

2026 College Free Speech Rankings
University of California, Davis

252

OVERALL
RANK

F

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING

Executive Summary

THE COLLEGE FREE SPEECH RANKINGS are the most comprehensive comparison of free speech climates at U.S. colleges and universities. Developed by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, the rankings combine student survey data, written speech policies, and school responses to recent speech-related controversies to evaluate how well institutions uphold free expression. Schools earn higher scores when they protect open debate and viewpoint diversity and lose points when they restrict it.

To understand the student experience of free speech on campus, our survey partner, College Pulse, surveyed 68,510 student respondents from 257 colleges and universities from Jan. 3 through June 5, 2025. The College Free Speech Rankings are available online (rankings.thefire.org) for easy comparison between institutions.

We surveyed 333 University of California, Davis undergraduates. Key findings include:

- UC Davis ranks 252 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 47.46, an F speech climate grade.
- UC Davis students are more accepting of disruptive conduct than students nationally. UC Davis students are less accepting of violence than they were last year.
- Students reported discomfort expressing controversial views in academic settings, especially when disagreeing with professors.
- Students would allow controversial speakers at rates near the national average.
- UC Davis earns a “yellow light” Spotlight rating. If UC Davis had revised its policies to earn a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 127.
- UC Davis had multiple notable speech-related controversies since 2022 that led to penalties in the rankings.

The University of California, Davis ranks 252 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 47.46, an F speech climate grade.¹ The following report highlights one area where UC Davis dramatically improved and several areas where it performs relatively poorly. In addition, it discusses UC Davis's speech policies and statements, its speech controversies, and what UC Davis can do to improve its free speech climate.

UC DAVIS STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students are accepting of disrupting speakers

University of California, Davis students were more willing than students nationally to endorse illiberal silencing tactics.

- 77% said shouting down a speaker is at least “rarely” acceptable (vs. 72% nationally).
- 59% said blocking entry to a speech is at least “rarely” acceptable (vs. 54% nationally).
- 35% said violence is at least “rarely” acceptable (vs. 34% nationally).

Despite ranking poorly on “Disruptive Conduct” (194), UC Davis improved dramatically from last year, when it ranked 245.

FIGURE 1: Acceptance of Disruptive Tactics Over Time (UC Davis vs. National)

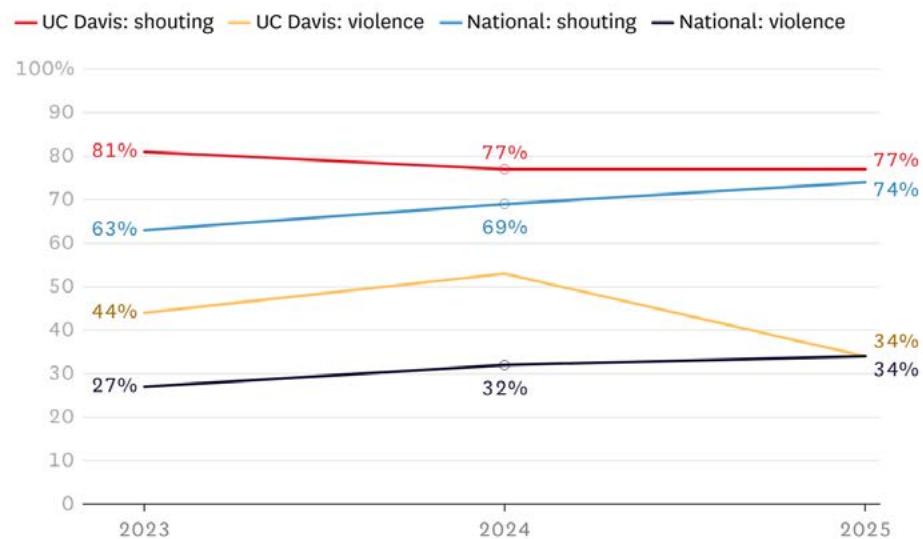


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

¹ The detailed methodology can be found at rankings.thefire.org/methodology.

STUDENTS ARE UNCOMFORTABLE EXPRESSING CONTROVERSIAL IDEAS — ESPECIALLY IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS

University of California, Davis ranks low on “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (187) and on “Self-Censorship” (208). The classroom and interactions with professors were the most challenging contexts for expressing controversial views.

- 71% reported being uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor.
- 59% reported being uncomfortable during in-class discussion on controversial topics.
- 68% reported self-censoring once or twice a month during in-class discussions.
- 71% reported self-censoring once or twice a month during conversations with professors.

However, students reported lower discomfort levels and self-censored less frequently in informal settings

- 55% feel uncomfortable in common campus spaces.
- 62% reported self-censoring once or twice a month during conversations with students on campus.

FIGURE 2: Discomfort Expressing Views by Context (UC Davis vs. National)

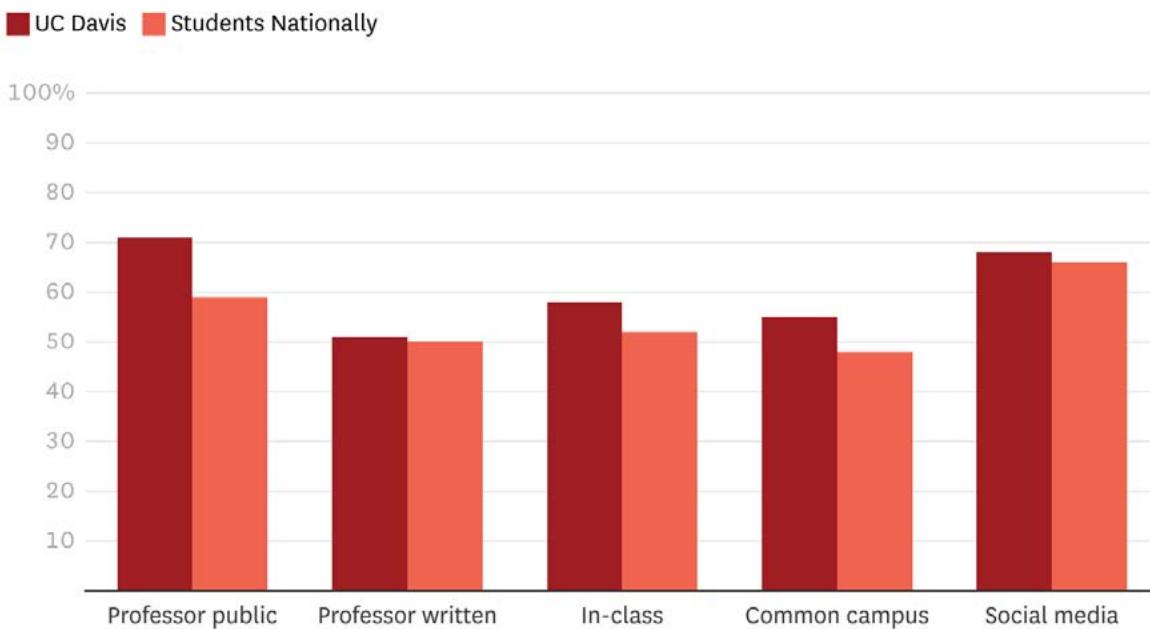


Chart: Emily Nayyer · Source: FIRE/College Pulse

STUDENTS WOULD ALLOW CONTROVERSIAL SPEAKERS AT RATES NEAR THE NATIONAL AVERAGE

University of California, Davis students' support for allowing controversial speakers was close to national averages but showed an ideological tolerance gap. For example, 56% would allow a speaker saying "children should be able to transition without parental consent" (vs. 49% nationally), while only 37% would allow a speaker saying "abortion should be completely illegal" (vs. 40% nationally).

FIGURE 3: Willingness to Allow Controversial Speakers on Campus (UC Davis vs. National)

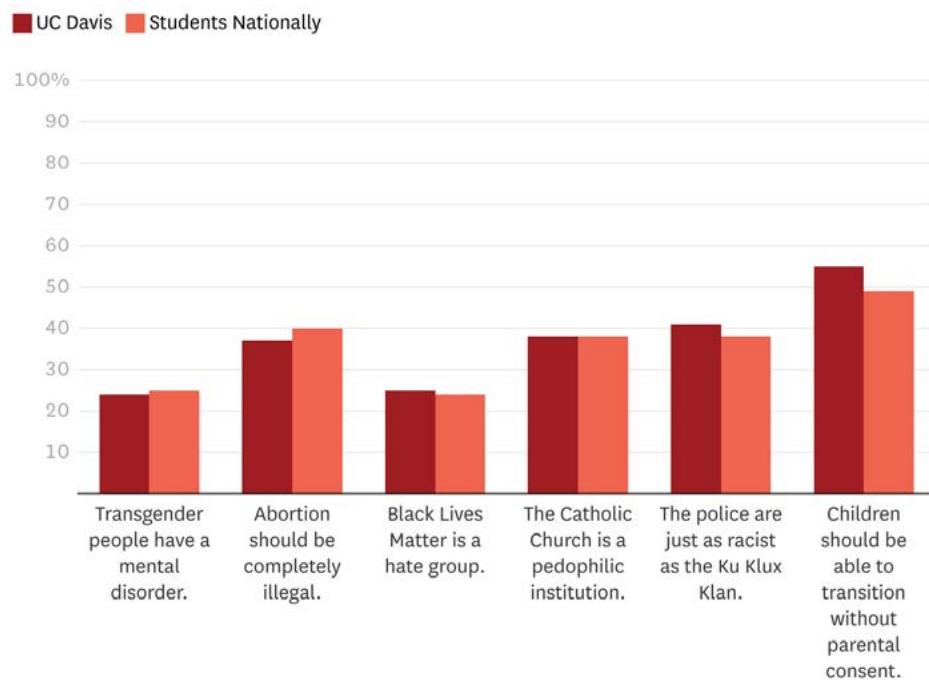


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/ College Pulse

A 'YELLOW LIGHT' SCHOOL WITH NO FREE SPEECH COMMITMENTS

The University of California, Davis earned a "yellow light" rating for written policies affecting student expression. A yellow light rating indicates at least one ambiguous or overbroad policy that could be applied to protected speech. UC Davis has adopted neither the "Chicago Statement" on free expression nor an institutional neutrality policy.

UC Davis maintains a yellow light rating for its written policies governing student expression and maintains five yellow light policies and five "green light" policies. Four of the university's five harassment policies fail to meet the legal standard for peer hostile environment harassment in an educational setting, putting protected speech that does not reach that threshold at risk. UC Davis also encourages students to report instances of bias while conflating this term with harassment and discrimination. This

conflation threatens free expression by subjecting protected speech to standards meant for legitimate misconduct. Concerns related to bias are already addressed by harassment and discrimination protocols; therefore, the administration should focus its resources on these established systems and avoid soliciting reports of subjective bias.

UC DAVIS SPEECH CONTROVERSIES

The University of California, Davis had multiple speech-related controversies since 2022 that contributed penalties in the rankings.

UC Davis was penalized for two incidents in 2025: a viewpoint-discriminatory resolution passed by the Law Student Association (LSA) and the administration's disproportionate response. In spring 2025, the LSA imposed prior restraint on pro-Israeli law student groups when it passed a resolution resolving that it "will not approve funding requests for events with speakers who represent the Israeli government... or voluntarily represent Israeli academic institutions that are complicit in occupation and genocide." Although the university intervened appropriately to ensure viewpoint-neutral access to student funds, it went further by suspending the LSA's unrelated, non-funding activities—an action that restricted the group's own expressive rights. Around the same time, an off-campus advocacy group launched a petition urging the university to discipline the LSA, though it's unclear what influence, if any, the petition had on administrative decision-making. The administration's response, though partly corrective, ultimately veered into punitive territory, raising concerns about disproportionate sanctioning of student political expression.

UC Davis was also penalized for a violent protest in response to Charlie Kirk's appearance on campus in 2023. Students and off-campus groups protested Kirk's talk because of his conservative views. Protesters banged on doors, smashed windows, blocked entrances, and used pepper spray in an attempt to keep people from attending the event. One police officer was injured and two protesters were arrested. The event continued without further disruption.

However, violent protesters did force the cancellation of another event. In 2022, a Turning Point USA-sponsored talk featuring Stephen Davis was canceled by student organizers after fights broke out outside the event venue. Administrators escorted student organizers and Davis from the building.

HOW CAN UC DAVIS IMPROVE?

The University of California, Davis can improve its ranking by reforming its "yellow light" speech policies to earn a "green light" rating. If UC Davis had earned a green light rating this year, it would rank 127 instead of 252 overall. In addition to improving its speech policies, UC Davis should adopt the Chicago Statement to affirm its commitment to open inquiry and make a commitment to institutional neutrality. Paired with green light policies, these commitments would have improved UC Davis to 48 in this year's rankings.

But policy changes alone do not change a campus' free speech culture. Administrators need to communicate policy changes directly to students in a way that emphasizes UC Davis's commitment to free expression. And they would need to live up to their own promises by defending students' and speakers' expressive rights rather than restricting them in the face of controversy.

Students' propensity to disrupt events, sometimes even with violence, should be addressed not just through punishment of offenders but also with proactive training to students about what constitutes acceptable and protected protest.

UC Davis's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	9.30	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.67	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.13	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	11.82	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.41	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.13	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Institutional Neutrality	0 (No)	-	0 (No)	3 (Yes)
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	-5	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	-4	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	47.46	58.63		

Topline Results

How clear is it to you that your college administration protects free speech on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	6	2
Not very clear	33	10
Somewhat clear	183	55
Very clear	81	24
Extremely clear	29	9

If a controversy over offensive speech were to occur on your campus, how likely is it that the administration would defend the speaker's right to express their views?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all likely	7	2
Not very likely	64	19
Somewhat likely	169	51
Very likely	80	24
Extremely likely	12	4

How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus? [Presented in randomized order]

Publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial political topic.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	79	24
Somewhat uncomfortable	157	47
Somewhat comfortable	75	22
Very comfortable	22	7

Expressing disagreement with one of your professors about a controversial political topic in a written assignment.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	54	16
Somewhat uncomfortable	118	35
Somewhat comfortable	121	36
Very comfortable	40	12

Expressing your views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	71	21
Somewhat uncomfortable	125	37
Somewhat comfortable	109	33
Very comfortable	29	9

Expressing your views on a controversial political topic to other students during a discussion in a common campus space such as a quad, dining hall, or lounge.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	51	15
Somewhat uncomfortable	134	40
Somewhat comfortable	84	25
Very comfortable	64	19

Expressing an unpopular political opinion to your fellow students on a social media account tied to your name.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	86	26
Somewhat uncomfortable	140	42
Somewhat comfortable	88	26
Very comfortable	19	6

This next series of questions asks you about self-censorship in different settings. For the purpose of these questions, self-censorship is defined as follows:

Refraining from sharing certain views because you fear social (e.g., exclusion from social events), professional (e.g., losing job or promotion), legal (e.g., prosecution or fine), or violent (e.g., assault) consequences, whether in person or remotely (e.g., by phone or online), and whether the consequences come from state or non-state sources. [Presented in randomized order]

How often do you self-censor during conversations with other students on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	26	8
Rarely	100	30
Occasionally, once or twice a month	107	32
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	81	24
Very often, nearly every day	19	6

How often do you self-censor during conversations with your professors?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	33	10
Rarely	82	25
Occasionally, once or twice a month	120	36
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	69	21
Very often, nearly every day	29	9

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	20	6
Rarely	80	24
Occasionally, once or twice a month	126	38
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	78	24
Very often, nearly every day	28	8

How acceptable would you say it is for students to engage in the following action to protest a campus speaker?
[Presented in randomized order]

Shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	19	6
Sometimes acceptable	102	31
Rarely acceptable	134	40
Never acceptable	78	24

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	17	5
Sometimes acceptable	53	16
Rarely acceptable	127	38
Never acceptable	135	41

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	10	3
Sometimes acceptable	44	13
Rarely acceptable	61	18
Never acceptable	218	65

Student groups often invite speakers to campus to express their views on a range of topics. Regardless of your own views on the topic, should your school **ALLOW** or **NOT ALLOW** a speaker on campus who promotes the following idea? [Presented in randomized order]

Transgender people have a mental disorder.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	137	41
Probably should not allow this speaker	114	34
Probably should allow this speaker	57	17
Definitely should allow this speaker	25	7

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	108	33
Probably should not allow this speaker	101	30
Probably should allow this speaker	88	26
Definitely should allow this speaker	36	11

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	136	41
Probably should not allow this speaker	115	35
Probably should allow this speaker	66	20
Definitely should allow this speaker	16	5

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	65	19
Probably should not allow this speaker	143	43
Probably should allow this speaker	99	30
Definitely should allow this speaker	27	8

The police are just as racist as the Ku Klux Klan.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	69	21
Probably should not allow this speaker	128	38
Probably should allow this speaker	98	30
Definitely should allow this speaker	38	11

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	42	13
Probably should not allow this speaker	106	32
Probably should allow this speaker	134	40
Definitely should allow this speaker	52	15

Some students say it can be difficult to have conversations about certain issues on campus. Which of the following issues, if any, would you say are difficult to have an open and honest conversation about on your campus? [Presented in randomized order with none of the above always listed last]

Abortion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	206	62
Yes	123	37

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	258	78
Yes	71	21

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	275	83
Yes	54	16

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	291	87
Yes	38	11

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	289	87
Yes	40	12

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	276	83
Yes	53	16

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	271	81
Yes	58	18

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	236	71
Yes	93	28

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	257	77
Yes	72	21

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	228	68
Yes	101	30

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	254	76
Yes	75	23

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	216	65
Yes	113	34

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	146	44
Yes	183	55

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	217	65
Yes	112	34

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	235	70
Yes	94	28

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	242	73
Yes	87	26

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	236	71
Yes	93	28

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	231	70
Yes	97	29

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	286	86
Yes	43	13

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	226	68
Yes	103	31

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	271	81
Yes	58	17

On your campus, how often have you felt that you could not express your opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	64	19
Rarely	143	43
Occasionally, once or twice a month	67	20
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	33	10
Very often, nearly every day	23	7

Have you ever been disciplined by your college's administration for expression on campus?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	7	2
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	25	8
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	296	89

How often, if at all, do you hide your political beliefs from your professors in an attempt to get a better grade?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	126	38
Rarely	90	27
Occasionally, once or twice a month	62	19
Fairly often, a couple times a week	21	6
Very often, nearly every day	30	9

How likely or unlikely is it that a student on campus would be reported to the administration by another student for saying something controversial?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very unlikely	34	10
Unlikely	82	25
Neither likely or unlikely	138	41
Likely	64	19
Very likely	10	3

How likely or unlikely is it that a professor on campus would be reported to the administration by a student for saying something controversial?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very unlikely	32	10
Unlikely	73	22
Neither likely or unlikely	115	34
Likely	88	27
Very likely	21	6

Have you or anyone you know filed a Title IX complaint?

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	6	2
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	7	2
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	44	13
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	272	82

Has a Title IX complaint ever been filed against you or someone you know?

Response	Frequency	Percent
A Title IX complaint was filed against me.	0	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	11	3
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	32	10
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	286	86

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	124	37
Less than once a year	46	14
Once or twice a year	51	15
Several times a year	42	13
Once a month	19	6
2-3 times a month	15	4
About weekly	10	3
Weekly	17	5
Several times a week	7	2

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	0	0
No	328	99

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	3	1	1
No	326	98	99

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	3	1	4
Less than half the time	39	12	41
About half the time	27	8	28
Most of the time, nearly every day	11	3	12
Always	15	5	16

How often would you say that you feel lonely or isolated?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	11	3	20
Less than half the time	25	7	44
About half the time	14	4	24
Most of the time, nearly every day	1	0	3
Always	6	2	10

How often would you say that you feel like you have no time for yourself?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	2	12
Less than half the time	18	5	29
About half the time	20	6	33
Most of the time, nearly every day	14	4	24
Always	1	0	2

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	18	5	28
Less than half the time	20	6	32
About half the time	19	6	30
Most of the time, nearly every day	6	2	9
Always	0	0	1

How often would you say that you feel stressed, frustrated, or overwhelmed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	1	8
Less than half the time	22	7	43
About half the time	18	5	35
Most of the time, nearly every day	7	2	13
Always	1	0	2



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