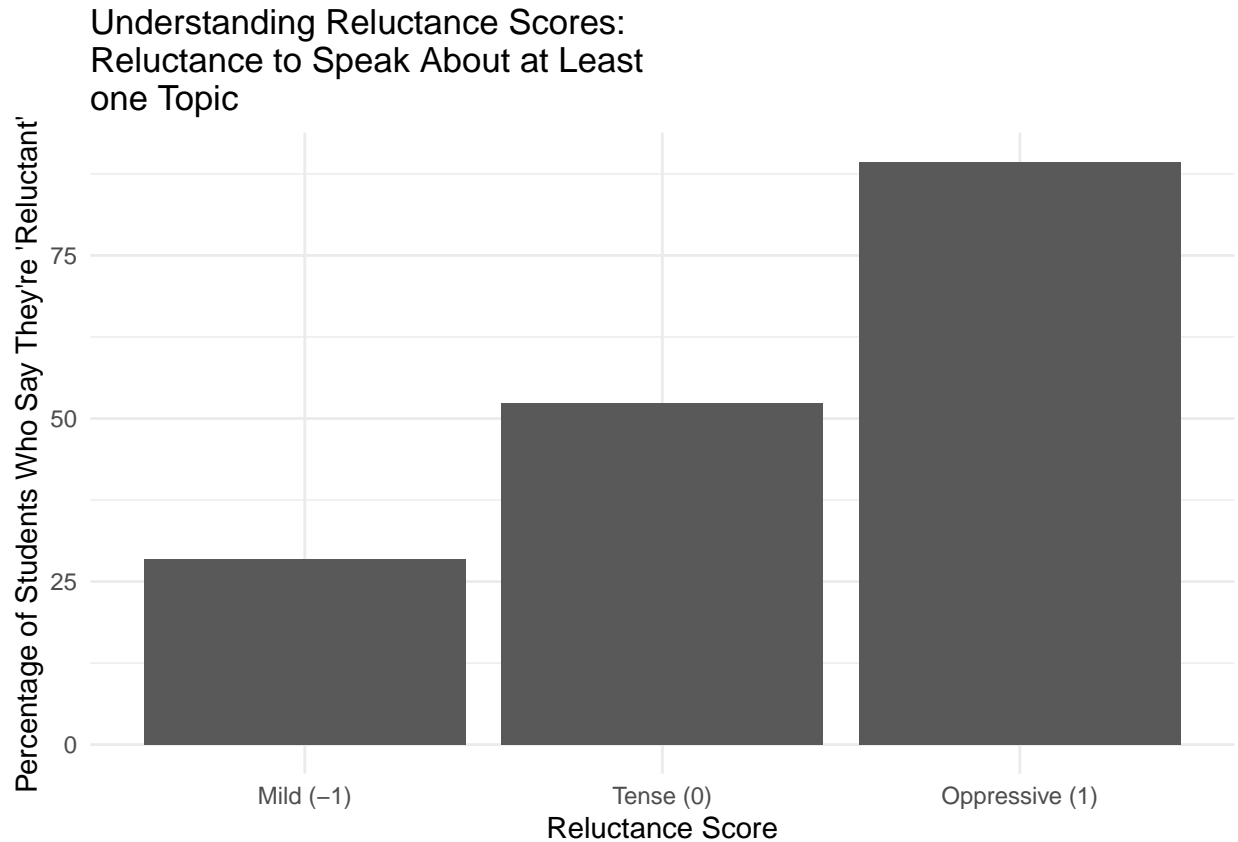
Students’ responses to individual items can be aggregated to gauge the overall culture surrounding each topic. To form an overall estimate of **reluctance**, students’ responses across multiple controversial items included in all annual CES surveys (race, gender, politics, and religion) can be aggregated together using principal components analysis.

**Controlling for General Reluctance** We asked students how comfortable or reluctant they would feel about speaking up about a “non-controversial topic”. This allows us to remove some of the false signal from students who are simply shy or reluctant to speak up for reasons unrelated to campus climate or controversy. Therefore, when we report on reluctance to speak about gender, this will represent reluctance to speak about gender *above and beyond the general reluctance to speak about a non-controversial topic*. The same applies to overall reluctance scores.

**Standardizing (“Z-Scores”)** To better compare different regions and types of colleges, we standardized responses (converted to “z-scores”). First, this means that various reluctance scores are **centered** - a score of 0 would mean that a college or region is exactly equal to the national average. Second, a score value other than zero represents the number of standard deviations away from the national average. For example, the University of Rhode Island had a reluctance score of 0.9, meaning that students’ reluctance was roughly one standard deviation higher than the national average.

**Understanding Standardized Reluctance Scores** Using standardized reluctance scores that control for general reluctance allows us to be more precise, repeatable, and to measure what we actually want to measure.

But what do these reluctance scores *mean* in practical terms?



A reluctance score of zero means that the student was about as reluctant to speak as the average student, nationally. But just how reluctant is this? Let’s pull the statistics.

For students with reluctance scores of about zero (between -0.5 and 0.5):

- 31.7% were reluctant to talk about politics
- 17.8% were reluctant to talk about race
- 22.8% were reluctant to talk about religion

- 15.0% were reluctant to talk about gender
- 52.4% were reluctant to talk about at least one of those four topics

This may be “average”, but it’s still quite disturbing. We would describe this atmosphere - typical of an American college campus, as “*Tense*”.

A reluctance score of 1 means that the student is one standard deviation more reluctant than the national average. But just how much is 1 standard deviation? To translate this to more familiar terms, a man in the US who is 1 standard deviation taller than average would be 6’1” (3 inches above the average of 5’10”).

For students with reluctance scores of about 1 (between 0.5 and 1.5):

- 59.3% were reluctant to talk about politics
- 40.8% were reluctant to talk about race
- 42.8% were reluctant to talk about religion
- 33.8% were reluctant to talk about gender
- 89.4% were reluctant to talk about at least one of those four topics

We would describe such a climate as “*Oppressive*”.

Finally, a reluctance score of -1 means the student is one standard deviation below the national average.

For students with reluctance scores of about -1 (between -0.5 and -1.5):

- 18.3% were reluctant to talk about politics
- 11.8% were reluctant to talk about race
- 14.9% were reluctant to talk about religion
- 11.4% were reluctant to talk about gender
- 28.5% were reluctant to talk about at least one of those four topics

This is an improvement from the average, but hardly anything to celebrate. We would describe this as a “*Mild*” climate.

There are some scores outside these ranges, but the vast majority of students (88.4) fall in one of these three climates

**Bayes Factors** To test various statistical hypotheses, we use **Bayes Factors** rather than p-values.

The reason for this is simple. Consider the hypothesis that students at R1 schools are more reluctant to speak about controversial topics compared to other schools. If we run a statistical analysis where R1 schools have slightly higher scores and  $p = 0.15$ , we cannot be sure whether R1 schools are **equal** to other schools, or whether we lack enough data to detect a meaningful difference. This is an important limitation of p-values.

Bayes Factors circumvent this problem by comparing the evidence for *two competing* hypotheses. In our case, the first hypothesis is that there is an effect (a difference), and the second hypothesis is that there is no effect (an equality). A Bayes Factor above 3 would suggest evidence in favor of the “difference” hypothesis. A Bayes Factor below 1/3 would suggest evidence in favor of the “equality” hypothesis. Anything in between 1/3 and 3 would suggest that we don’t have enough data to tell the difference, and that we shouldn’t jump to any conclusions.

## Sample Characteristics

Our online sample was designed to be geographically representative of US college students. The tables below show the breakdown of various demographic characteristics, which for the most part follow national trends in college attendance (e.g., majority female, white, and Democrat). The age range of the CES has been restricted to students age 18-24.

Gender	Count
Female	3098

Gender	Count
Male	1997
Non-binary/non-conforming	53
Nonbinary	39
Other	15

Race	Count
White	2070
Hispanic or Latino	704
Black or African American	482
Asian	263
Multi-racial	234
Middle Eastern	44
Other	25
American Indian or Alaska Native	18
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	8

Political Party	Count
Democrat	2277
Independent	1087
Republican	965
Haven't thought much about this	276
Other	210
Libertarian	170
Don't know	144

Sexuality	Count
Straight or heterosexual	2897
Bisexual	579
Gay or lesbian	185
Asexual	78
Other	77

Religion	Count
Christian	2696
Agnostic	688
Atheist	632
Other	620
Muslim	131
Jewish	101
Buddhist	95
Hindu	51

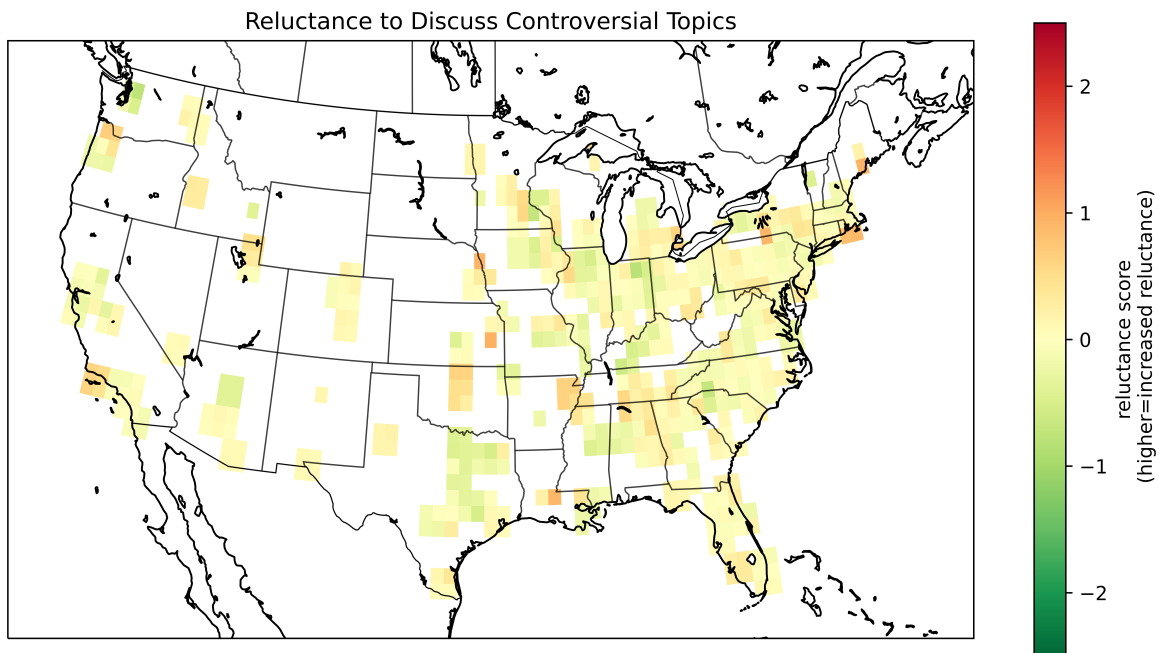
Age	Count
18	713
19	972
20	951
21	982
22	749
23	485
24	351

The available sample size has been roughly consistent over the years in which the CES has been collected (2019-2022). Note that these sample sizes may be slightly smaller than the full samples of corresponding CES reports, as this combined dataset has been filtered to students who self-reported a college that could be linked to a corresponding institution in the IPEDS dataset.

Year of Data Collection	Count
2019	1411
2020	1146
2021	1297
2022	1349

## The Geography of Reluctance

Let's start with a general visualization of reluctance across the nation.



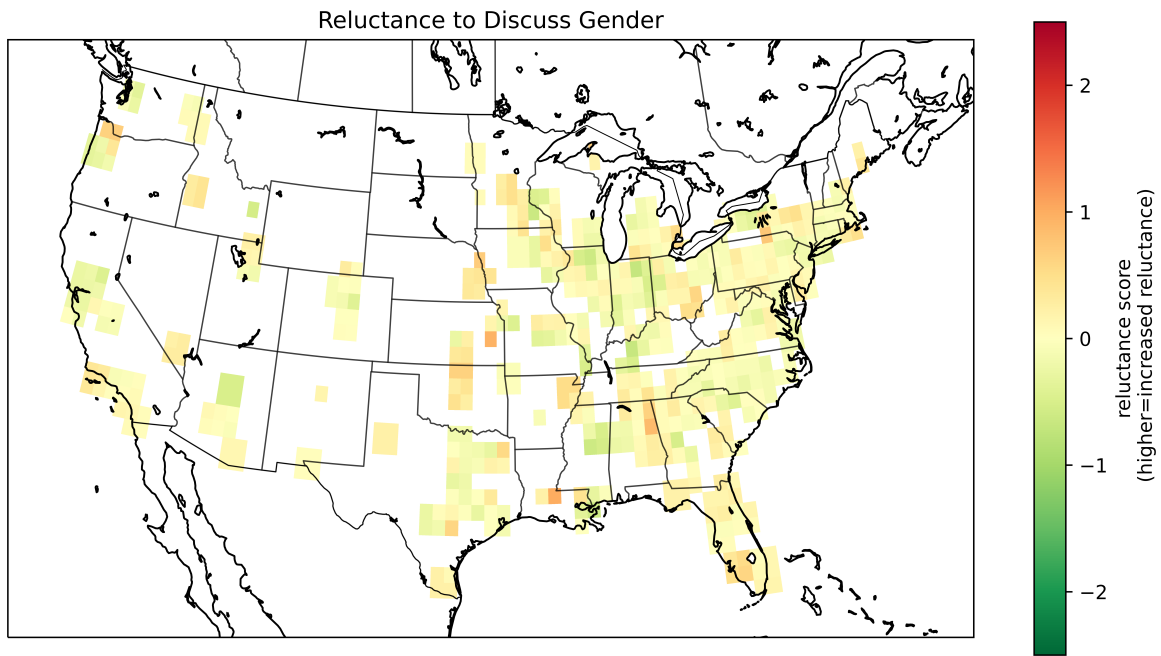
This map is created by matching each students' response to their campus, extracting the latitude and longitude of the campus from the IPEDS data, and performing a linear interpolation to combine the various

data points into geographical squares. To prevent outliers from becoming too prominent, we have also erased any squares interpolated using fewer than 10 student responses.

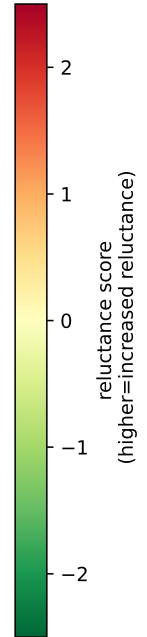
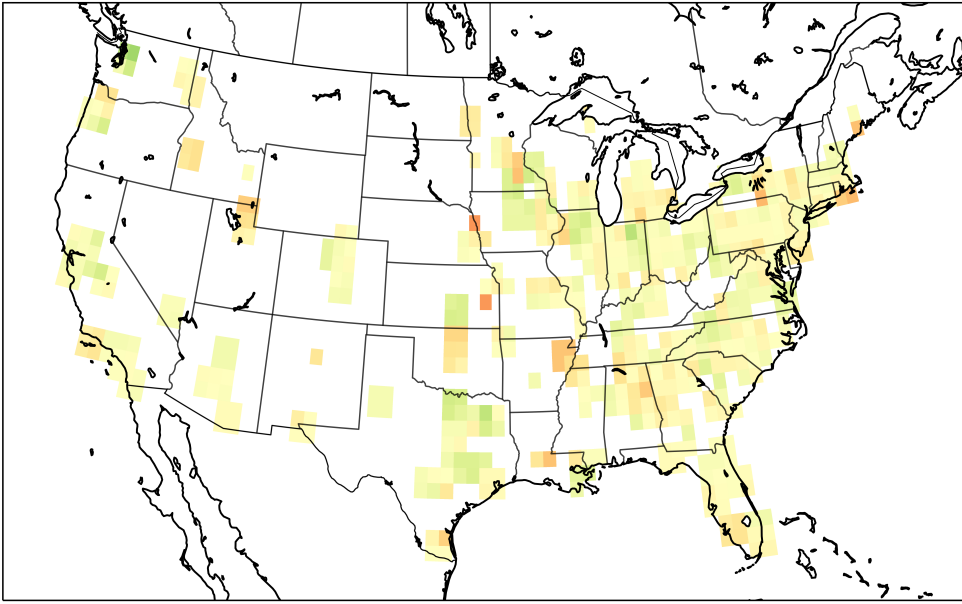
One major takeaway from this first map is the striking uniformity of reluctance across the nation. Though some pastures are greener than others, very few geographical areas are more than one standard deviation away from the national average. This is especially surprising given that some areas are comprised of just 10-20 data points. We would expect even greater uniformity if we had more data to smooth out responses.

As we delve deeper into the data, this overall story of uniformity will arise again and again.

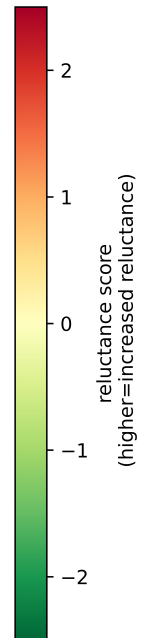
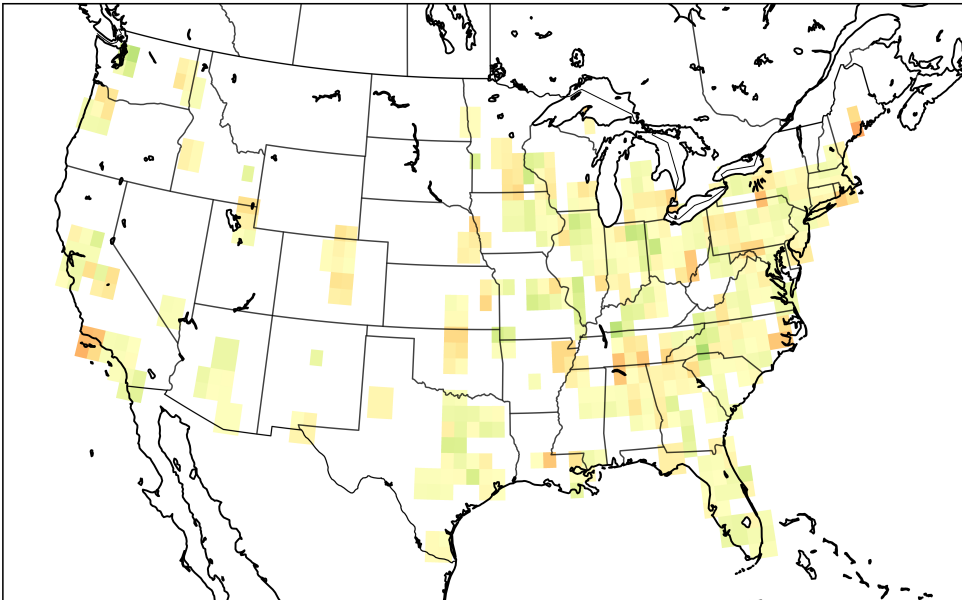
Next, let's break overall reluctance into its four component topics.

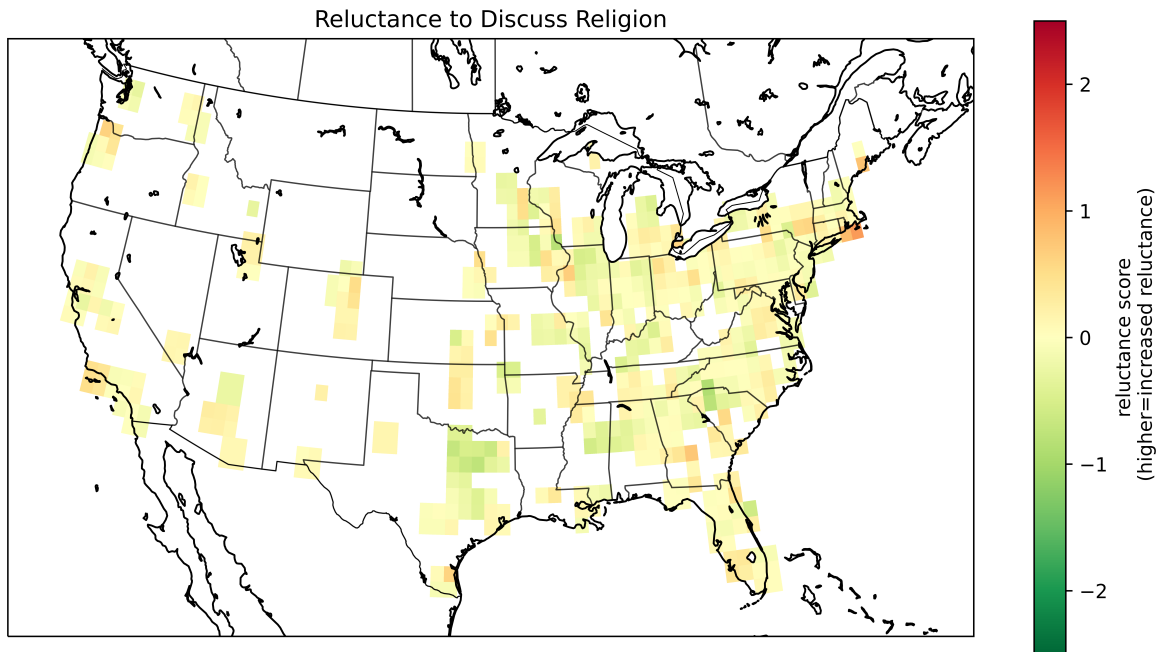


Reluctance to Discuss Politics



Reluctance to Discuss Race





As we search for patterns in these maps, the most surprising results are the patterns we *don't* find.

- For all their attention in media, the coasts do not appear to be outliers.
- With some exceptions, reluctance to talk about race does not seem more intense in the American South
- Reluctance to talk about politics is fairly uniform whether the state is Red, Blue, or Purple.

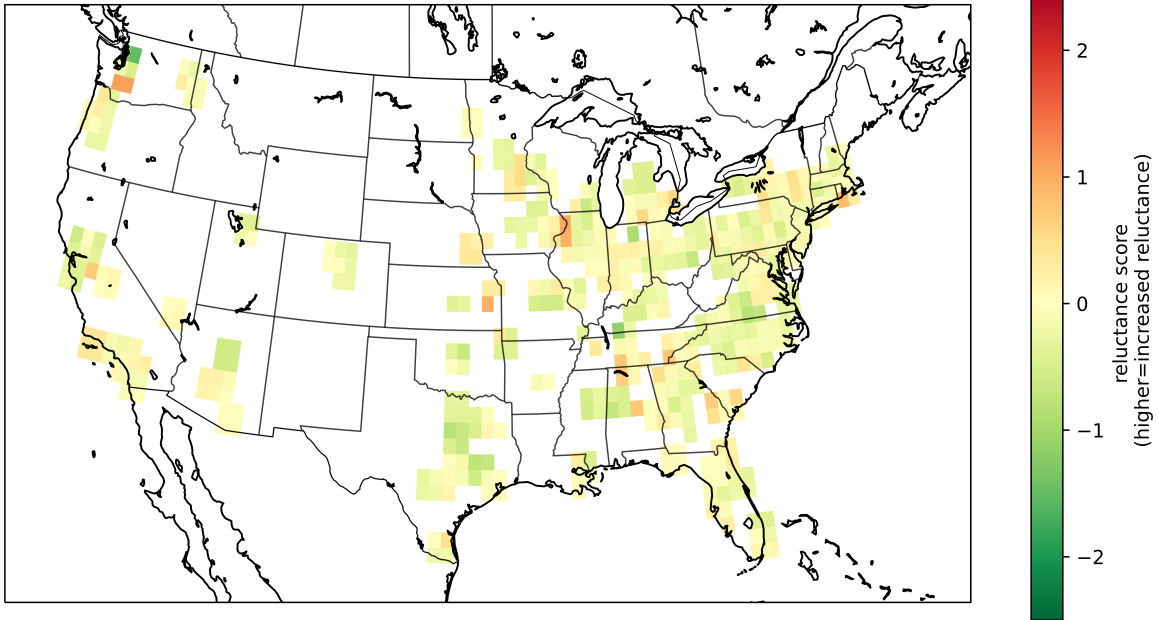
### Splitting Maps by Political Party

One reason why maps might look uniform is because we're aggregating the answers from students who are Democrats, Republicans, or Independent. Think about a school where most students are Republicans, like Liberty University. The Republican students might speak freely while the Democrat students hold their tongues. So, when we add up all their answers, they balance each other and the area has a reluctance score near average.

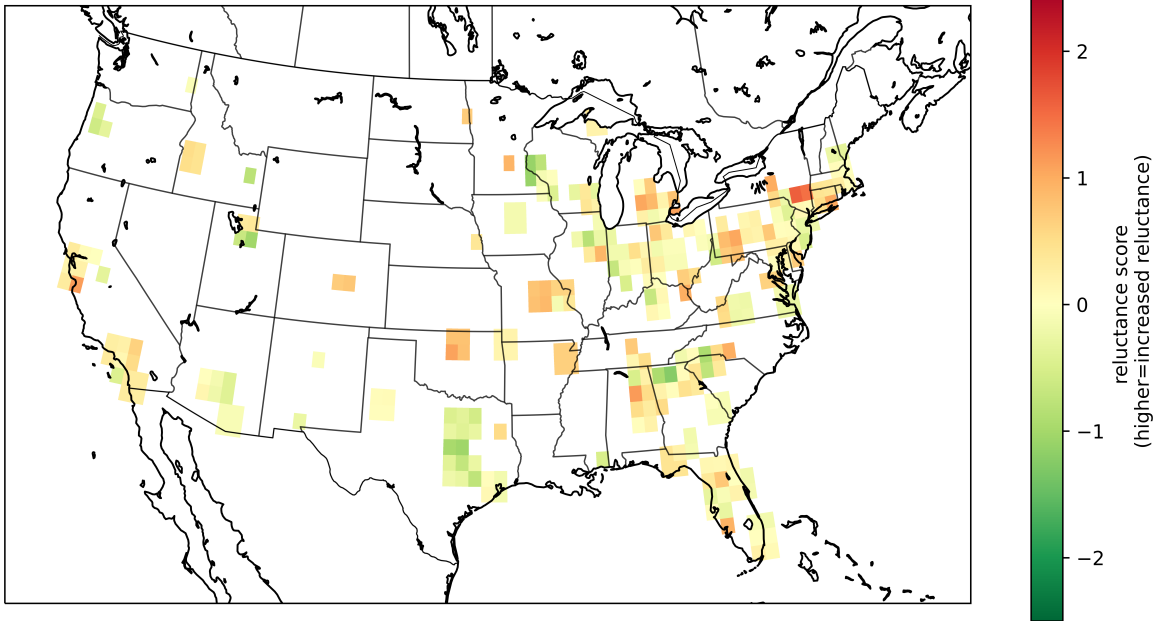
Let's examine reluctance for students of different political parties.



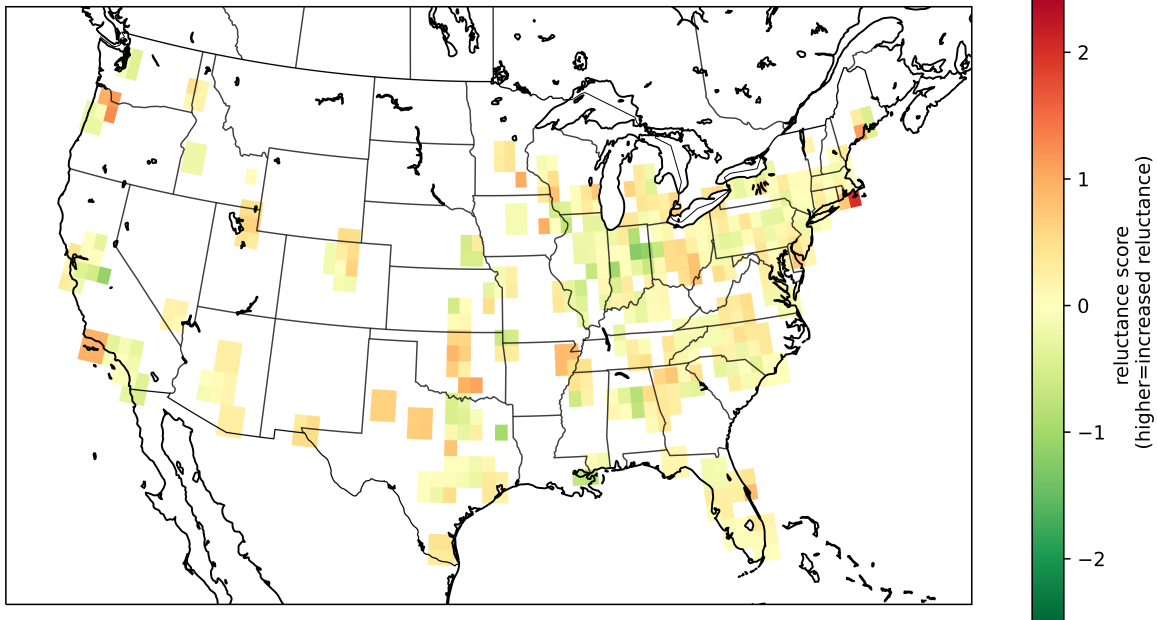
Democrat Students - Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics



Republican Students - Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics



Independent and Other Students - Reluctance to Discuss Controversial Topics

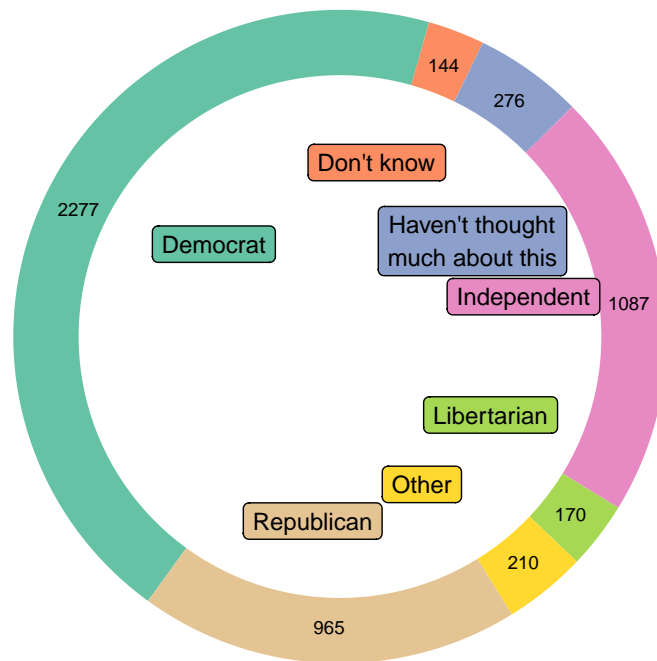


One immediate takeaway is that students identifying as Democrats are much more comfortable speaking their minds about controversial topics compared to Republican or Independent/Other students across the nation. If you have read the previous CES reports, this will not be surprising. Democrats consistently fell in the “Mild” to “Tense” range. In contrast, Republicans and Independents often reported reluctance consistent with an “Oppressive” campus culture.

Democrats were 13.6% less reluctant to discuss a controversial topic than Republicans, 21.7% less to discuss a controversial topic than Libertarians.

You may also notice that the sparsity of the data differs somewhat between the maps. This is because there are many more students who identify as Democrat than Republican or Independent. Our sample is nationally representative, and the distribution of students’ political orientation is not the close-to-halfway split we are accustomed to expect in age-aggregated samples and active voters.

## Students' Political Parties



In these maps, we can begin to see some of the trends we were missing before, such as Republicans being more comfortable in Texas compared to New York. Yet the uniformity of reluctance continues to surprise. For example, Democrats experience relative comfort to speak their minds anywhere in the nation; they show less reluctance than Republicans even in Republican strongholds.

Another interesting trend is that Independent and other students - including students who said they “haven’t thought much about” political party - seem to closely match Republican reluctance across the nation. This supports the idea that universities experience a general orthodoxy of liberal thought rather than a specific bias against Republicans per se.

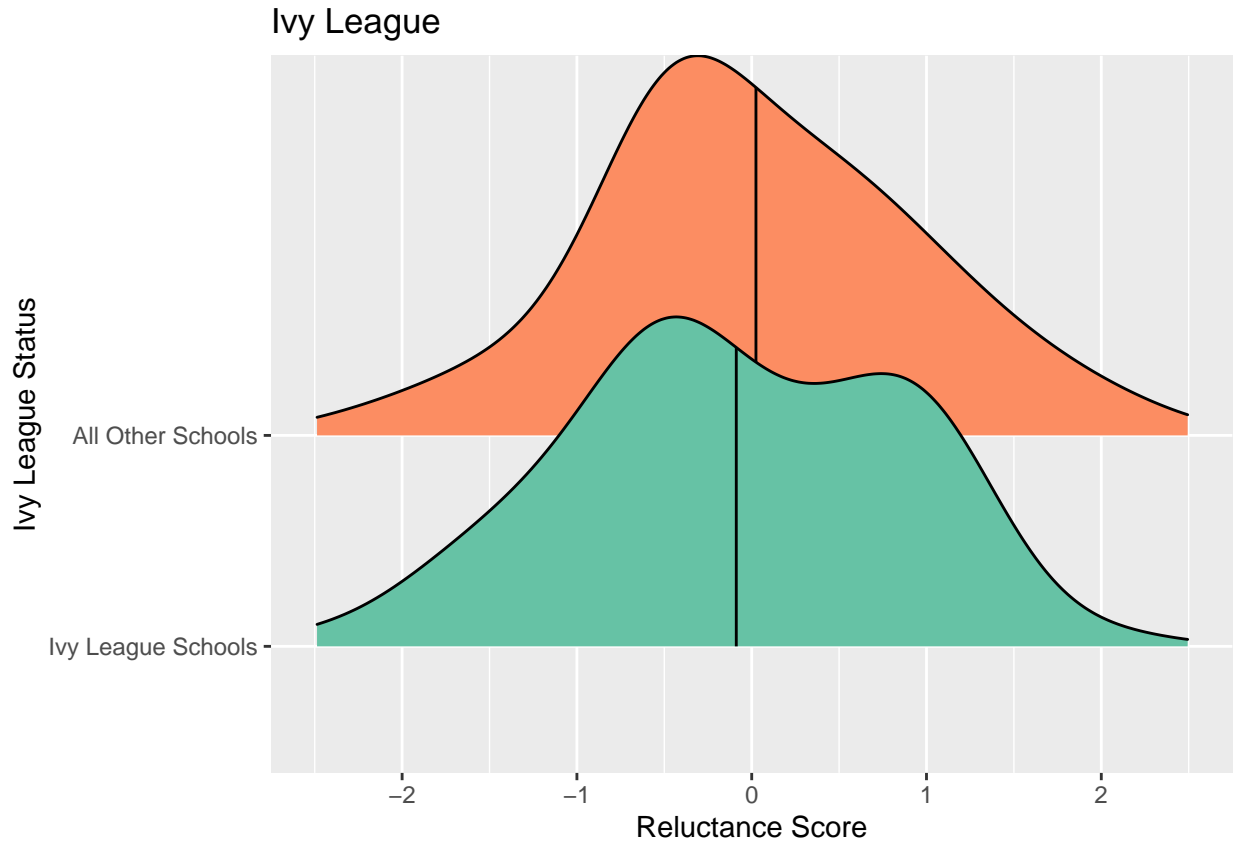
These maps also seem less uniform, but we must be careful about interpreting this. The minimum for interpolation has been lowered from 10 to 5 for these graphs to prevent blackouts, which means that outliers will have slightly more influence on any given location.

### An Elite Problem?

Much of the conversation around the political climate of universities has focused on “elite” institutions. Some critics have suggested that campus free speech issues are mostly limited to these exceptional campuses, whereas the majority of institutions have healthier climates. Does this bear out in the data?

### Ivy Leagues

Though not an exclusive list of “elite” colleges, nor necessarily the highest ranked, the Ivy Leagues provide a reasonable heuristic for eliteness. How do these universities compare to the rest of the nation?



```
## Equality hypothesis supported
## Bayes Factor = 0.313156
```

Once again, we see equality supported. The mean reluctance score for Ivy League schools is actually lower, though not significantly.

There does seem to be a small bimodal trend in the Ivy League responses, though keep in mind that a lack of smoothness may simply be an artifact of the relatively small sample.

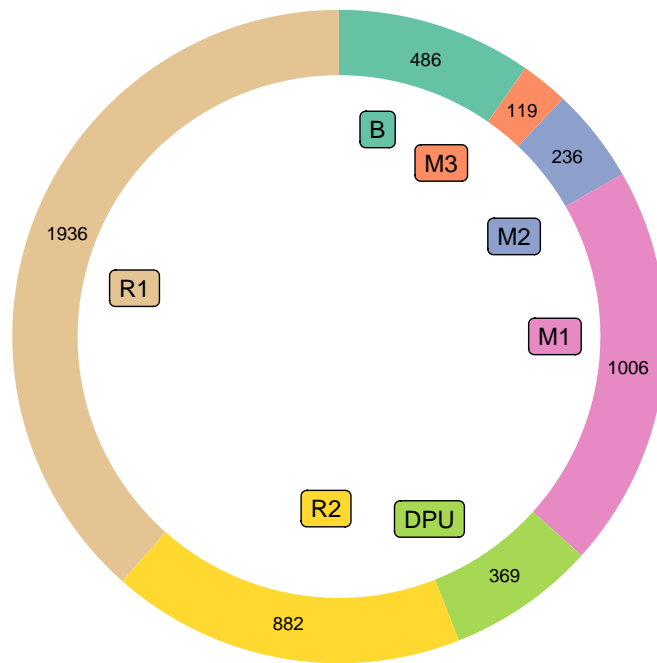
Unfortunately, we can't break this up by political party, as there were only 7.0 Republican students at Ivy League Schools across the CES reports.

### Carnegie Classification

Carnegie Classification is a framework used to categorize and classify colleges and universities in the United States based on various factors such as size, scope, and mission.

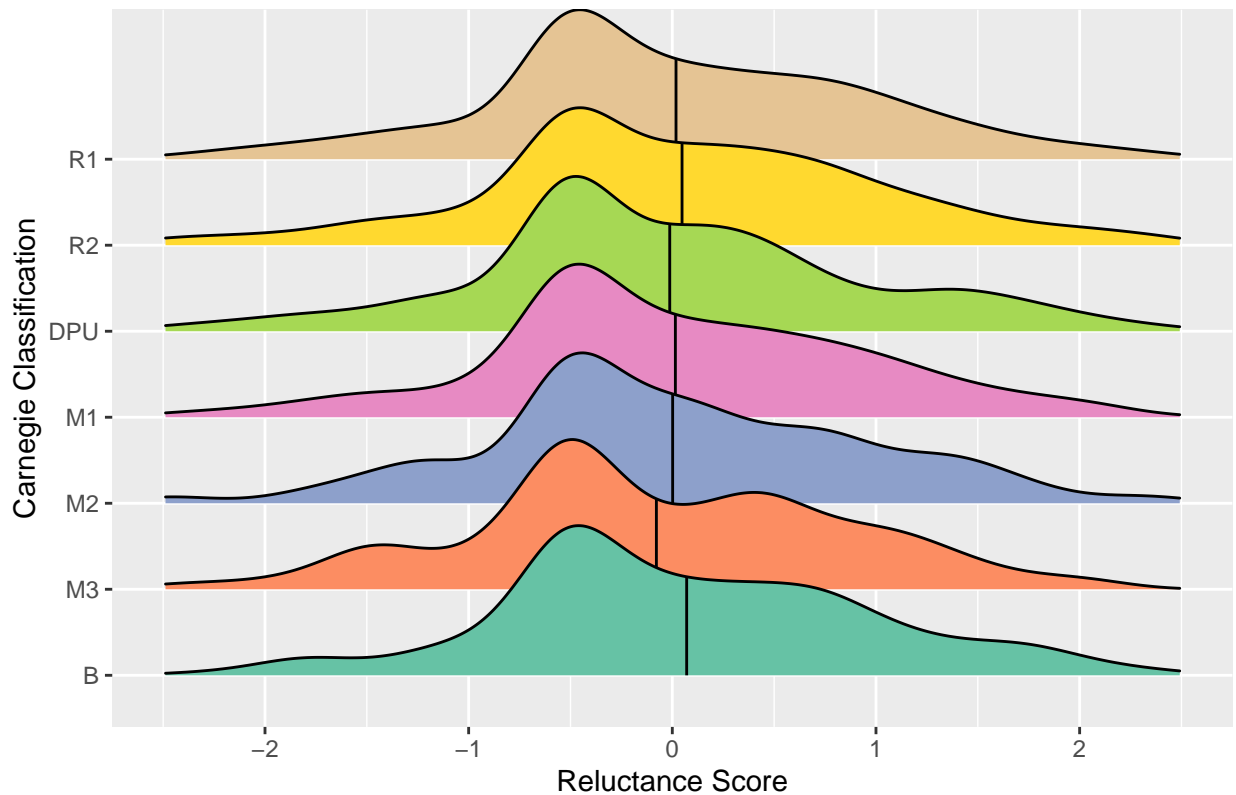
First, let's understand the representation of various levels of the Carnegie Classification in the CES data:

## Carnegie Classification



So, do we observe a difference in expression across the various levels of the Carnegie Classification?

## Carnegie Classification



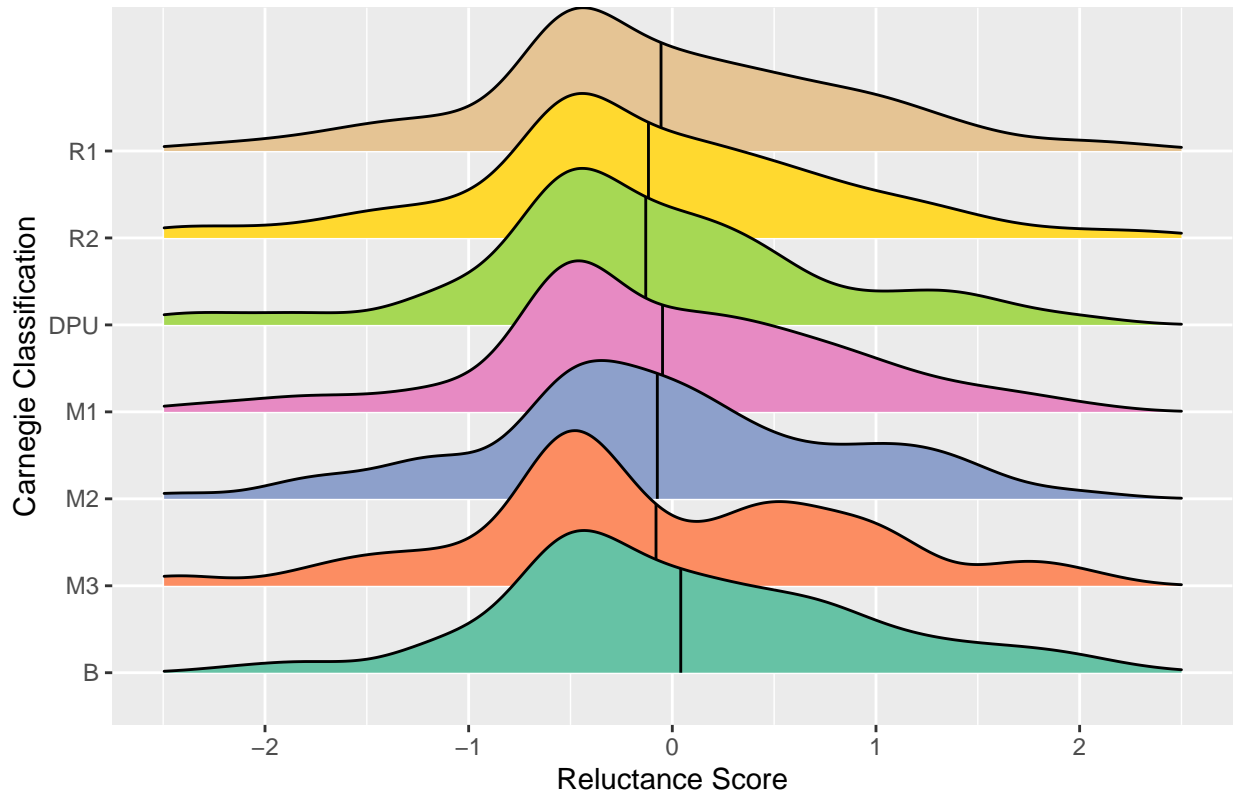
## Equality hypothesis supported  
## Bayes Factor = 0.05118

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
Intercept	0.02	0.02	0.71	0.48
B	0.02	0.05	0.45	0.65
M3	-0.18	0.09	-1.88	0.06
M2	0.00	0.07	0.00	1.00
M1	-0.02	0.04	-0.54	0.59
DPU	-0.04	0.06	-0.66	0.51
R2	0.02	0.04	0.47	0.64

With most category estimates nearly perfectly falling on the mean, only M3 schools seem to depart at all from the trend. Students at M3 schools were 9.1% less reluctant to speak about a controversial topic compared to students at R1 schools. Unfortunately, M3 schools are the least represented with only 119.0' student responses, meaning that they are difficult to statistically differentiate from the rest. Our Bayesian test implies that general equality across the Carnegie Classifications is more likely than statistically reliable differences. A more traditional linear model, comparing categories against R1 as a baseline, also suggests that M3 schools are not reliably different.

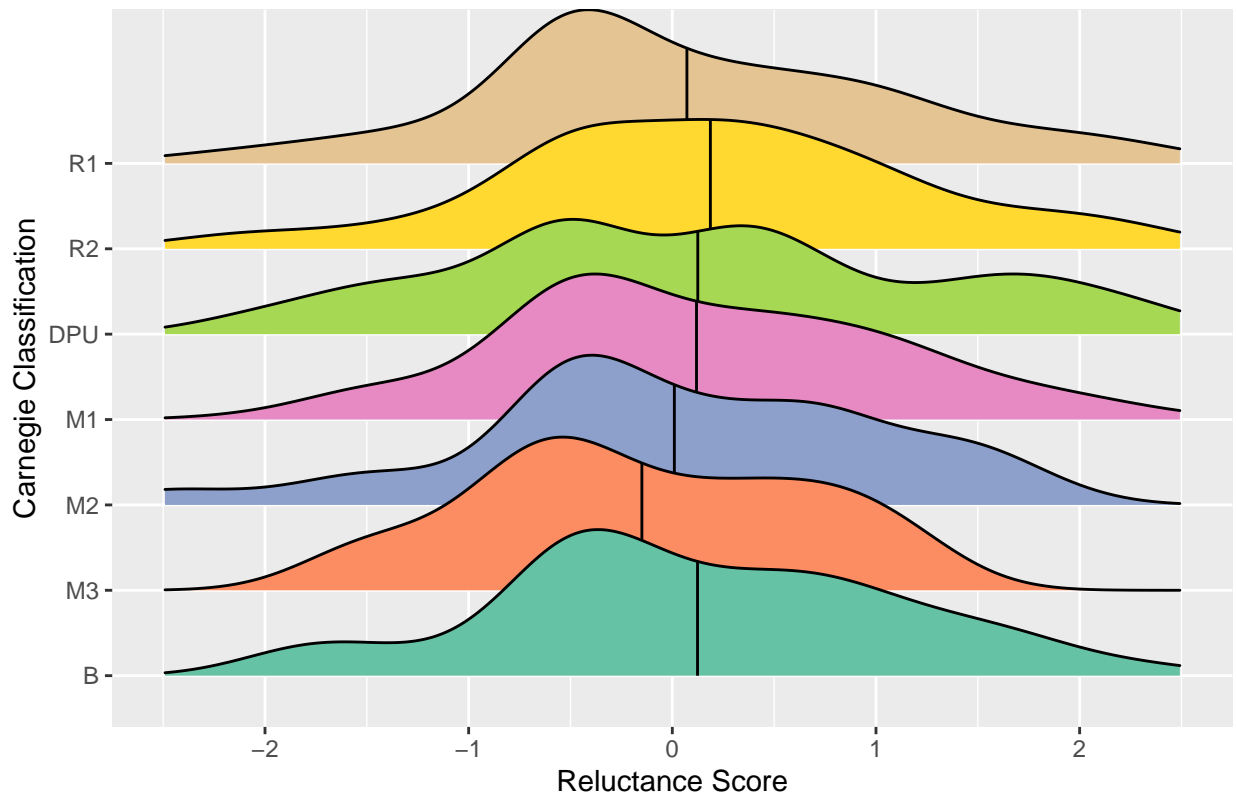
What if we split by Republican vs. Democrat students?

### Democrats Only – Carnegie Classification



## Equality hypothesis supported  
## Bayes Factor = 0.000917

## Republicans Only – Carnegie Classification



```
## Equality hypothesis supported
## Bayes Factor = 0.008784
```

Although the plots give hints that there may be something interesting going on at M3 and M2 schools, the statistics are consistent with the story for all students - reluctance to speak about controversial topics is consistent across all types of schools.

## Paying for Freedom? Public vs. Private Institutions

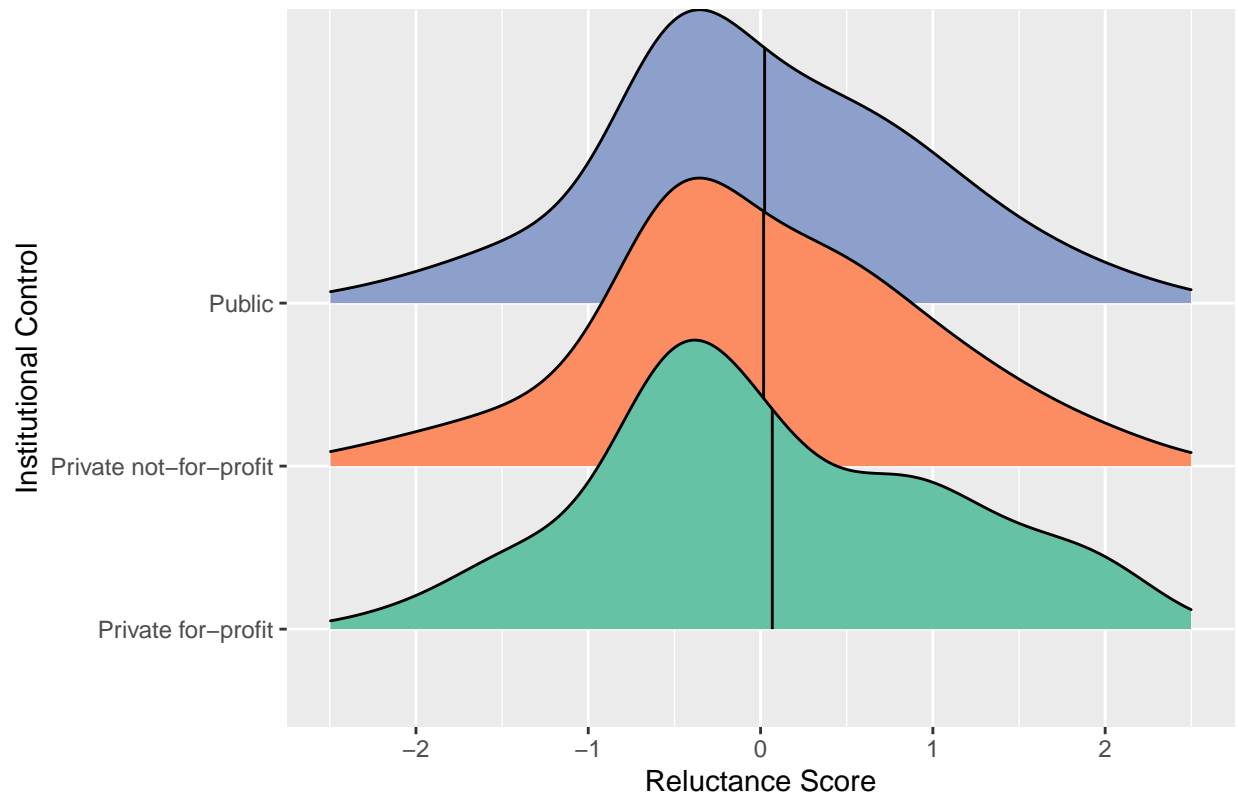
Another way to split colleges is by their status as a public or private school.

This is a tricky category to predict. On one hand, some private colleges, especially religious colleges (e.g., Notre Dame, Brigham Young University) are more conservative, centrist, or mixed compared to their public counterparts. As much of the discourse on college expression focuses on a dominance of liberal ideology, we might expect these colleges to be more open. On the other hand, there are many private colleges where the trend of a dominant liberal ideology (e.g., Sarah Lawrence, Vassar) might be much stronger than a public university.

First, let's examine the overall trend.



## Public vs. Private

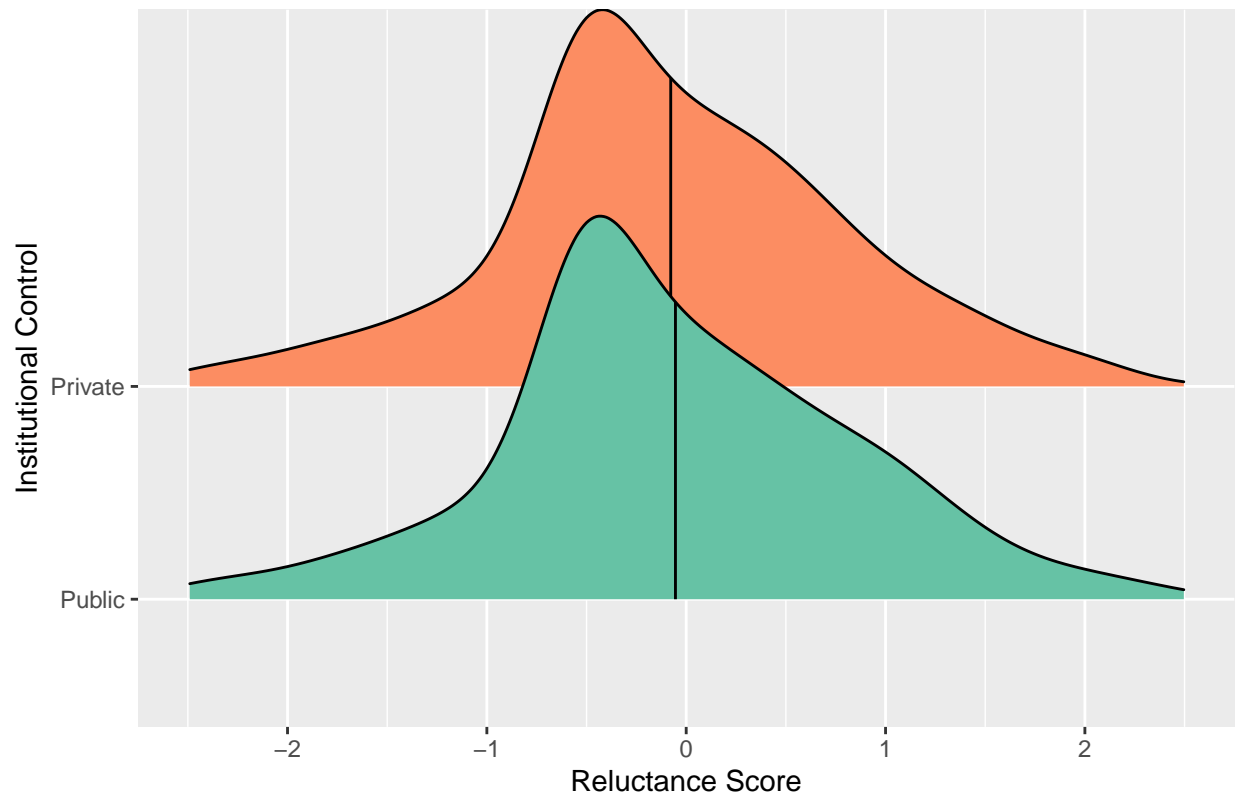


```
## Equality hypothesis supported
## Bayes Factor = 0.007998
```

Each category is dead center on the national average. Private for-profit colleges had a much smaller sample size (just 84.0 responses); the variances of reluctance did not differ across categories.

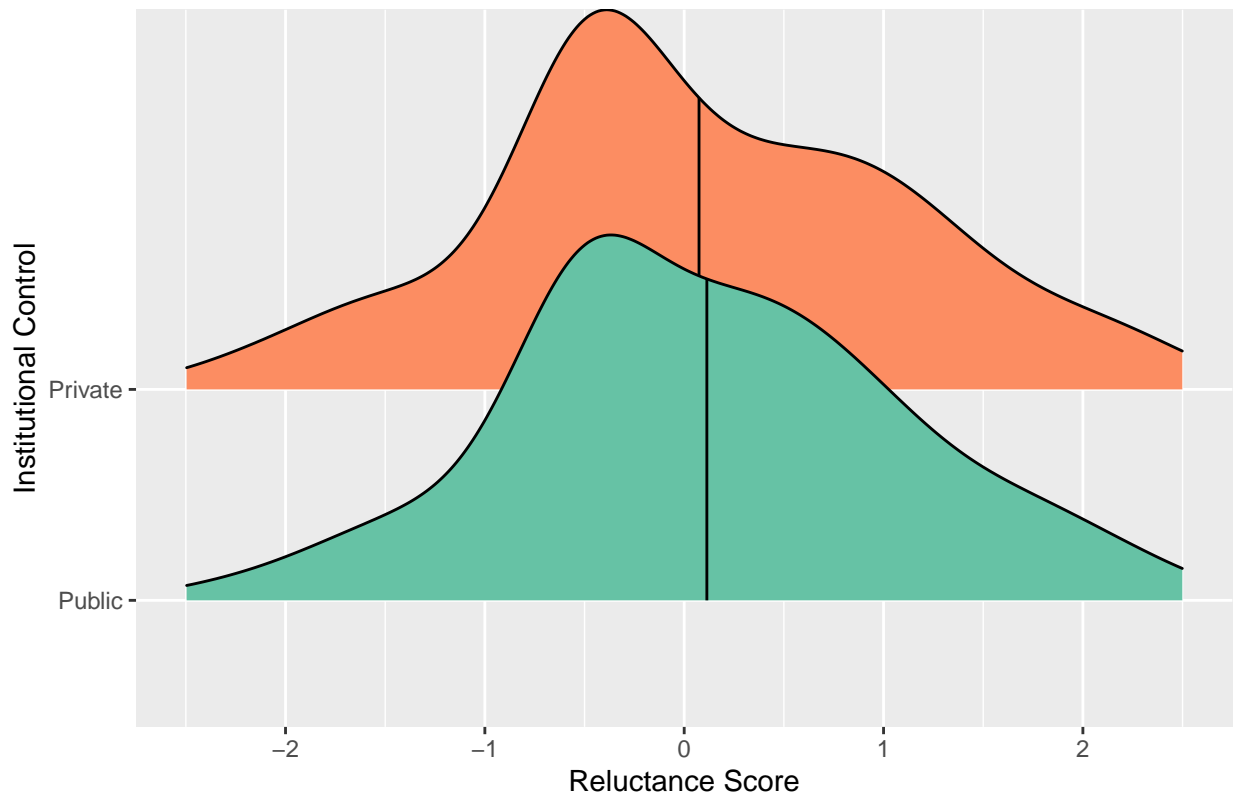
Overall, the CES data shows that students identifying as Republicans were much more reluctant to speak on controversial topics than students identifying as Democrats. Does this interact with institutional status as public or private?

### Democrats Only – Public vs. Private



## Equality hypothesis supported  
## Bayes Factor = 0.0208

## Republicans Only – Public vs. Private



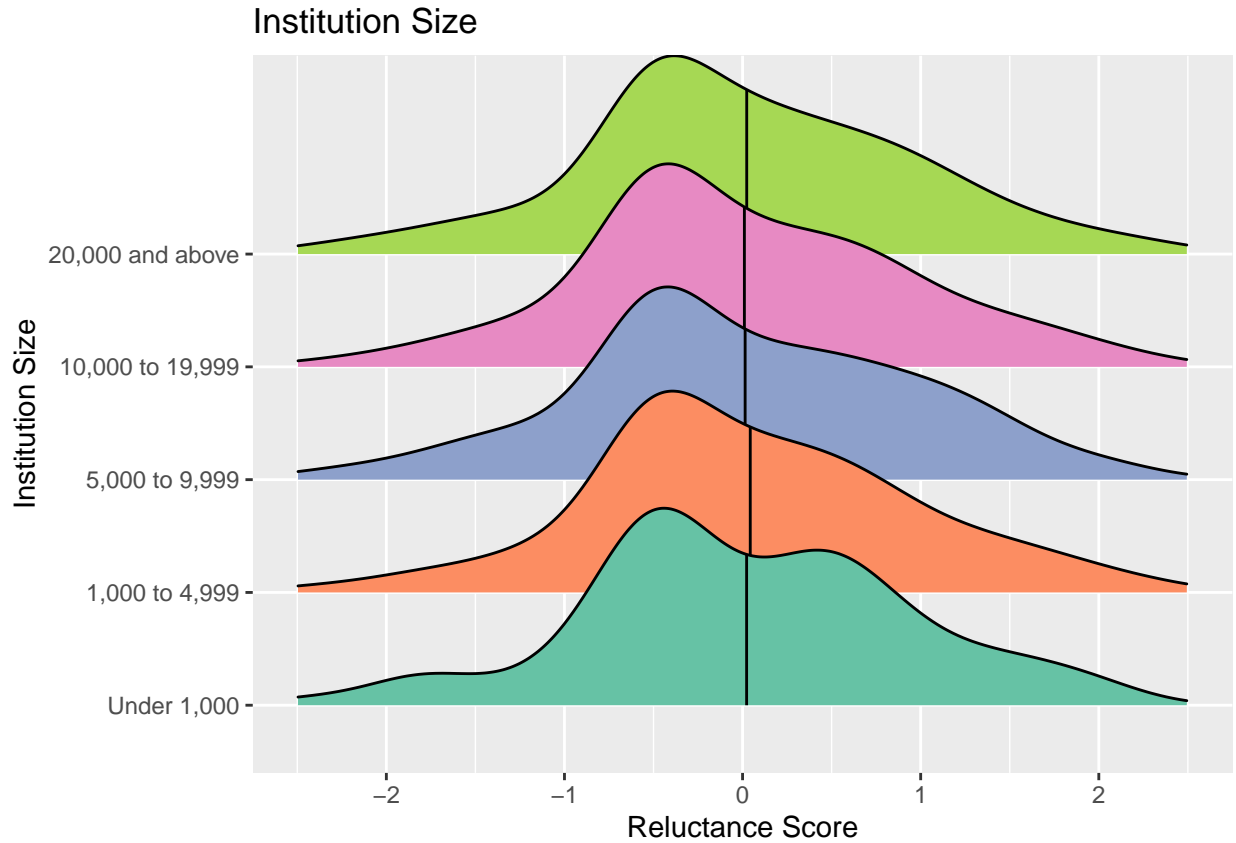
```
## Equality hypothesis supported  
## Bayes Factor = 0.037697
```

Apparently not. Bayes Factors indicated relatively greater support for equality across groups. For these analyses, we combined Private for-profit and Private not-for-profit due to small sample sizes.

In short, students express reluctance to speak about controversial topics at public and private schools alike.

## School and Class Size

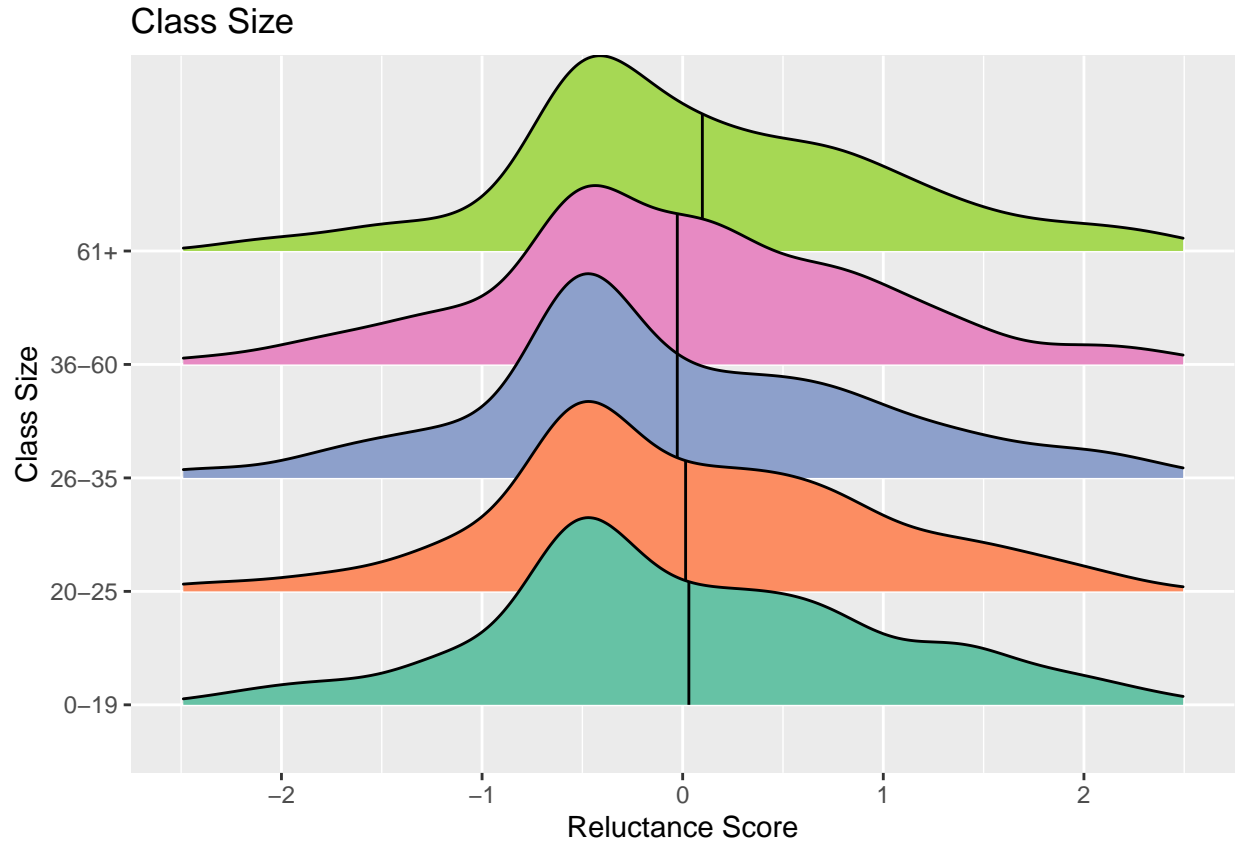
There are a few factors left to consider. The IPEDS data gives us an estimate of the overall size of the institution. As before, there is uniformity in the degree of reluctance.



```
## Equality hypothesis supported
## Bayes Factor = 0.000283
```

More relevant than the school size is the number of students in the classroom. A question from the CES asked students to estimate the average number of other students in their classes. This question was not available in earlier iterations of the CES, but we can examine the subset of the data in which it is available.

Critically, we must remember that our reluctance score measures reluctance *above and beyond* general reluctance to discuss a noncontroversial topic. Although for most students a larger class is certainly more intimidating in general, it's less clear whether that intimidation factor is exacerbated for controversial topics specifically.



```
## Equality hypothesis supported
## Bayes Factor = 0.052077
```

We have binned the class sizes for the purposes of the plot, but preserved the raw numeric input for the statistical analysis. Again, we see the equality hypothesis supported. The largest classes have a slightly higher mean - students with class sizes of 61+ were 13.4% more reluctant to speak about a controversial topic (not controlling for general reluctant). However, it is not reliably different from smaller classes.

## Conclusion

In this report, we attempted to answer the “where” of Campus Expression. That is, in what types of institutions, geographical areas, and campus settings do students feel reluctant to speak about controversial topics?

In short, the answer is **everywhere**.

- Students experienced similar reluctance at both **elite** and non-elite institutions.
- A uniform culture of reluctance was present across all levels of institutions, from **R1** research universities to Baccalaureate colleges
- Students feel hesitant to discuss controversial subjects all across the country, not just in **urban coastal** areas.
- While conservative and independent students felt relatively comfortable in specific geographical areas, Democrat students felt comfortable everywhere
- Both **private** and **public** institutions face similar challenges regarding free expression.
- Campus expression remains inhibited in **small** institutions and classroom sizes as well as larger ones