



Tough Talk: Navigating Political Discussions Abroad

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DISCLAIMER

This presentation is not itself political in nature, and we are not representing or asserting institution/organizational or personal political views.

Rather, we hope this presentation addresses relevant topics that may inform how education abroad professionals advise students on an evolving set of student needs.

Introduction

Why this is this topic relevant?

- Political discourse in the US is changing almost constantly
 - And in host countries as well, where many citizens follow US politics
- Media savvy students
 - Immediate and direct access to information
- Students can expect to navigate questions of politics and political beliefs
 - Do they feel prepared for this?

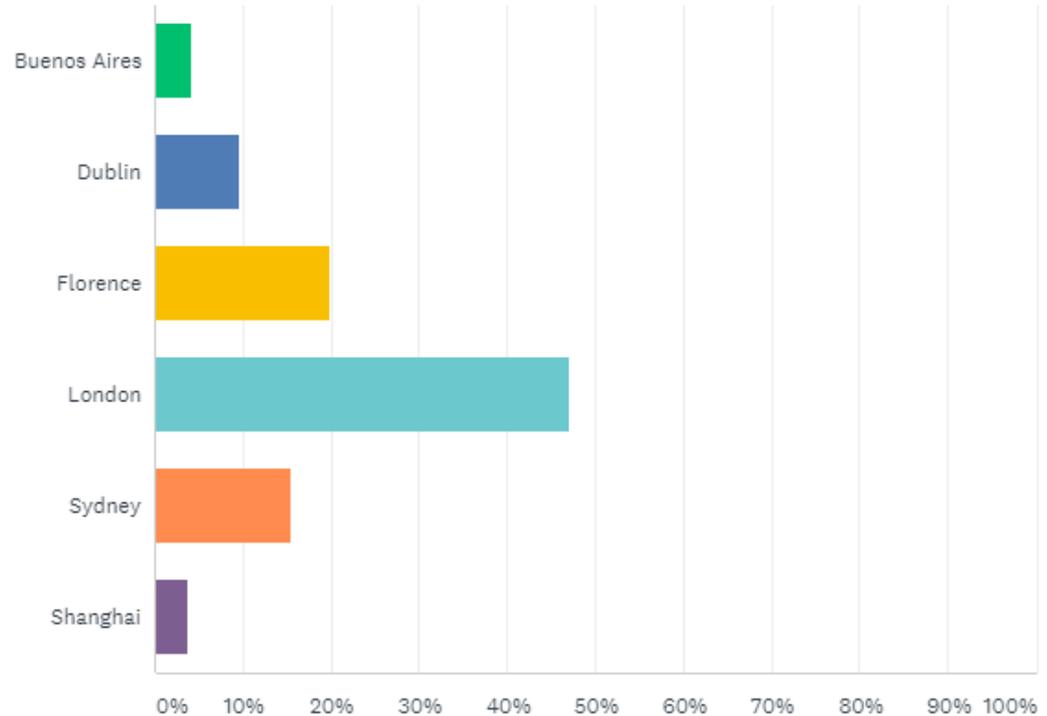
"It's natural for students to feel uncomfortable going abroad — it's not only natural, it's healthy. But their assumptions will probably be challenged like they've never been challenged before." - Kendall Brostuen, director of international programs at Brown University, via The Chronicle of Higher Education

How did we assess this topic?

- Developed and distributed a survey to CAPA program participants

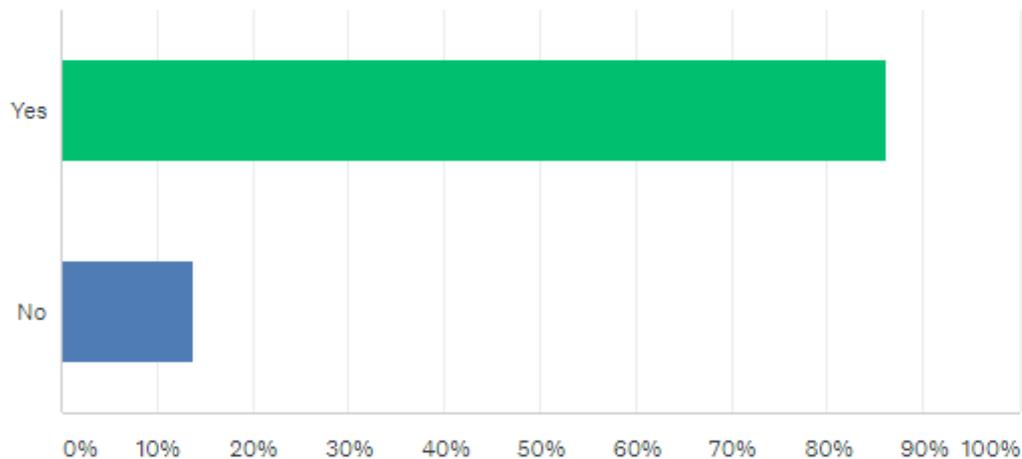
Participants

- CAPA program participants
- Undergrads at US institutions
- Studied abroad during Fall 2016 - Spring 2018
- On short term and semester programs
- Studying at 6 CAPA centers worldwide



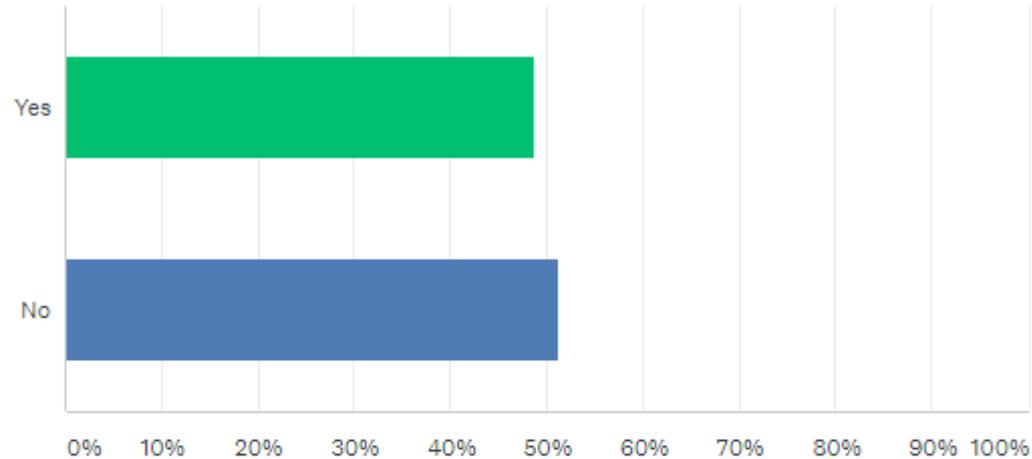
- Total respondents: 187

While studying abroad on your CAPA program, did anyone from your host country (e.g. coworker, friend, acquaintance) engage you in conversations related to current issues in US politics?



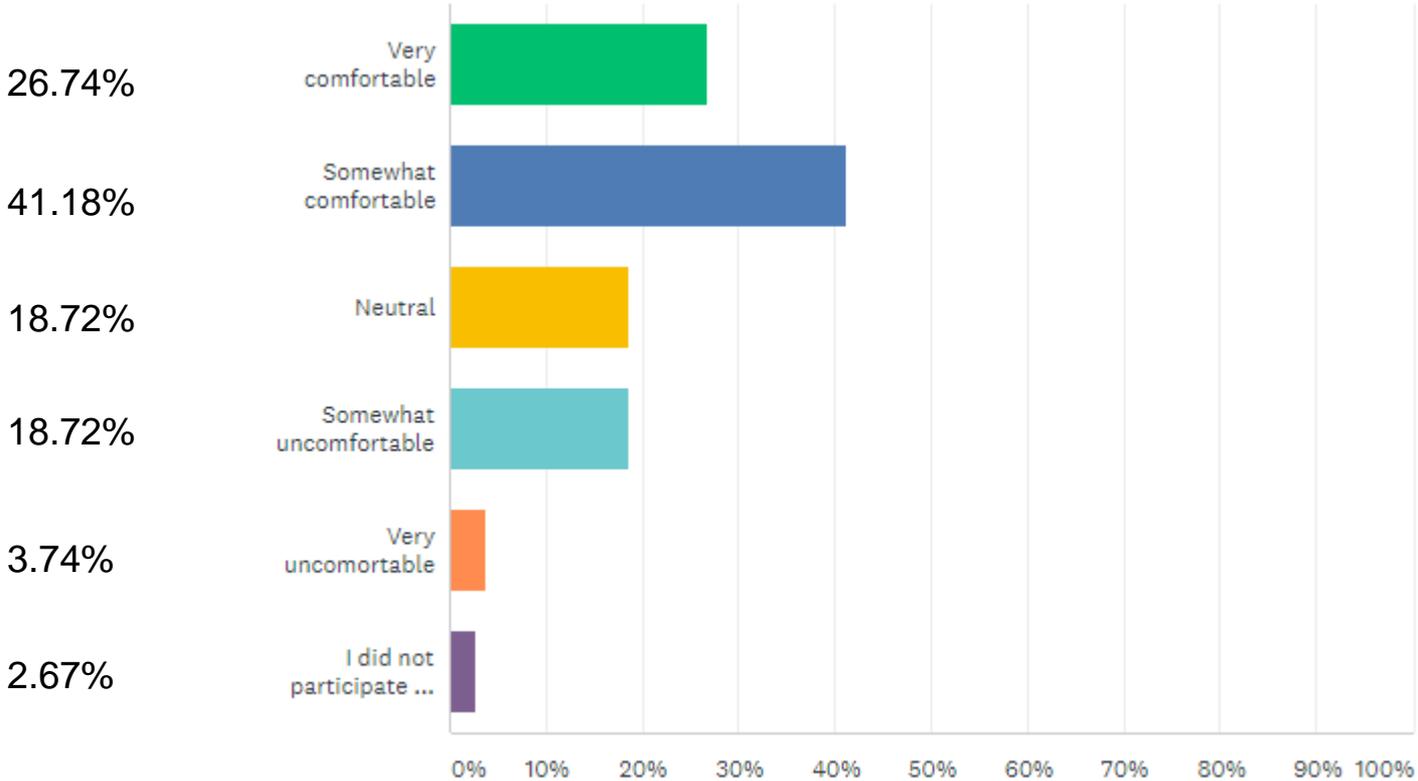
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Yes	86.10% 161
▼ No	13.90% 26
TOTAL	187

Did you bring up the topic of US politics with anyone from your host country while studying abroad?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Yes	48.66%	91
▼ No	51.34%	96
TOTAL		187

How comfortable were you with engaging in conversations related to current political events in the US?



If you participated in any conversations of this nature, what were the topics?

Policies Economics Health Care Protests Racism Equality
Gun Control Government Election Gun Violence
President Asked Donald Trump Abroad Brexit
Abortion Gun Laws London Politics Stuff North Korea

Student Responses

- Since I studied abroad right after Trump's inauguration, I was faced with many questions from people I met. None were aggressive questions, and most people were just curious. These conversations led to America's political and social climate, and I learned how much America affects many countries around the world, like Ireland. The people I met knew a lot about America's politics while I learned about Ireland's politics while abroad.
- Trump as president, US relations to other countries (specifically regarding taxing), immigration in US, education in US, healthcare in US
- Reasons I voted for Trump; explained electoral college to a London MP
- I was there for the election in Britain, so politics was a very prominent topic for that reason. With the election of a new PM, there was a lot of comparison between our President and the PM.
- Usually how many Americans and people in Buenos Aires did not like Trump. Also about how the Argentinian political state is currently going through some changes (according to locals) and about job market in Buenos Aires

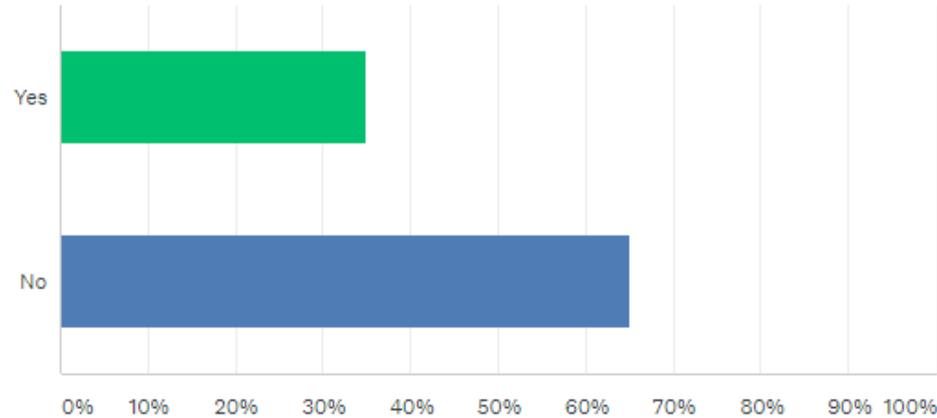
If you overheard any political conversations between locals and US nationals, what did those topics include?

Politics Republicans Presidential Election Negative Gun
Immigration Laws President care Donald Trump
North Korea Conversations Democrats Brexit

Student Responses

- How it doesn't make sense that there is an electoral college.
- Usually the president, how informed US citizens were, and conversations about media (I met people from BBC who asked many questions about US media).
- Absolute disgust for American politics and Brexit
- A lot of hate for trump lol
- I didn't overhear any conversations but just from the propaganda displayed around London, it is clear to see that they are opinionated on the subject (lots of signs mocking Trump, Kim Jung Un, etc.)

Whether you participated in a conversation about US politics or overheard a conversation of that nature, did this impact your personal politics or sense of national identity?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	34.97% 64
No	65.03% 119
TOTAL	183

How?

Maintained Beliefs

- I already have a defined stance on the current political situation in the US, and most intellectuals tended to agree with my stance.
- It made my view of Donald Trump improve. I was already a supporter, but that just solidified it more.
- I was fortunate enough to engage in intelligent debate with locals while abroad, which both helped to strengthen my own political beliefs as well as emboldening my national identity.
- I will defend my country and my president to the fullest extent. I believe it to be so disrespectful and rude to bad mouth the political leaders of your home country in a foreign land

How?

Shifting Perspectives

- I felt compelled to take multiple perspectives on US politics, whereas prior to studying abroad, my views were based on the opinions of my close friends and family. I was finally able to make my own perspective.
- I learned to respect the Irish political system better than the American political system. After hearing about Ireland's hardships and how far they've come to become a peaceful country today, I think America still has a long way to go before we can have as stable as a system like the Republic of Ireland.
- Although I'd like to think I was already aware of the US position in relation to other countries, I think hearing perspectives from people from other countries really emphasized some of the things the US does that are vastly different than other countries (costly education and healthcare, heavy taxing as opposed to a more open market)
- It made me really question my identity, as I had felt more connected to my host country than America

Prior to going abroad, what do you wish you had been told about having political conversations in your host country?

Location Specific

- Don't talk about politics in China in public
- I wish I was informed about the political climate of Italy post-Fascism, and how Italians choose who will lead them.
- I knew from research that I should expect to talk politics every day. But I was thrown off by how blunt the English are about their questions. I had to teach numerous people that asking who a person voted for is very rude in the US.
- I wish I knew that there would not be an interrogation. I went into Ireland, thinking they would handle politics the way many Americans did.
- How blunt Australians would be about asking me about my political views, which I was not expecting

Prior to going abroad, what do you wish you had been told about having political conversations in your host country?

Social Norms

- Everyone is very blunt and it isn't offensive. They aren't "PC" like America is, so if you're having a pint with some coworkers and they bring up politics it isn't something you should shy away from. It is a very normal conversation to have in those environments.
- People are very willing to speak openly about politics in the workplace in the UK

Broader expectation setting

- Learn more about US politics, because even if you think you know enough the people your host country will know more and want to discuss everything with you. If you don't know what they're talking about, that's pretty embarrassing.
- More comparison between the home and host countries politics
- How much people abroad are genuinely impacted by the US

Limitations

- Stand-alone assessment
 - No larger context within program evaluation
- Respondents at different stages
 - Spring 2018 students currently abroad through Fall 2016 students studied over a year ago
- Working with Gen Z
 - Wanted to keep the survey short and engaging
- Participant Profile
 - CAPA students

Discussion

- Are your pre-departure orientations location specific? Do they include topics related to politics abroad?
- What are some strategies for helping students feel prepared to discuss politics abroad?
- Should on-site staff have training on discussing local/comparative politics?
- What resources have you suggested to students preparing to go abroad?