

2026 College Free Speech Rankings

University of Delaware

156

OVERALL
RANK

F

SPEECH
CLIMATE

YELLOW

SPOTLIGHT
RATING



FIRE

Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

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 472 University of Delaware undergraduates. Key findings include:

- UD ranks 156, with an overall score of 56.40, an F speech climate grade.
- UD did not rank in the top 50 on any of the survey components, leaving the university without an area of clear strength.
- UD plummeted on both the “Self-Censorship” (210, compared to 19 last year) and “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (246, compared to 79 last year) components, indicating a campus climate where many students keep opinions to themselves.
- UD continues to maintain speech policies that earn it a “yellow light” rating from FIRE. If the university revised its one yellow light policy and earned a “green light” rating, it would have ranked 18 overall.

The University of Delaware ranks 156 out of 257 schools in the 2026 College Free Speech Rankings. The university earned a score of 56.40, an F speech climate grade.¹ The university fell 84 spots and lost 1.31 points since last year.

The following report highlights two survey areas where UD is middling and two areas where it sits among the worst in the nation. In addition, it discusses the university's speech policies and what the school can do to improve its free speech climate.

UD STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FREE SPEECH

Students perceive the administration as being more supportive of free speech

The University of Delaware ranks 97 on the "Administrative Support" component after ranking 122 last year.

Thirty-nine percent of UD students said it was either "very" or "extremely" clear that the administration protects free speech on campus, compared to 36% of students nationally. An additional 49% said it was "somewhat" clear.

Additionally, 26% of UD students said that it was either "very" or "extremely" likely that the administration would defend the expressive rights of an invited speaker in the face of controversy, in line with students nationally. A further 51% said it is "somewhat" likely.

Students are equally intolerant of liberal and conservative speakers

The University of Delaware ranks 153 on "Political Tolerance."

Students were asked whether six speakers (three liberal, three conservative) who had previously expressed controversial opinions should be allowed to give a campus speech.

Last year, a greater percentage of UD students said the administration "probably" or "definitely" should not allow the conservative speakers (ranging from 61% to 77%) than the liberal speakers (ranging from 44% to 57%). Reflecting a national trend, opposition among UD students increased toward each of the six speakers. Unlike students nationally, however, this increase was not proportional. Opposition toward conservative speakers increased by an average of 7 percentage points both among students nationally and at UD. Opposition toward liberal speakers, on the other hand, increased only 9 percentage points on average among students nationally and a whopping 23 percentage points on average at UD.

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

FIGURE 1: UD Students Who Opposed Controversial Speakers (%)

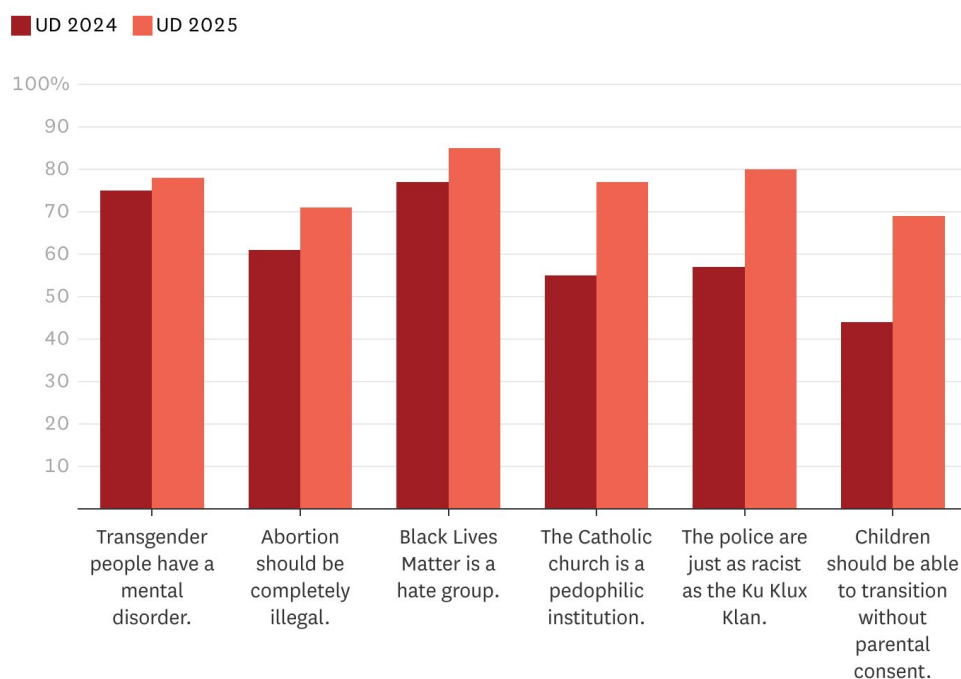


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

Students are less comfortable and self-censor more

| *I felt scared to express my political opinions*

The University of Delaware ranks 210 on the “Self-Censorship” component after finishing 19 last year.

Students were presented the following definition of self-censorship:

“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.”

They were then asked about the frequency with which they self-censor in three campus contexts. Results show that not only are more students self-censoring, but they are also self-censoring more frequently. Since last year, the percentage of UD students who said they “never” self-censored dropped by 7 percentage points for each context. Meanwhile, the percentage who said they self-censored at least “a couple of times a week” increased for each context by an average of 10 percentage points.

FIGURE 2: Students Who Self-Censor at Least a Couple of Times a Week (%)

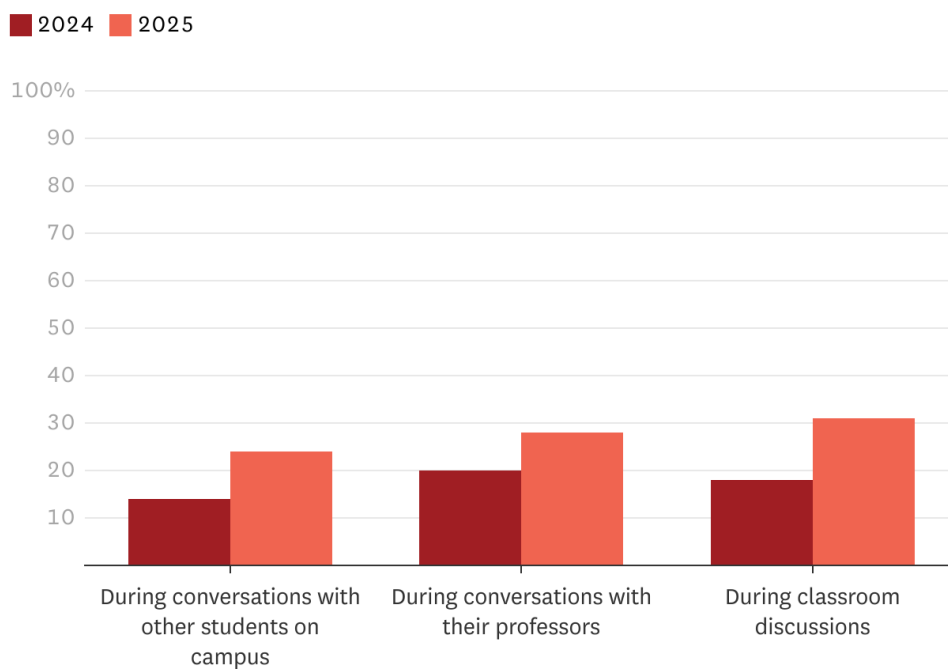


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

Given the spike in self-censorship on campus, it's unsurprising then that UD plummeted 167 spots on "Comfort Expressing Ideas," ranking 246 this year after finishing 79 last year. Its current position is a far cry from its top 20 finish in 2021.

Back then, between 45% and 65% of students expressed feeling either "somewhat" or "very" comfortable in each of five campus settings. Today, these percentages ranged from 30% to 41%. What's more, over this period the percentage who said they felt "very uncomfortable" increased for all five contexts by an average of 10 percentage points.

After reaching a nadir in each context in 2023, UD recovered substantially the following year. However, comfort levels have once again plummeted for each setting, by an average of 9 percentage points.

FIGURE 3: Students Who Felt at Least Somewhat Comfortable by Context (%)

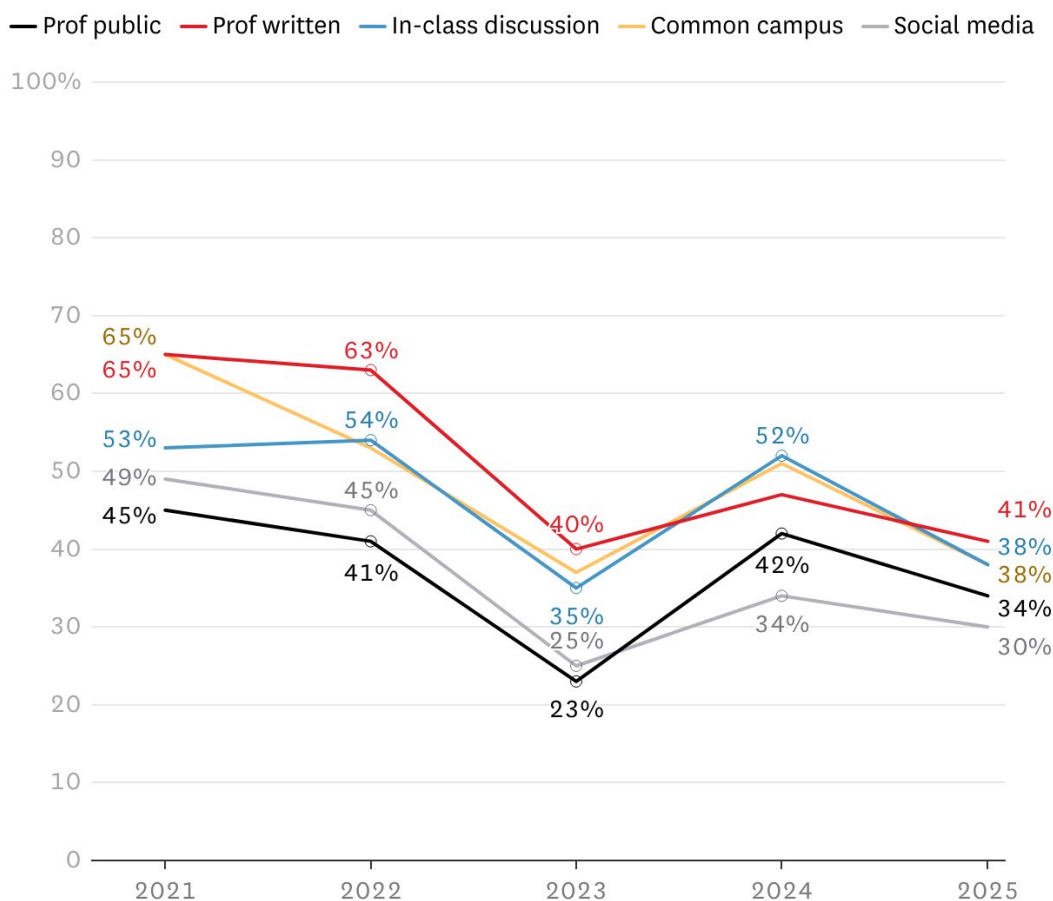


Chart: Emily Nayyer • Source: FIRE/College Pulse

A ‘YELLOW LIGHT’ SCHOOL WITH NO COMMITMENTS

University of Delaware earns an overall “yellow light” rating for its written policies governing student expression. The university maintains one yellow light policy and two “green light” policies. The university’s harassment policy fails 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. UD also has yet to adopt institutional neutrality or a statement of commitment to free expression such as the “Chicago Statement.”

HOW CAN UD IMPROVE?

The University of Delaware can improve its ranking by reforming its one “yellow light” speech policy to earn a “green light” rating. If the university earned a green light rating this year, it would have ranked 18 instead of 156. In addition to urging UD to improve its speech policies, we encourage UD to adopt statements committing to free speech and institutional neutrality similar to those of the Chicago Statement and “Kalven Report.” These changes, in combination with a green light rating, would have placed UD 2 in this year’s College Free Speech Rankings.

But policy changes and formal commitments alone will not improve UD’s free speech climate. Students reported staggering levels of self-censorship, discomfort expressing themselves across various campus settings, and intolerance toward both controversial liberal and conservative speakers. The university could pair its policy changes and formal commitments to free speech and institutional neutrality with free speech training for its student body. By helping students better understand the principles around free speech and their relationship to open inquiry, UD could help raise its ranking on the “Self-Censorship” (210), “Comfort Expressing Ideas” (246), and “Political Tolerance” (153) components.

UD’s 2026 College Free Speech Rankings Scores by Component

COMPONENT	UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE	NATIONAL AVERAGE	MINIMUM VALUE	MAXIMUM VALUE
Comfort Expressing Ideas	8.92	9.53	5	15
Self-Censorship	11.66	12.12	3	20
Disruptive Conduct	15.64	15.50	3	20
Administrative Support	11.68	11.32	2	20
Openness	7.14	7.19	0	10
Political Tolerance	6.32	6.44	3	15
Chicago Statement	0	-	0	3
Institutional Neutrality	0	-	0	3
Spotlight Rating	-5 (Yellow)	-	-10 (Red)	5 (Green)
Campus Deplatformings	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Scholars Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Students Under Fire	0	-	∞ Penalties	∞ Bonuses
Overall score	56.40	58.67		

Topline Results

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not at all clear	9	2
Not very clear	48	10
Somewhat clear	230	49
Very clear	167	36
Extremely clear	16	3

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	12	2
Not very likely	96	20
Somewhat likely	242	51
Very likely	111	24
Extremely likely	10	2

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	145	31
Somewhat uncomfortable	165	35
Somewhat comfortable	116	25
Very comfortable	44	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	96	20
Somewhat uncomfortable	183	39
Somewhat comfortable	148	32
Very comfortable	43	9

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	96	20
Somewhat uncomfortable	198	42
Somewhat comfortable	141	30
Very comfortable	36	8

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	101	21
Somewhat uncomfortable	190	40
Somewhat comfortable	152	32
Very comfortable	27	6

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Very uncomfortable	168	36
Somewhat uncomfortable	163	35
Somewhat comfortable	111	24
Very comfortable	27	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	37	8
Rarely	111	24
Occasionally, once or twice a month	205	44
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	91	19
Very often, nearly every day	26	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	44	9
Rarely	106	22
Occasionally, once or twice a month	191	41
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	78	17
Very often, nearly every day	51	11

How often do you self-censor during classroom discussions?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	32	7
Rarely	111	24
Occasionally, once or twice a month	186	40
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	106	23
Very often, nearly every day	36	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	4	1
Sometimes acceptable	128	27
Rarely acceptable	177	38
Never acceptable	161	34

Blocking other students from attending a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	12	2
Sometimes acceptable	93	20
Rarely acceptable	157	33
Never acceptable	208	44

Using violence to stop a campus speech.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Always acceptable	4	1
Sometimes acceptable	94	20
Rarely acceptable	60	13
Never acceptable	312	66

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	191	41
Probably should not allow this speaker	173	37
Probably should allow this speaker	73	16
Definitely should allow this speaker	33	7

Abortion should be completely illegal.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	152	32
Probably should not allow this speaker	184	39
Probably should allow this speaker	116	25
Definitely should allow this speaker	17	4

Black Lives Matter is a hate group.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	216	46
Probably should not allow this speaker	185	39
Probably should allow this speaker	50	11
Definitely should allow this speaker	18	4

The Catholic church is a pedophilic institution.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	156	33
Probably should not allow this speaker	208	44
Probably should allow this speaker	92	20
Definitely should allow this speaker	14	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	196	42
Probably should not allow this speaker	180	38
Probably should allow this speaker	74	16
Definitely should allow this speaker	20	4

Children should be able to transition without parental consent.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Definitely should not allow this speaker	122	26
Probably should not allow this speaker	203	43
Probably should allow this speaker	123	26
Definitely should allow this speaker	22	5

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	255	54
Yes	214	46

Affirmative action

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	400	85
Yes	70	15

China

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	410	87
Yes	60	13

Climate change

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	397	84
Yes	73	16

Crime

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	416	88
Yes	54	12

Economic inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	388	83
Yes	82	17

Freedom of speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	372	79
Yes	98	21

Gay rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	316	67
Yes	154	33

Gender inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	329	70
Yes	141	30

Gun control

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	315	67
Yes	155	33

Hate speech

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	340	72
Yes	130	28

Immigration

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	296	63
Yes	174	37

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	247	52
Yes	223	48

The Presidential Election

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	239	51
Yes	231	49

Police misconduct

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	342	73
Yes	128	27

Racial inequality

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	297	63
Yes	173	37

Religion

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	344	73
Yes	126	27

Sexual assault

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	340	72
Yes	130	28

The Supreme Court

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	406	86
Yes	64	14

Transgender rights

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	272	58
Yes	198	42

None of the above

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	391	83
Yes	79	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	84	18
Rarely	154	33
Occasionally, once or twice a month	152	32
Fairly often, a couple of times a week	47	10
Very often, nearly every day	32	7

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I have been disciplined.	30	6
No, but I have been threatened with discipline.	62	13
I have not been disciplined nor threatened with discipline.	378	80

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	160	34
Rarely	109	23
Occasionally, once or twice a month	132	28
Fairly often, a couple times a week	32	7
Very often, nearly every day	37	8

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	32	7
Unlikely	116	25
Neither likely or unlikely	188	40
Likely	114	24
Very likely	20	4

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	31	7
Unlikely	135	29
Neither likely or unlikely	168	36
Likely	112	24
Very likely	24	5

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

Response	Frequency	Percent
I have filed a Title IX complaint.	5	1
I both know someone who has and have myself filed a Title IX complaint.	13	3
I have not but I know someone who has filed a Title IX complaint.	86	18
I have neither filed a Title IX complaint, nor know anyone who has.”)	366	78

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.	1	0
A Title IX complaint was filed against me and someone I know.	11	2
A Title IX complaint was filed against someone I know, but not me.	58	12
A Title IX complaint has never been filed against me or someone I know.”)	400	85

How often do you attend church or religious services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Never	122	26
Less than once a year	62	13
Once or twice a year	98	21
Several times a year	73	15
Once a month	41	9
2-3 times a month	31	7
About weekly	26	6
Weekly	10	2
Several times a week	8	2

Are you currently a member of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	8	2
No	462	98

Are you a veteran of the armed services?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	1	0	0
No	468	100	100

How often would you say that you feel anxious?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	8	2	7
Less than half the time	41	9	37
About half the time	29	6	26
Most of the time, nearly every day	30	6	27
Always	3	1	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	22	5	29
Less than half the time	41	9	54
About half the time	10	2	14
Most of the time, nearly every day	2	0	3

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	7	2	8
Less than half the time	33	7	38
About half the time	34	7	39
Most of the time, nearly every day	12	3	14
Always	0	0	1

How often would you say that you feel depressed?

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	33	7	31
Less than half the time	54	12	52
About half the time	13	3	13
Most of the time, nearly every day	4	1	3
Always	0	0	0

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

Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Never	4	1	4
Less than half the time	25	5	27
About half the time	30	6	32
Most of the time, nearly every day	17	4	18
Always	17	4	18



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