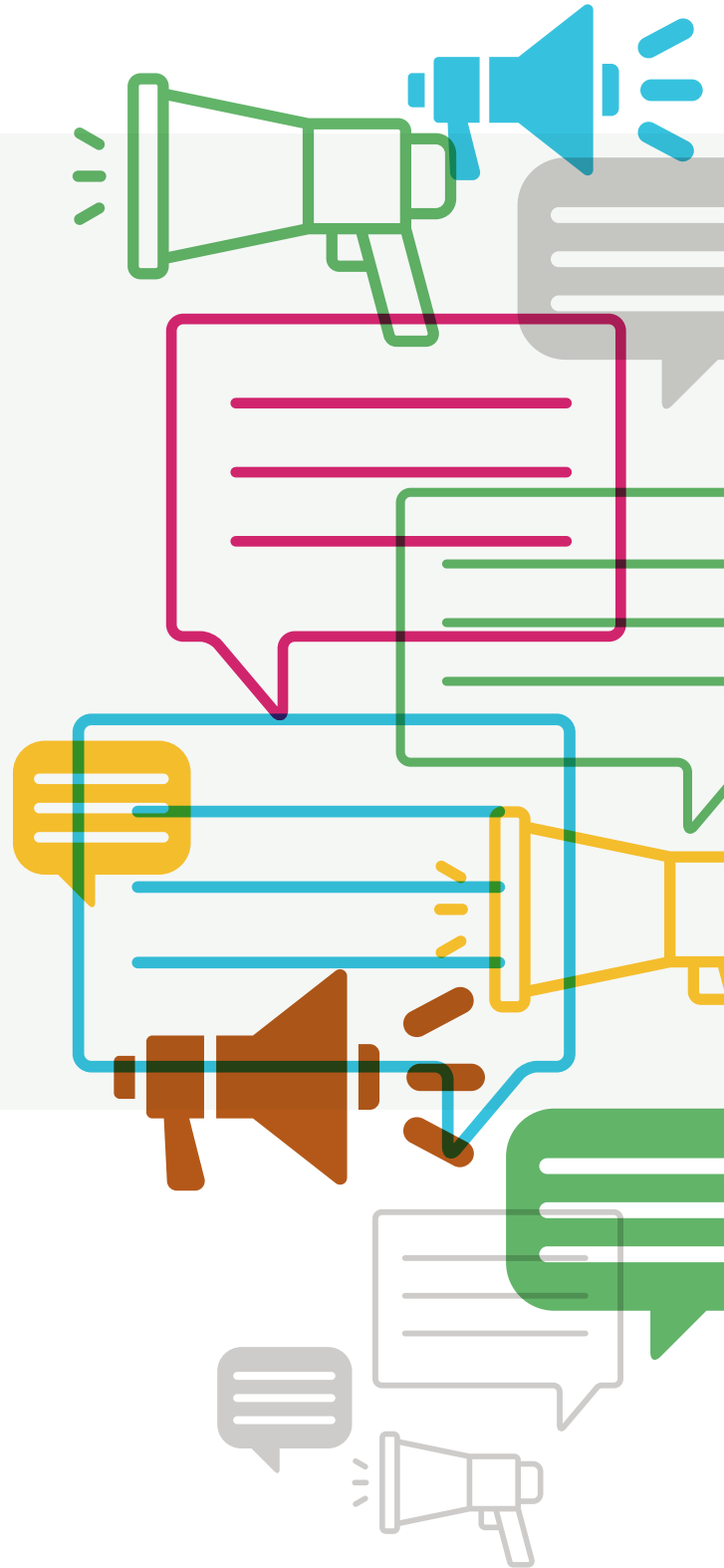


FREE EXPRESSION IN AMERICA POST-2020

A Landmark Survey of Americans' Views on Speech Rights

A Knight Foundation-Ipsos study from the Knight Free Expression Research Series





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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Acknowledgments	10
Detailed Findings	11
Introduction	11
Free Expression Attitudes and Priorities.....	12
State of Free Expression Today	18
Key Speech Experiences	25
Views on Social Media	29
Public Views of Acceptable Speech	32
High Schoolers Then and Now	37
The Broader Research Landscape	38
Conclusion	40
Methodology	41

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Free expression and the freedom of speech are cornerstones of American democracy. Yet the interpretation of the First Amendment continues to be a flashpoint in the 21st century as the nation debates how to apply these rights to our society.

For the 2021 “Free Expression in America Post-2020” report, Knight Foundation commissioned Ipsos to conduct a survey with a nationally representative sample of more than 4,000 American adults, including an additional sample of 1,000 undergraduate college students. **The Knight Foundation-Ipsos study provides a comprehensive look at American attitudes toward freedom of speech in a post-2020 environment, building on Knight Foundation’s long-standing work studying free speech views among students since 2004.**

The findings described in this report cover many but not all of the rich insights possible from this complex dataset. We invite the public and researchers to explore this publicly available resource in further detail. This study finds that all Americans hold to the ideal of free speech, but putting free expression into practice reveals significant differences in experiences and attitude. It examines how Americans view free expression issues, events and the application of our First Amendment rights in an increasingly digital, diverse,¹ and politically driven² society.

KEY FINDINGS

- Americans of all walks of life appreciate freedom of speech and recognize its benefits to society and democracy. However, many Americans place equal or more importance on mitigating social challenges that can arise from free speech, like preventing misinformation or violence.
- While most Americans feel they enjoy First Amendment protections around their speech rights, some groups feel notably less secure. Black or African Americans, in particular, are much less likely to report that they feel protected by the First Amendment.
- Partisan affiliation drives wide-ranging views among Americans as to what constitutes a legitimate expression of First Amendment rights—particularly on topics that have been politicized, such as the 2020 racial injustice protests, the 2020 election, or the spread of misinformation about the election results. For nonpoliticized topics, like high school students making insulting comments about their school on social media, partisan differences disappear entirely.
- Most Americans believe they have a moderately easy time expressing their free speech rights, but most also believe that others—typically those of opposing political persuasions to their own—have an easier time.



1 U.S. Census Bureau, “2020 U.S. Population More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Than Measured in 2010,” August 12, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/2020-united-states-population-more-racially-ethnically-diverse-than-2010.html>.

2 Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide,” Pew Charitable Trusts, March 29, 2021, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2021/america-is-exceptional-in-its-political-divide>.

■ Experience with speech differs by race and politics. Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans are more likely to report feeling uncomfortable or unsafe because of speech made by others. While few Americans overall have had their social media activity curtailed by the platforms, Republicans are more likely than Democrats and independents to say they have experienced this (however, this poll did not ask what specific types

of posts or materials were curtailed). Views on how problematic speech should be addressed—particularly on social media—are likewise divided along political and racial lines.

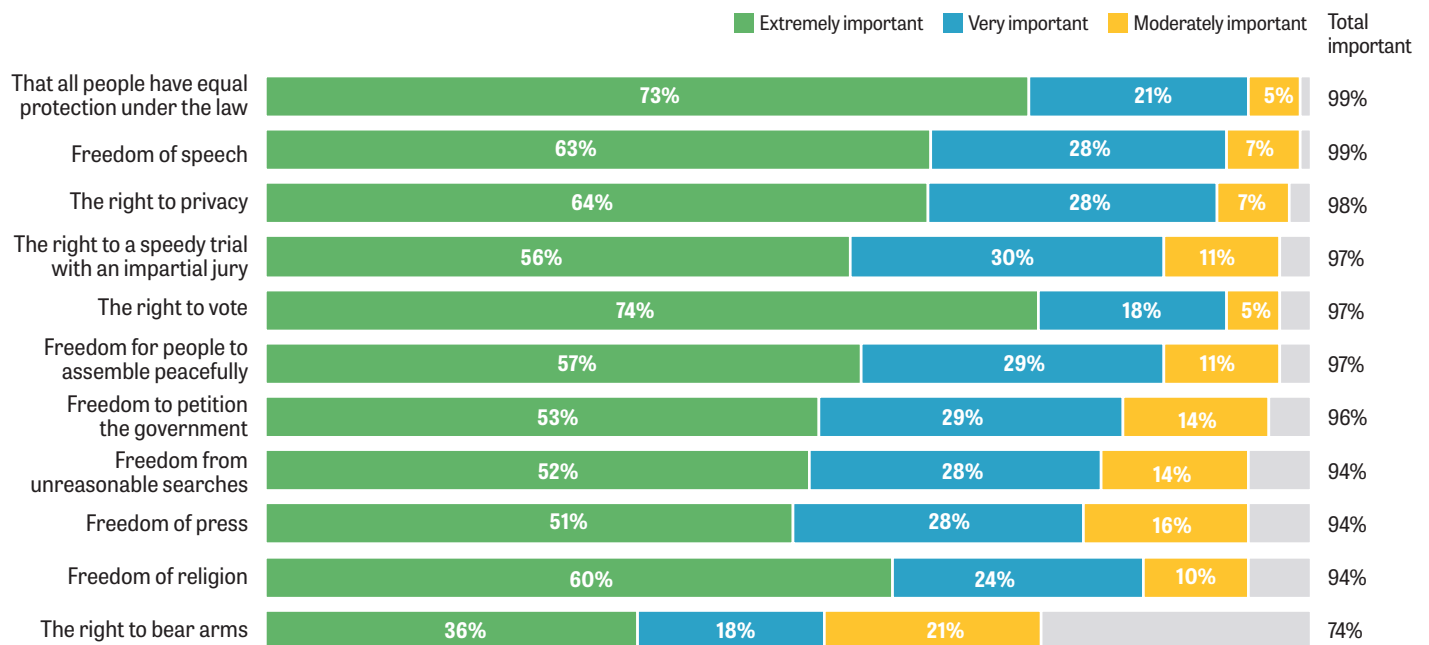
■ Most Americans say a variety of private and public institutions should prohibit racist speech but allow political views that are offensive. However, overall trust in these institutions is low.

KEY CHARTS

A selection of key data points. Full findings are in the body of the report.

Free speech is one of the most important rights to Americans

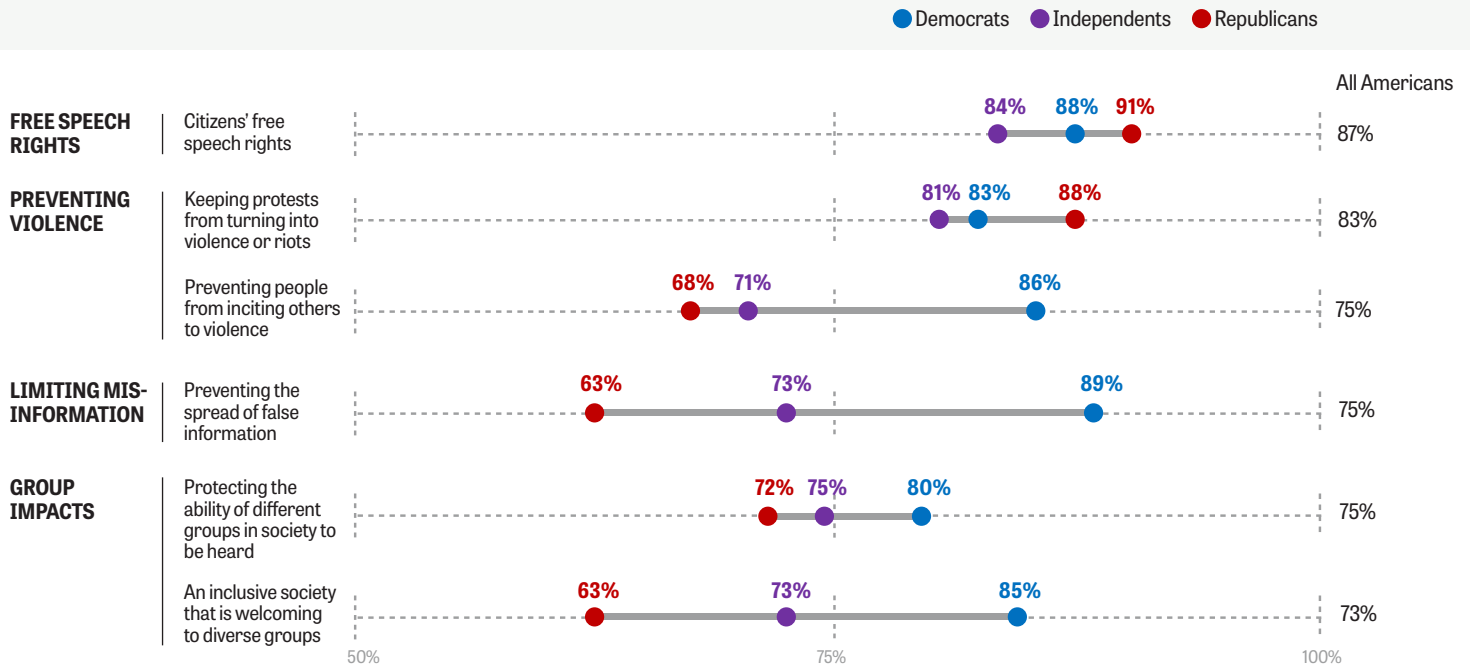
How important, if at all, are the following to you?



Q1. How important, if at all, are the following to you? Base: Three-quarters of respondents n=3,275

Partisans weigh free speech rights and challenges differently

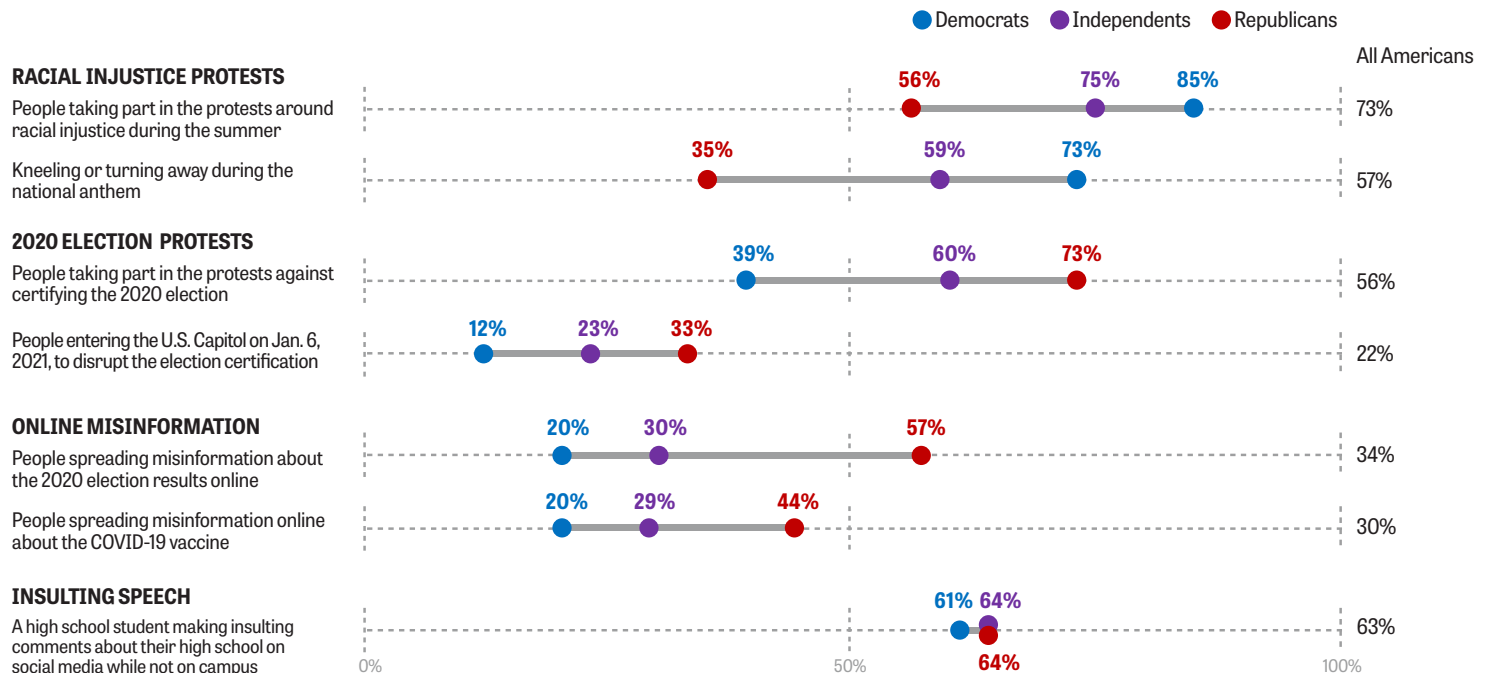
% Who consider each of the following to be extremely/very important in our democracy



Q20. How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy? Base (sizes vary across questions): "Citizens' free speech rights" n=1,465; "Keeping protests from turning into violence or riots" n=2,491; "Preventing people from inciting others to violence" n=2,484; "Preventing the spread of false information" n= 2,473; "Protecting the ability of different groups in society to be heard" n= 2,460; "An inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups" n=1,465

Partisans are mostly divided around what constitutes a legitimate example of someone expressing their First Amendment rights

% Who believe the following are legitimate examples of people expressing their First Amendment rights



Q29. Do you feel like the following are legitimate or not legitimate examples of people expressing their First Amendment rights? Base: "People taking part in the protests around racial injustice during the summer of 2020" n=2,512; "A high school student making insulting comments about their high school on social media while not on campus" n=2,508; "Kneeling or turning away during the national anthem" n=2,475; "People taking part in the protests against certifying the 2020 election" n=2,484; "People spreading misinformation about the 2020 election results online" n=2,494; "People spreading misinformation online about the COVID-19 vaccine" n=2,481; "People entering the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, to disrupt the election certification" n=2,510

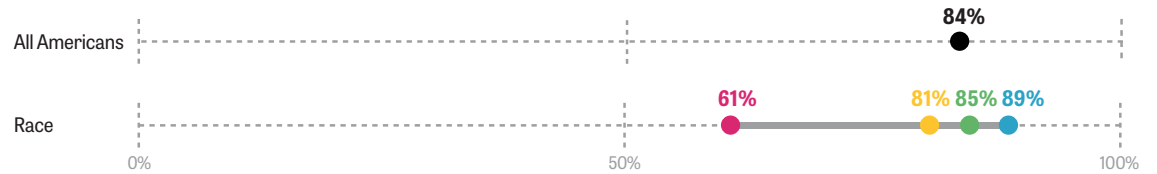
Black Americans are significantly less likely to feel the First Amendment protects them

How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect people like you?

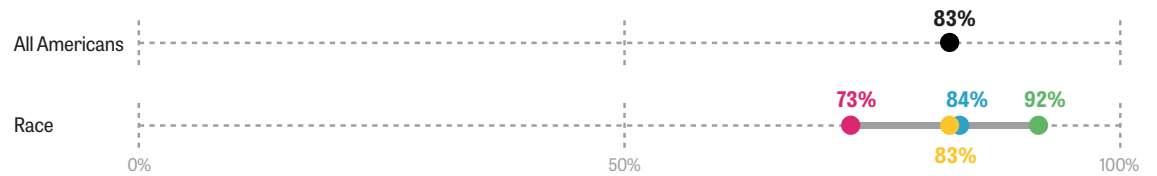
% A great deal/A fair amount

● White ● Black ● Hispanic ● Asian

PEOPLE LIKE YOU



THE TYPICAL AMERICAN



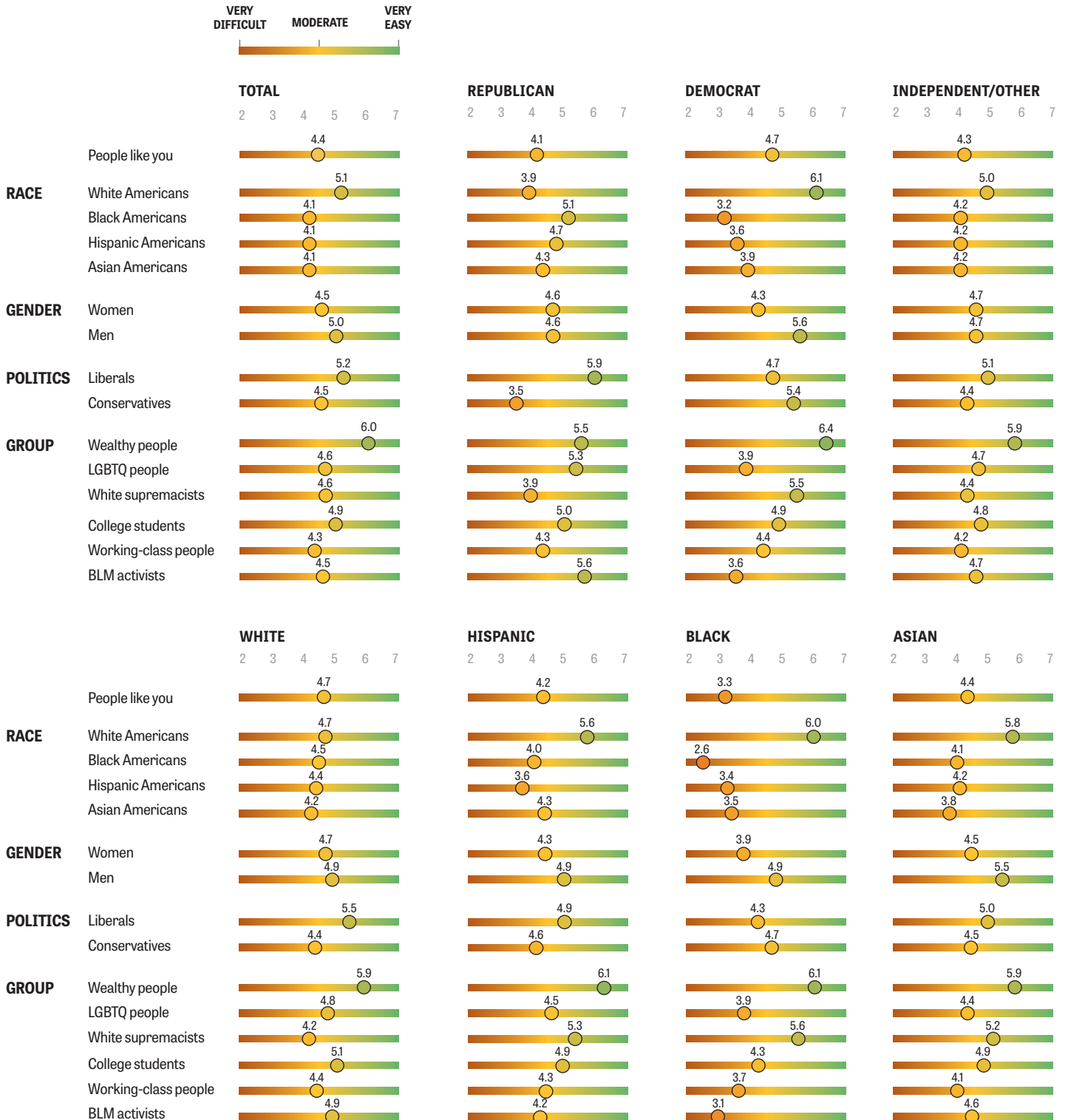
Q3. How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect [people like you] OR [the typical American]?

Base: Three-quarters of respondents saw "people like you," one-quarter were shown "the typical American." People like you n=3,256; the typical American n=1,110



Americans disagree on which groups are more marginalized in exercising speech rights—particularly when it comes to politics and race

How easy or difficult is it for the following people to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today?



Note: Responses were given on a scale (1=Hardest, 7=Easiest). These are a selection of the total number of groups the question asked about

KEY POPULATIONS

Experience with and attitudes toward speech vary widely among different groups in American society. The following is a brief summary of the major findings from several of those groups. Full data can be found in the main body of the report.

Democrats

Democrats tend to see their political opponents (that is, conservatives) as having a slightly easier time than themselves in expressing their free speech rights. However, this masks a deeper divide among Democrats of different races and ethnicities. White Democrats are unique in seeing themselves as having a relatively easy time using their free speech rights, while Democrats of other racial and ethnic groups are less inclined to feel this way.

As a group, Democrats are more likely than Republicans or independents to report having felt either uncomfortable or unsafe because of comments other people have made about their identity or political beliefs. White Democrats are almost as likely as Black Americans to report feeling uncomfortable or unsafe because of others' speech.

Democrats also hold strongly partisan views of what is (and is not) a legitimate exercise of free expression, being among the most likely to say that the 2020 racial injustice protests were legitimate and that spreading vaccine misinformation is illegitimate.

Republicans

Republicans have distinctive views and experiences around free expression. On one hand, they are among the most permissive of speech when it is presented as an abstract concept. On the other hand, most Republicans do not believe kneeling during the national anthem is a legitimate form of free expression, and they are split on whether the racial injustice protests of 2020 were legitimate.

Republicans also have a unique understanding of free speech protections in America. While most Republicans say they personally feel protected

by the First Amendment, many also believe that other groups, such as Black, Hispanic, Asian or LGBTQ people, have an easier time using their free speech rights without consequence than whites, conservatives or people like them.

As noted in the Key Findings section, Republicans are slightly more likely than Democrats and independents to report that they have had social media posts flagged or removed by the platforms but are less likely to report feeling uncomfortable or unsafe as a result of others' speech.

Independents

American independents are not the cohesive group on speech issues that they are sometimes thought of in popular imagination. When disaggregating opinions of independents, their views vary widely across a range of responses. For instance, on feeling protected by the First Amendment, independents as a whole look somewhat like Democrats, but digging deeper, white independents feel more protected—closer to white Republicans—while Black independents feel less well protected, more like Black Americans overall.

Likewise, white and minority independents have differing experiences when it comes to feeling the impacts of speech, with minority independents more likely to report feeling uncomfortable or unsafe because of the speech of others.

However, independents are broadly similar when it comes to interpreting more political examples of speech. They are firmly and cohesively between Democrats and Republicans in interpreting the legitimacy of either the 2020 racial injustice protests or the 2021 protests about election certification.

Black and African Americans

Black Americans are among the least likely to say they feel the First Amendment protects them, personally. Black Americans believe that Black and Black-aligned groups have the hardest time expressing free speech without consequences while white and conservative groups have an easier time.

Additionally, Black and African Americans report having the most negative experiences with speech. One in four Black Americans report feeling unsafe because of a statement made about their race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Over half report feeling uncomfortable because of a similar comment, among the highest levels of any group analyzed in this report.

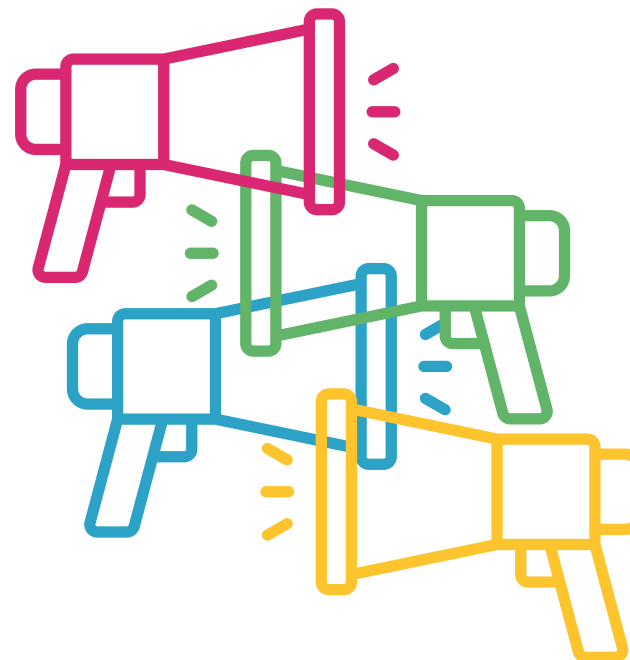
Black Americans are among the most likely to say that other values, such as inclusion or preventing violence, are of equal priority when compared with speech rights.

Hispanic and Asian Americans

Attitudes among Hispanic and Asian Americans represent, in many ways, the middle ground on free speech and expression issues across racial and ethnic groups. These Americans broadly feel protected by the First Amendment, though not quite as much as white Americans.

Asian and Hispanic Americans are generally very strong believers in freedom of speech and are among those least likely to believe freedom of speech is under threat. They generally rate their ease of expression as lower than other racial and ethnic groups in society.

These Americans, particularly Asian Americans, are highly likely to report that they have felt unsafe because of the speech of others.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

We are social investors who support democracy by funding free expression and journalism, arts and culture in community, research in areas of media and democracy, and in the success of American cities and towns where the Knight brothers once had newspapers.

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DETAILED FINDINGS

Introduction

This first “Free Expression in America Post-2020” Knight Foundation-Ipsos report offers a uniquely in-depth look at the state of free speech and expression in America today. This study explores attitudes toward and understandings of First Amendment freedoms, shining a light on how opinion diverges across racial, ethnic and partisan lines. Rather than allowing current events alone to guide and shape the research, this report provides overarching insights into how and where the broader public agrees and disagrees, in ways that can help shape and inform the dialogue on these critical issues.

Building on extant research by Knight Foundation and many others—a summary of which can be found in the section titled “The Broader Research Landscape” (page 38)—the central findings underline what a wider body of research on freedom of expression has previously found: Americans cherish First Amendment rights and principles, and believe that

freedom of expression is essential to democracy and ought to be protected. Yet the public does not always see eye to eye on what forms of expression are—or should be—protected under the First Amendment.

Beyond illuminating these broader attitudes, the Knight-Ipsos report delves into the public’s divergent personal experiences with speech, and normative views on what speech should be allowed in different environments. The report also explores whether Americans view recent seismic events—such as the 2020 protests for racial justice and the events at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021—as legitimate expressions of First Amendment rights.

As the report found, partisanship drives perception around these issues, with a significant divide across parties depending on the event or action in question. Taken together, these findings underline the divergent experiences of Americans today, providing a window of insight at a time of significant societal polarization.³

³ Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide,” Pew Charitable Trusts, March 29, 2021, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2021/america-is-exceptional-in-its-political-divide>.

FREE EXPRESSION ATTITUDES AND PRIORITIES

The First Amendment is one of the founding principles of the United States, and the public holds it in high regard. Americans say that freedom of speech and the First Amendment are important, central values of American society. However, as Knight-Ipsos research underlines, freedom of speech exists in the minds of Americans alongside other priorities, and the principles of the First Amendment are unevenly understood. Additionally, not all Americans feel equally protected by the First Amendment.

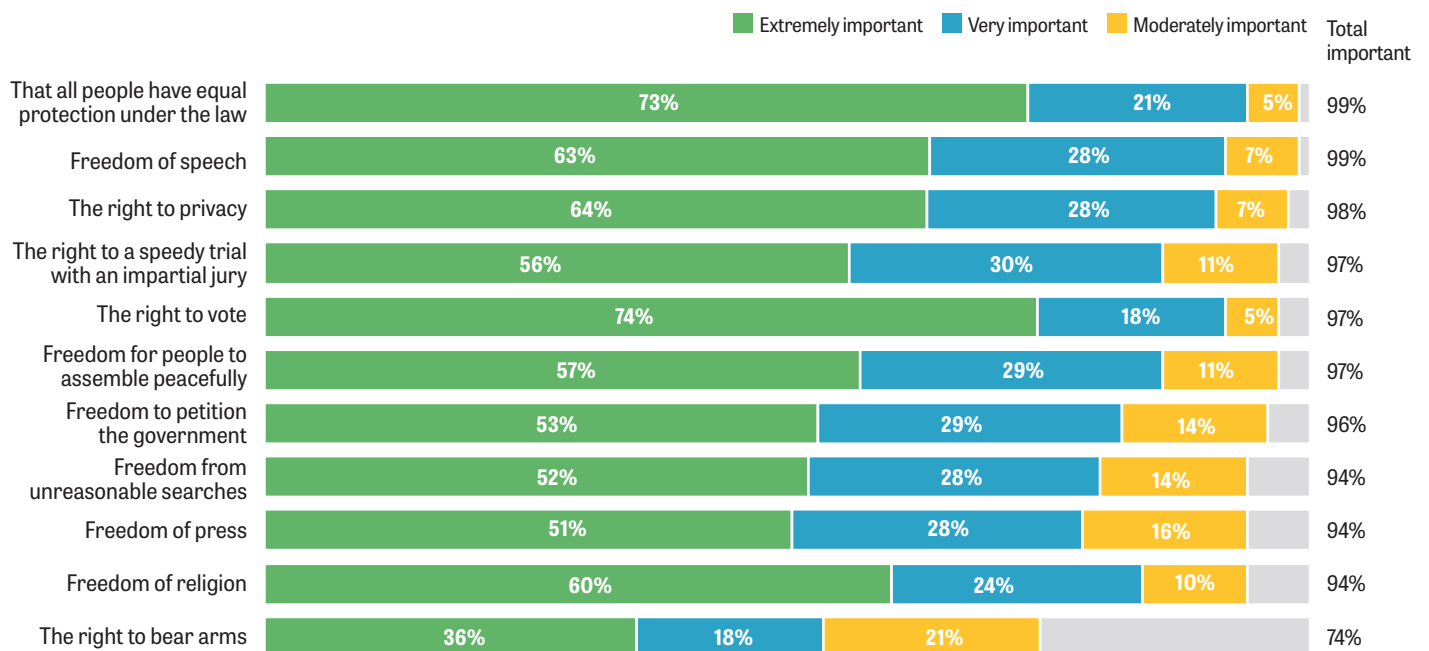
Freedom of speech is extremely important to all Americans.

Most people see personal value in freedom of speech and understand its importance to society. Respondents rank the importance of freedom of speech just behind all people having equal protection under the law, but ahead of freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and the right to bear arms. Regardless of age, race or political affiliation, majorities of Americans say this right is “extremely” important to them and society.

When Americans are pressed to choose a right that is most important to them and society, freedom of speech ranks third overall. This is true for how Americans rank these rights for themselves, personally, and for society as a whole, falling behind the right to equal protection under the law and the right to vote. Freedom of speech is tied with freedom of religion and the right to bear arms in its importance among the public when people are called upon to choose rights in this way.

Free speech is one of the most important rights to Americans

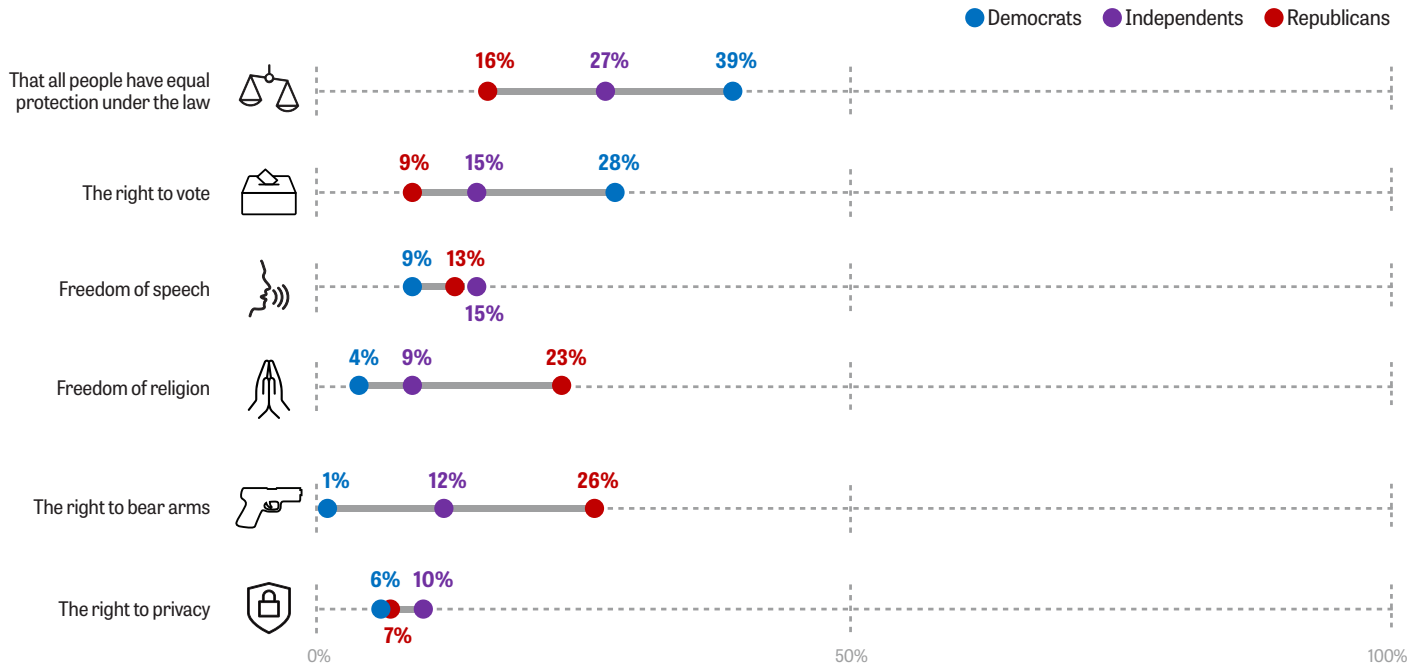
How important, if at all, are the following to you?



Q1. How important, if at all, are the following to you? Base: Three-quarters of respondents n=3,275

The rights that are important to society are also personally important to Americans

If you had to pick, which of the following is the most important to you?



Q2. If you had to pick, which of the following is most important to you?
 Base: Selected "extremely important" for more than one item in Q1. N=2,966

Partisans, however, differ on their highest priority. Republicans tend to gravitate toward freedom of religion and the right to bear arms, while Democrats focus on the right to vote and equal protection. Independents have more mixed priorities, with equal protection under the law being the highest priority, followed by speech and voting. Additionally, Black Americans are more likely to value equal protection under the law and the right to vote above all other rights.

Black Americans are less likely to have confidence in First Amendment protections.

A large majority of Americans, more than four in five, feel that the First Amendment protects people like them. And very few, fewer than one in 50, believe the First Amendment does not protect people like them at all. This perception holds true across most groups in American society, including by age or partisanship.

However, Black Americans are much less likely than Hispanic, Asian or white Americans to feel the First Amendment protects people like them. In fact, twice as many Black Americans report not feeling protected compared with any other group.

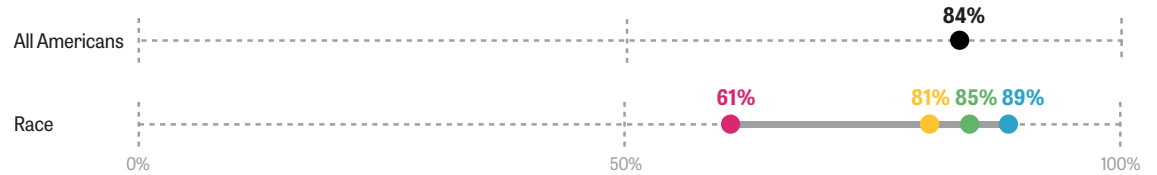
Black Americans are significantly less likely to feel the First Amendment protects them

How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protects people like you?

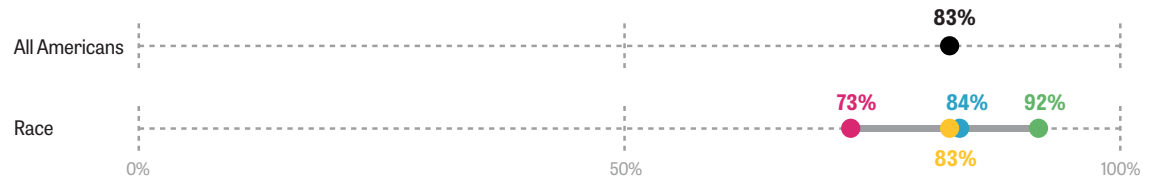
% A great deal/A fair amount

● White ● Black ● Hispanic ● Asian

PEOPLE LIKE YOU



THE TYPICAL AMERICAN



Q3. How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect [people like you] OR [the typical American]?

Base: Three-quarters of respondents were shown "people like you", one-quarter saw "the typical American," People like you n=3,256, The typical American n=1,110

Americans recognize the centrality of free speech to democratic society.

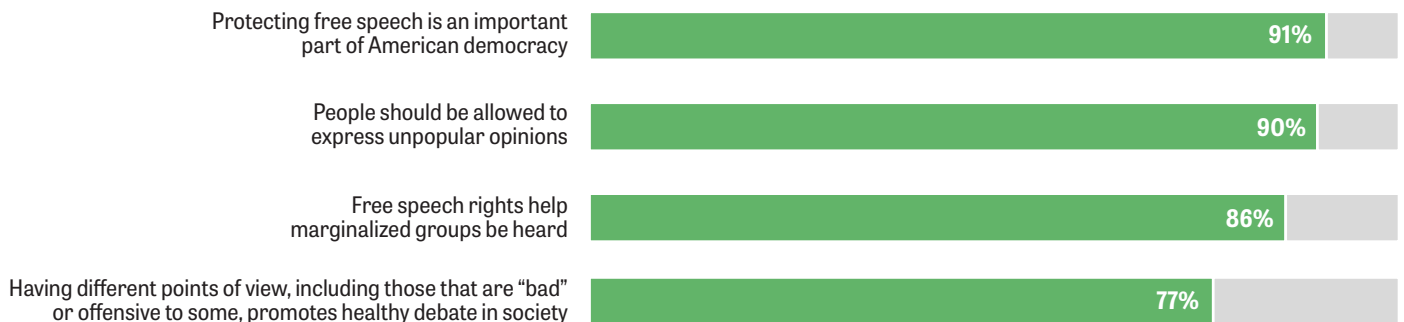
While Americans value free speech and largely feel they are protected by the First Amendment, these views become complicated when tested against specific situations or scenarios involving free expression.

Reflecting the value people place on free expression, most Americans support free speech principles in the abstract. Decisive majorities of Americans feel that "protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy" (91%), "people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions" (90%), and "free speech rights help marginalized groups be heard" (86%).

Most Americans agree on the values of free speech

Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements

% Agree



Q16. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree:

Base: One-quarter of respondents were shown "People should be allowed to express unpopular opinions" n=1,469; all respondents were shown the other questions n=4,366

Partisans disagree about the relative priority of free speech and other social challenges.

Nearly all Americans rate “citizens’ free speech rights” as an important part of our democracy, with many (56%) feeling free speech rights are extremely important.

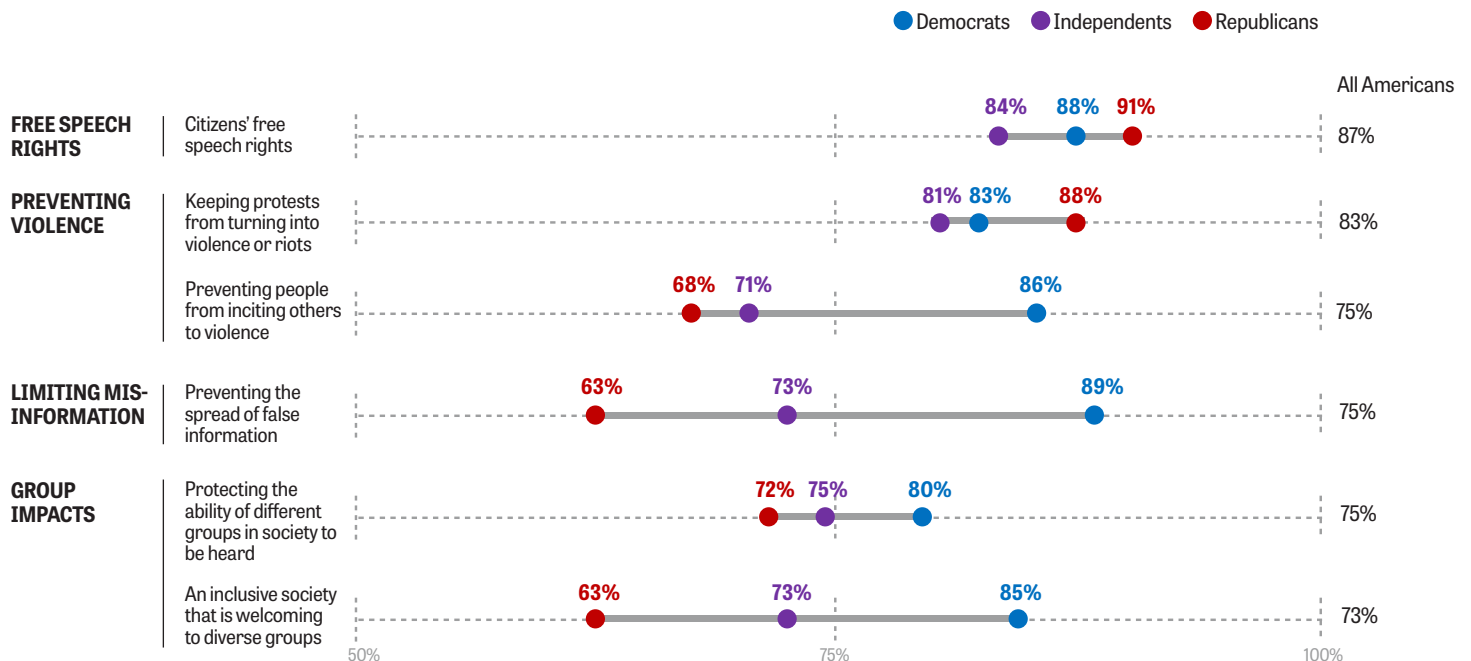
However, almost as many Americans rate other social challenges—some of which relate to speech issues—as important. Efforts to prevent violence—either in protests or individual incitements—are considered at least moderately important by almost as many Americans as free speech (95% and 93%, respectively). A similar number perceive protecting the ability of groups to be heard (95%) and promoting an inclusive society as important (93%). Preventing the spread of false information is seen as important

to at least nine in 10 Americans. However, as we will explore in the following section, some perceive being heard, inclusivity, and fighting misinformation as occasionally conflicting with free speech rights.

While Republicans, Democrats and independents are similarly aligned on the importance they attach to citizens’ free speech rights, Democrats, in particular, place equal levels of importance on other values. For instance, majorities of Americans believe an “inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups” is important for democracy, but as the graphic below shows, Democrats are significantly more likely to say this than independents or Republicans. Likewise, Democrats are also more likely to assign importance to “preventing people from inciting others to violence” and “preventing the spread of false information” than Republicans or independents.

Partisans weigh free speech rights and challenges differently

% Who consider each of the following to be extremely/very important in our democracy



Q20. How important do you consider each of the following to be in our democracy? Base (sizes vary across questions): “Citizen’s free speech rights” n=1,465; “Keeping protests from turning into violence or riots” n=2,491; “Preventing people from inciting others to violence” n=2,484; “Preventing the spread of false information” n=2,473; “Protecting the ability of different groups in society to be heard” n=2,460; “An inclusive society that is welcoming to diverse groups” n=1,465

Taken together, this indicates that Americans weigh a number of priorities regarding free speech differently. For Democrats, other priorities associated with speech, like preventing violence or the spread of false information, are equally important as free speech rights. Meanwhile, Republicans and independents place more importance on free speech rights alone and see mitigating various social challenges that can arise from speech as a secondary concern.

Americans see some tension between free speech rights and inclusion efforts.

Most Americans say free speech sometimes conflicts with other social priorities. For instance, about two-thirds of Americans (68%) say that diversity and inclusion frequently or occasionally conflicts with free speech rights. Republicans (75%) are more likely to say that diversity and inclusion frequently or

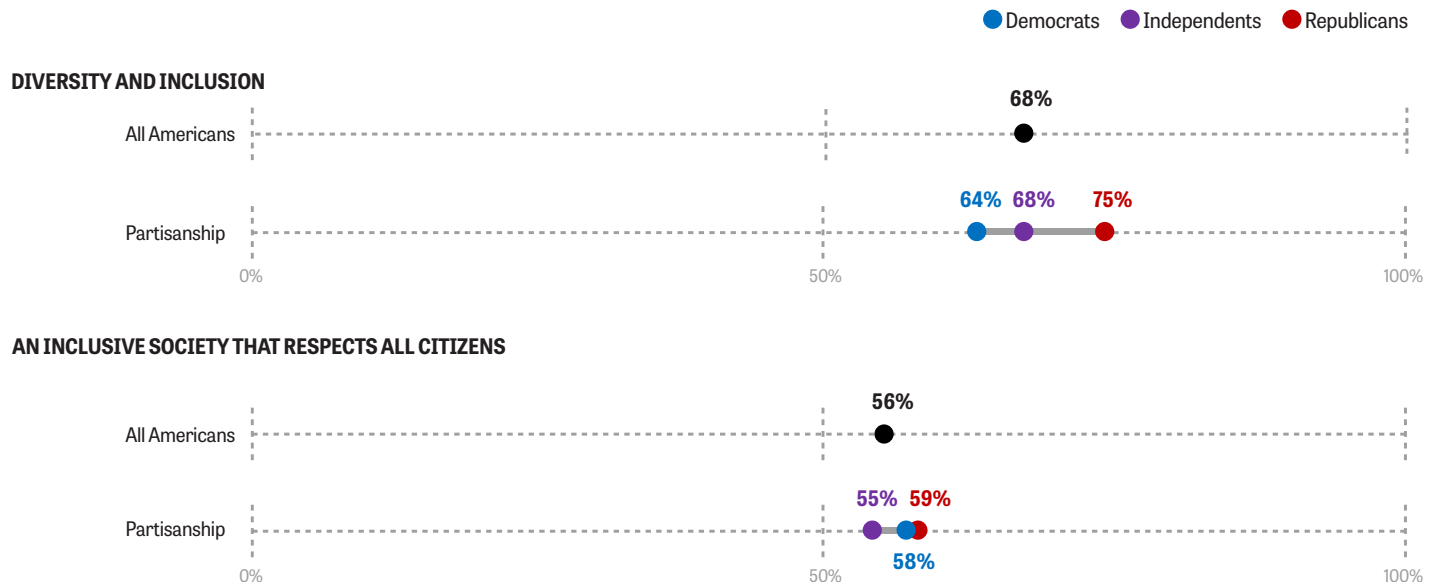
occasionally conflicts with free speech rights, more so than independents (68%) or Democrats (64%).

However, opinion is dependent on how the question is asked. When the question is rephrased slightly, framed as how often “an inclusive society that respects all citizens” conflicts with free speech, the number who say it frequently or occasionally conflicts drops over 10 percentage points (from 68% to 56%). With this wording, there is virtually no difference among Republicans (59%), Democrats (58%) and independents (55%).

This leaves a minority who believe that both values rarely or never conflict with free speech rights, and about one in 10 who did not offer an opinion or declined to answer the questions. Around one in three (32%) feel that an inclusive society does not conflict with free speech rights, while 23% believe that diversity and inclusion is not in conflict. Democrats and independents are more likely than

Americans see free speech rights sometimes in conflict with diversity and inclusion efforts

In your view, how often you think _____ frequently/occasionally conflicts with free speech rights?



Q21. In your view, how often do you think [BLANK] conflicts with free speech rights?
 Base: One-quarter were shown “diversity and inclusion,” one quarter were shown “an inclusive society that respects all citizens.” Diversity and inclusion n=1,079; an inclusive society that respects all citizens n=1,092

Republicans to say that diversity and inclusion rarely or never conflicts with free speech rights. Yet similar numbers across parties (one in three) say that an inclusive society is not in conflict with free speech.

Americans do not have a unified understanding of the First Amendment.

To further examine how Americans understand the First Amendment, the Knight-Ipsos survey includes a series of abstract true-false statements relating to certain First Amendment protections, to gauge whether Americans can correctly identify each as true or false. It is important to remember that First Amendment protections, as they relate to the law, can vary based on the specifics of the situation. While a majority correctly identify each statement as either true or false, further analysis reveals a lack of common understanding across certain subgroups.

Some of the most profound differences emerge by educational attainment, but other groups indicate differing levels of knowledge of what the First Amendment does and does not protect, including by generation, race and ethnicity, and partisanship.

Over half (58%) of Americans correctly stated that the First Amendment prevents government restrictions of speech but not restrictions from the private sector,

while two in five incorrectly identified this as a false statement. The greatest differences in opinion are apparent across educational levels, with 67% of bachelor's degree holders recognizing that this was a true statement, as opposed to 51% of those with less than a high school education and 54% among those with a high school diploma and some college.

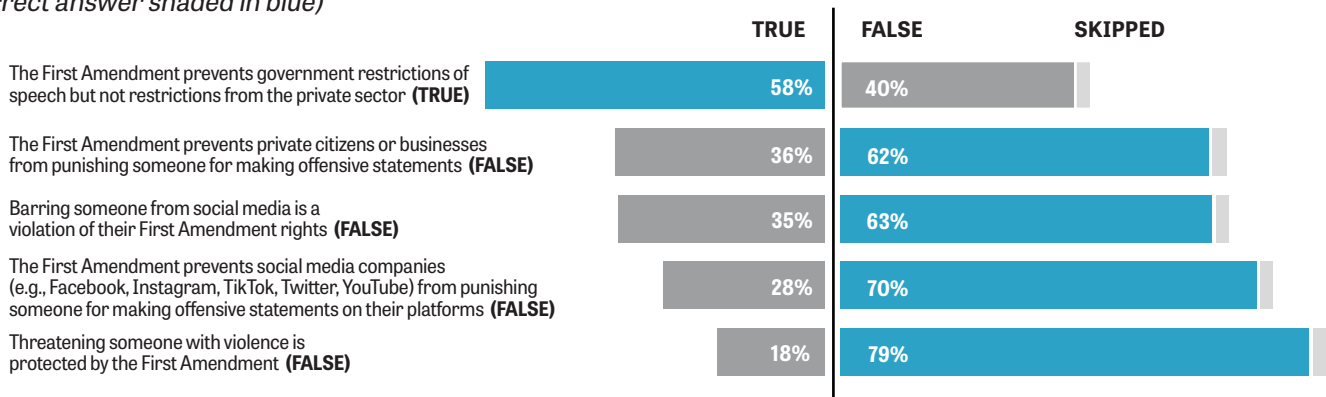
The public is most aware that First Amendment rights do not extend to threats of violence; 79% correctly identify "threatening someone with violence is protected by the First Amendment" to be a false statement, as opposed to the 18% who say this is true.

A majority also correctly identify how First Amendment protections relate to social media. Seven in 10 correctly say that the First Amendment does not prevent social media companies from penalizing people for making offensive statements on platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter; and six in 10 correctly identify that barring someone from social media is not a violation of their First Amendment rights.

Even within partisanship, the impact of education holds, with college-graduate Republicans, Democrats and independents more likely to accurately assess these statements than less highly educated co-partisans.

Americans demonstrate mixed understanding of First Amendment protections

To the best of your knowledge, are the following statements true or false?
(Correct answer shaded in blue)



Q4. To the best of your knowledge, are the following statements true or false?
Base: All respondents n=4,366

STATE OF FREE EXPRESSION TODAY

In this section, findings show that Americans see First Amendment rights under threat and differ on what constitutes a legitimate expression of free speech. Here, race and political affiliation are essential to understanding differing views on these topics.

While many Americans believe First Amendment rights are under threat, other research demonstrates that, in recent decades, the public also has grown increasingly accepting of free speech principles.⁴

Less than half believe that free speech is secure.

Less than half of Americans believe that free speech is secure in America today, similar to the number

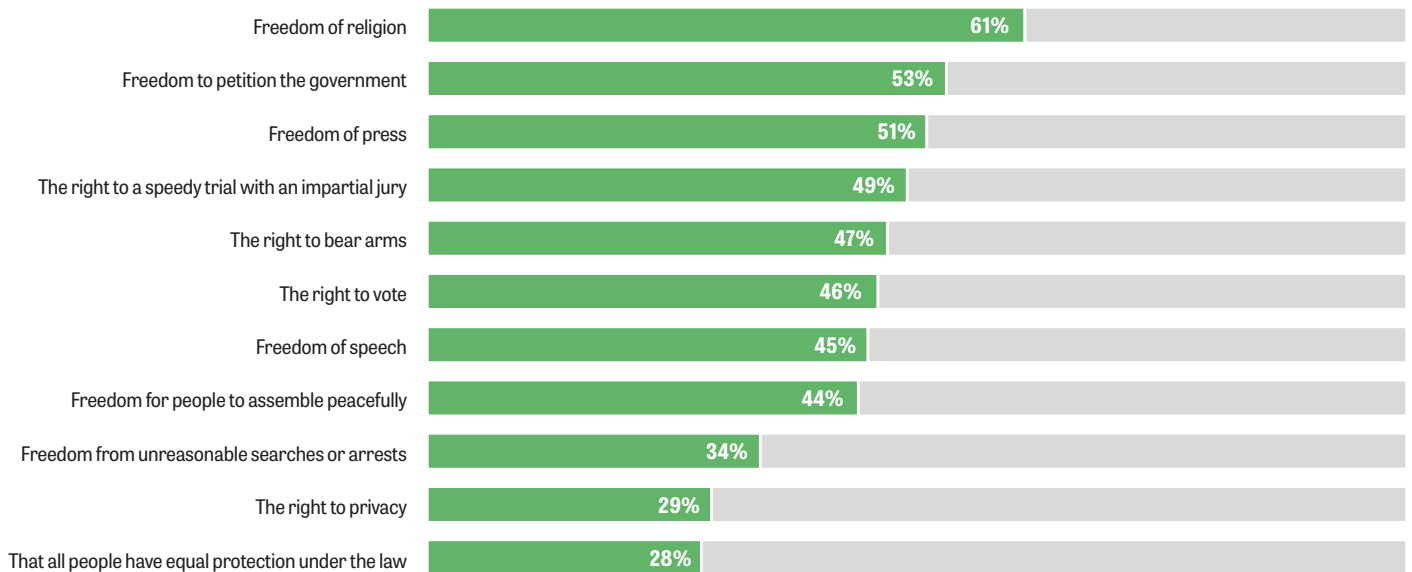
who believe that the rights to vote, assemble peaceably, and bear arms are secure. This suggests that concerns about speech are part of a larger set of concerns about democratic society.

The relative security of free speech looks different through a partisan lens. Democrats (61%) are twice as likely as Republicans (28%) to believe that free speech rights are secure. Independents land somewhere in the middle, with 43% agreeing that free speech rights are secure.

Less than half of Americans believe that free speech is secure

To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?

% Secure

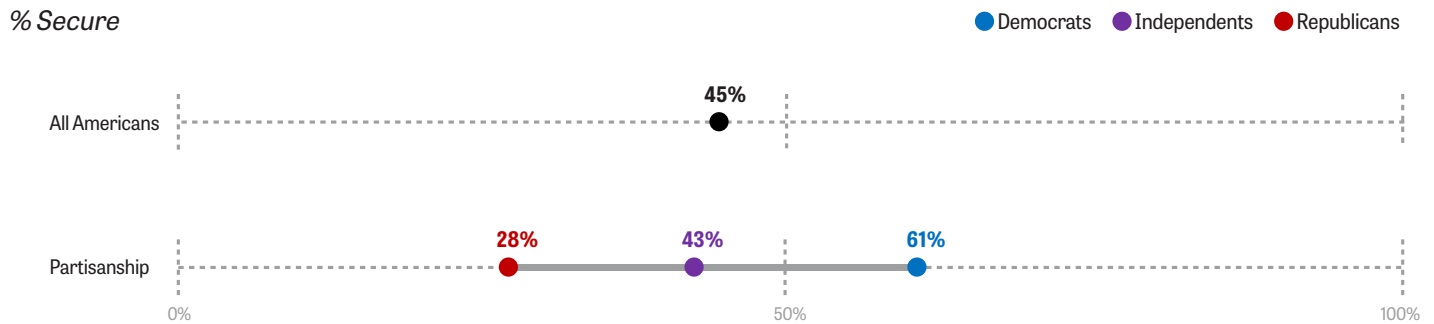


Q5. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?
Base: All respondents n=4,366

⁴ Dennis Chong and Morris Levy, "Competing Norms of Free Expression and Political Tolerance," *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Volume 85, Number 1, Spring 2018, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/692750>.

Democrats are more likely to feel free speech is secure

To what extent do you think free speech rights are secure or threatened in the country today?



Q5. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?
Base: All respondents n=4,366

Around the security of some of these fundamental rights, partisans are in close alignment. For instance, similar numbers of Republicans (45%), Democrats (45%) and independents (44%) agree that the freedom for people to assemble peaceably is secure.

However, opinion falls apart around other rights, such as the right to vote. A majority of Republicans (58%) believe this right is secure, compared to 36% of Democrats and 47% of independents.

Advocacy for free speech gets more divisive when politically fraught topics enter the picture.

While strong, bipartisan majorities of Americans agree with more abstract sentiments about the value of free speech, views start to differ when people are asked about specific instances that carry more political weight. For instance, on the issue of flag burning, relatively few agree it should be allowed (31%) in the first place. There are stark partisan divides around whether this should be allowed, with very few Republicans (16%) compared with more Democrats (37%) and independents (36%) in favor.

Fewer Republicans agree that it is appropriate (49%) for athletes to speak out against laws they disagree with, compared with an overwhelming majority of Democrats (82%) and most independents (73%) who think it is appropriate for them to do so. Athletes taking a political stand have become a partisan

flashpoint in recent years, something that could be driving these differences of opinion. Other issues—such as online news media companies publishing stories without government intervention—are widely accepted by most Americans (68%), though partisanship plays a role in opinion on the matter. While majorities across all parties are in favor of online media operating outside government intervention, Republicans (77%) and independents (70%) are more likely to agree with this than Democrats (60%). Here, too, political discourse may be framing public opinion. Government intervention has long been a dividing line in American politics, with Republicans generally more skeptical of it than Democrats.

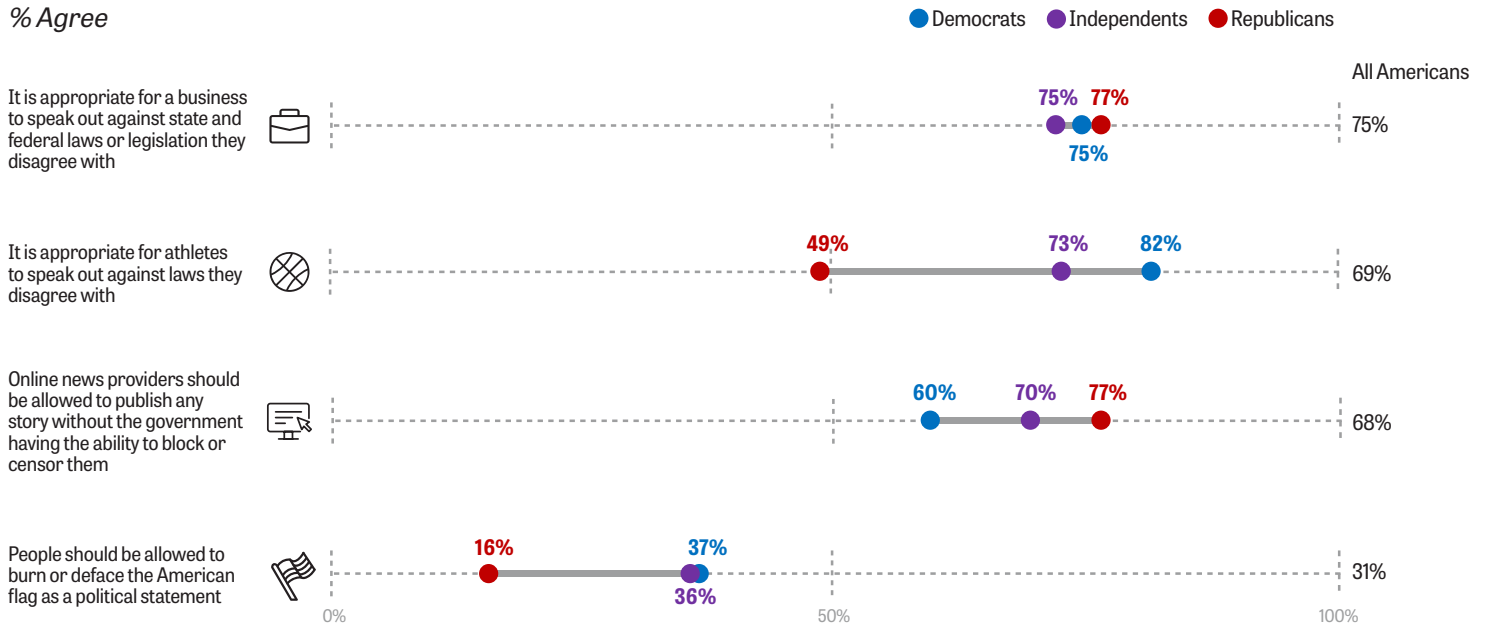
Gaps in opinion are not as stark when considering the free expression of business leaders or musicians speaking out against laws they disagree with.

Political context drives partisan opinion on what actions or forms of speech constitute a legitimate expression of First Amendment rights.

On many issues, particularly those that have been political battlegrounds such as the 2020 election and the coronavirus pandemic, partisan affiliation drives wide-ranging views among Americans as to what constitutes a legitimate expression of First Amendment rights.

Americans are divided over politically controversial speech

For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree



Q16. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree:

Base: One-quarter of respondents were shown: "It is appropriate for a business to speak out against state and federal laws or legislation they disagree with" n=1,441; "It is appropriate for athletes to speak out against laws they disagree with" n=1,475; "Online news providers should be allowed to publish any story without the government having the ability to block or censor them" n=1,457; "People should be allowed to burn or deface the American flag as a political statement" n=1,438.

People across the political spectrum agree that protesting is a legitimate way of expressing one's First Amendment rights. But Democrats and Republicans ultimately disagree on which of the protests that roiled the nation in 2020 and 2021 represent legitimate examples of free speech, underlining the degree to which opinion has polarized around certain high-profile, politicized events.

For example, Democrats—in particular, white (91%) and Hispanic (80%) Democrats—are significantly more likely to believe the protests against racial injustice during the summer of 2020 are a legitimate example of people expressing their First Amendment rights. A large majority of independents, too, say the summer 2020 protests were legitimate expressions. Though a majority of Republicans agree (56%), they are nearly 30 points less likely to agree than Democrats. Meanwhile, 73% of Republicans believe that protests around the certification of the 2020 election are a legitimate form of expression, something that just 39% of Democrats feel is the case. Here independents are closer to Republicans,

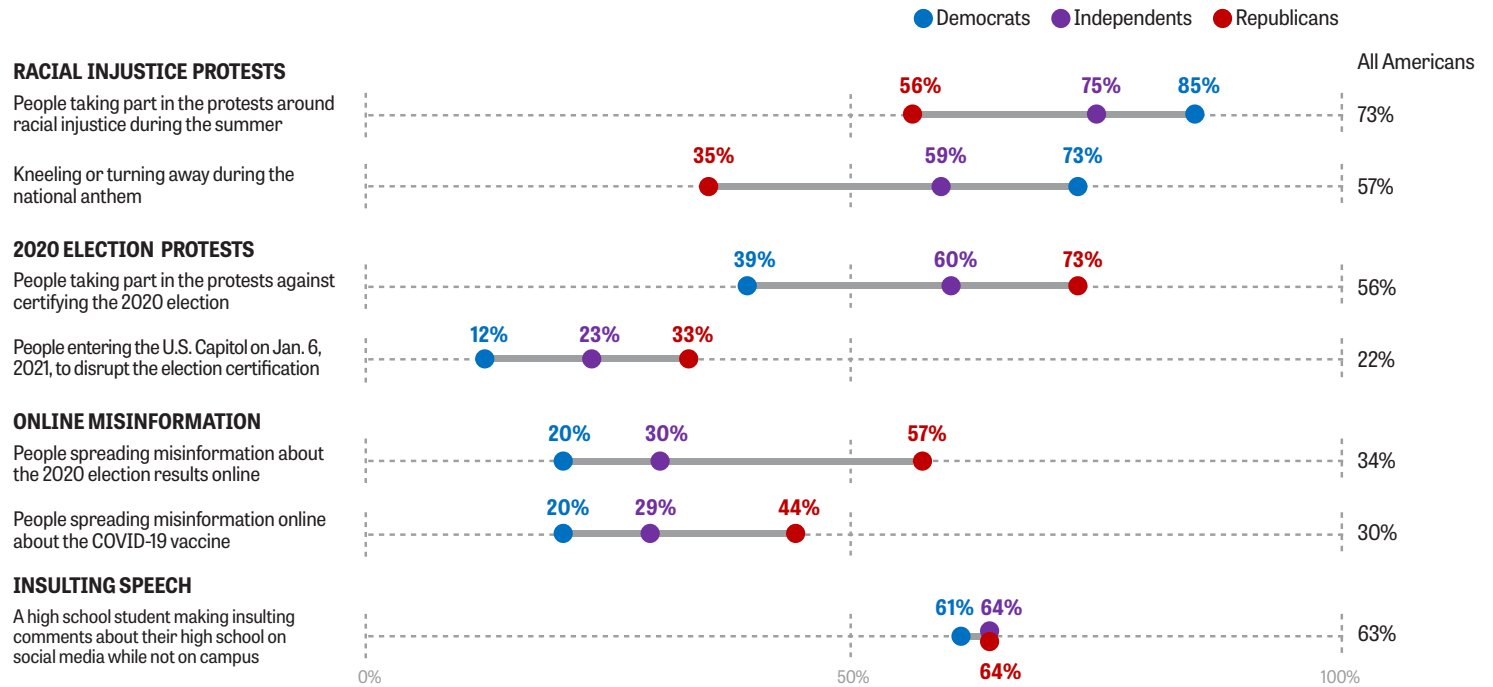
suggesting independents are somewhat more open to protest as an act of speech generally.

Views around free expression and misinformation produce similarly partisan patterns. Three out of five Republicans believe that spreading misinformation about the 2020 election results online is a legitimate expression of First Amendment rights. Only one in five Democrats and just under a third of independents agree. Less than half across all parties agree that spreading misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine is a legitimate First Amendment expression (30% overall see this as a legitimate form of expression). But that number jumps to 44% of Republicans and falls to 20% among Democrats.

Finally, over half (57%) of Americans believe kneeling or turning away during the national anthem is a legitimate way to express one's First Amendment rights. Positive sentiment is primarily driven by Democrats (73%) and independents (59%), since just 35% of Republicans agree.

Partisans are mostly divided around what constitutes a legitimate example of someone expressing their First Amendment rights

% Believe the following are legitimate examples of people expressing their First Amendment rights



Q29. Do you feel like the following are legitimate or not legitimate examples of people expressing their First Amendment rights? Base: "People taking part in the protests around racial injustice during the summer of 2020" n=2,512; "A high school student making insulting comments about their high school on social media while not on campus" n=2,508; "Kneeling or turning away during the national anthem" n=2,475; "People taking part in the protests against certifying the 2020 election" n=2,484; "People spreading misinformation about the 2020 election results online" n=2,494; "People spreading misinformation online about the COVID-19 vaccine" n=2,481; "People entering the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, to disrupt the election certification" n=2,510

However, partisan divides all but disappear for nonpolitical events. For instance, 63% of Americans overall agree that a student making insulting comments about their high school on social media constitutes a legitimate example of someone expressing their First Amendment rights, including 64% of Republicans, 61% of Democrats and 64% of independents.

Partisan views are divided on who has (and has not) been deprived of free speech rights.

What constitutes an infringement on individuals' free speech rights breaks down along political and racial lines, particularly when it comes to social media, and rarely connects to real First Amendment infringements. Actions taken by social media companies to limit threats of violence, the spread of false information about public health, or conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic generate significant partisan

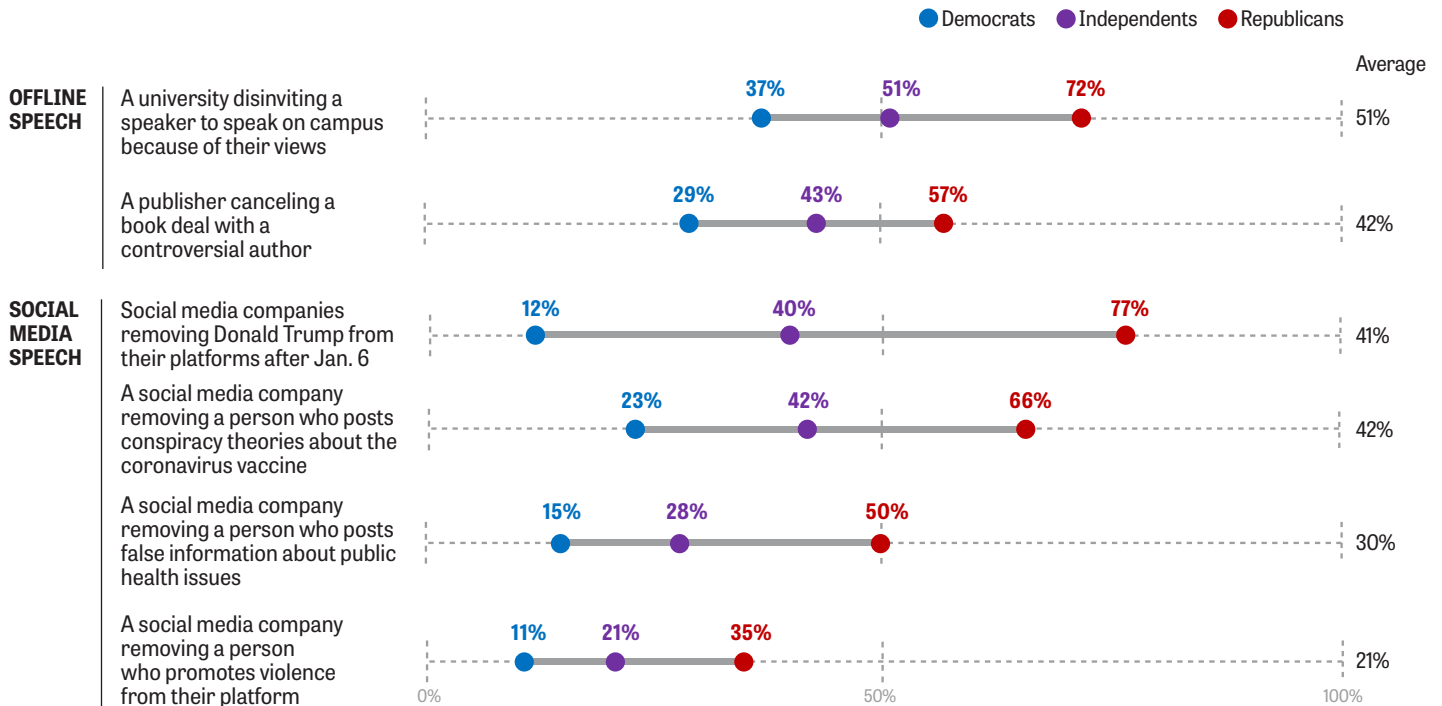
division. However, the most pronounced divide is apparent around the question of whether social media companies were depriving Donald Trump of his right to free expression by removing him from their platforms after the events of Jan. 6.

To understand this, the Knight-Ipsos survey queried respondents on a series of restrictive actions taken by social media companies in response to the spread of misinformation about COVID-19, threats of violence and the removal of Donald Trump following the events of Jan. 6. Again, while none of those actions constitute a real infringement of First Amendment rights, because the question used the phrase "free expression rights" instead of "First Amendment rights," respondents may have been thinking about the issue in broader terms, and less from a strictly legal perspective.

Overall, just one in five believe that social media companies removing individuals who promote violence on their platforms deprive people of

Partisans are divided on what represents an infringement on individuals' free expression rights

% Believe the following are depriving people of their rights to free expression



Q30. Are the following actions depriving people of their rights to free expression or not? Base: "A university disinviting a speaker to speak on campus because of their views" n=2,603; "A publisher canceling a book deal with a controversial author" n=2,657; "Social media companies removing a person who posts conspiracy theories about the coronavirus vaccine" n=2,615; "Social media companies removing Donald Trump from their platforms after Jan. 6" n=4,366; "A social media company removing a person who posts false information about public health issues" n=2,592; "A social media company removing a person who promotes violence from their platform" n=2,631

their right to free expression. However, a third of Republicans believe that removing people promoting violence is a violation of their rights, ahead of any other demographic group and 24 points ahead of Democrats (with independents in between).

Furthermore, just 30% of respondents believe that social media companies removing people who post false information about public health issues is depriving them of their free speech rights, while far more (68%) believe it does not. On this point, Republicans are much more likely to believe it is depriving people of their rights (50%) than either independents (28%) or Democrats (15%).

Potentially as a consequence of recent events, Republicans are significantly more likely than Democrats to see de-platforming as an infringement on free speech. Two in three Republicans (66%) believe that social media companies removing people

who post conspiracy theories about the coronavirus vaccine deprive those individuals of their free speech rights, compared with 23% of Democrats and 42% of independents who feel the same.

Yet the greatest difference in opinion among Republicans and Democrats centers on the question of whether social media companies' decision to remove Donald Trump from their platforms after Jan. 6 deprived him of his free expression rights (77% of Republicans agree, compared with 12% of Democrats and 40% of independents).

Partisan views split around other social issues, such as visits from controversial speakers to college campuses or book deal cancellations. While half (51%) of Americans believe that a university disinviting a speaker to campus because of their views deprives that speaker of their free expression rights, many others believe it does not.

SPEECH RIGHTS IN PRACTICE

A peculiar facet of attitudes around free speech is that most people believe others, particularly those who hold opposing political views, have an easier time exercising their rights. This sense of inequality and that others enjoy greater standing is an important finding of this research, helping shed light on the sense of oppression or persecution felt by people across racial, ethnic and political lines.

While this question wording is a novel way of unpacking how people perceive their ability to express their First Amendment rights along with their perception of other people's experiences with this practice, the results align with previous research in the field of First Amendment rights that demonstrate the importance of partisanship and race in understanding these issues ([see Cato Institute](#)).

Most people believe others have an easier time exercising their free speech rights than they do.

To understand how Americans view their own ability to exercise their free speech rights, the Knight-Ipsos survey asked people to evaluate how easy or difficult it is for people like them to use their free speech rights without consequence in America. Most people put themselves in the middle of the scale, leaning a little toward easier but not all the way to very easy. Interesting differences emerge at the subgroup level, with Black Americans, Republicans and people with less than a high school education rating their ease of using free speech rights lower than average.

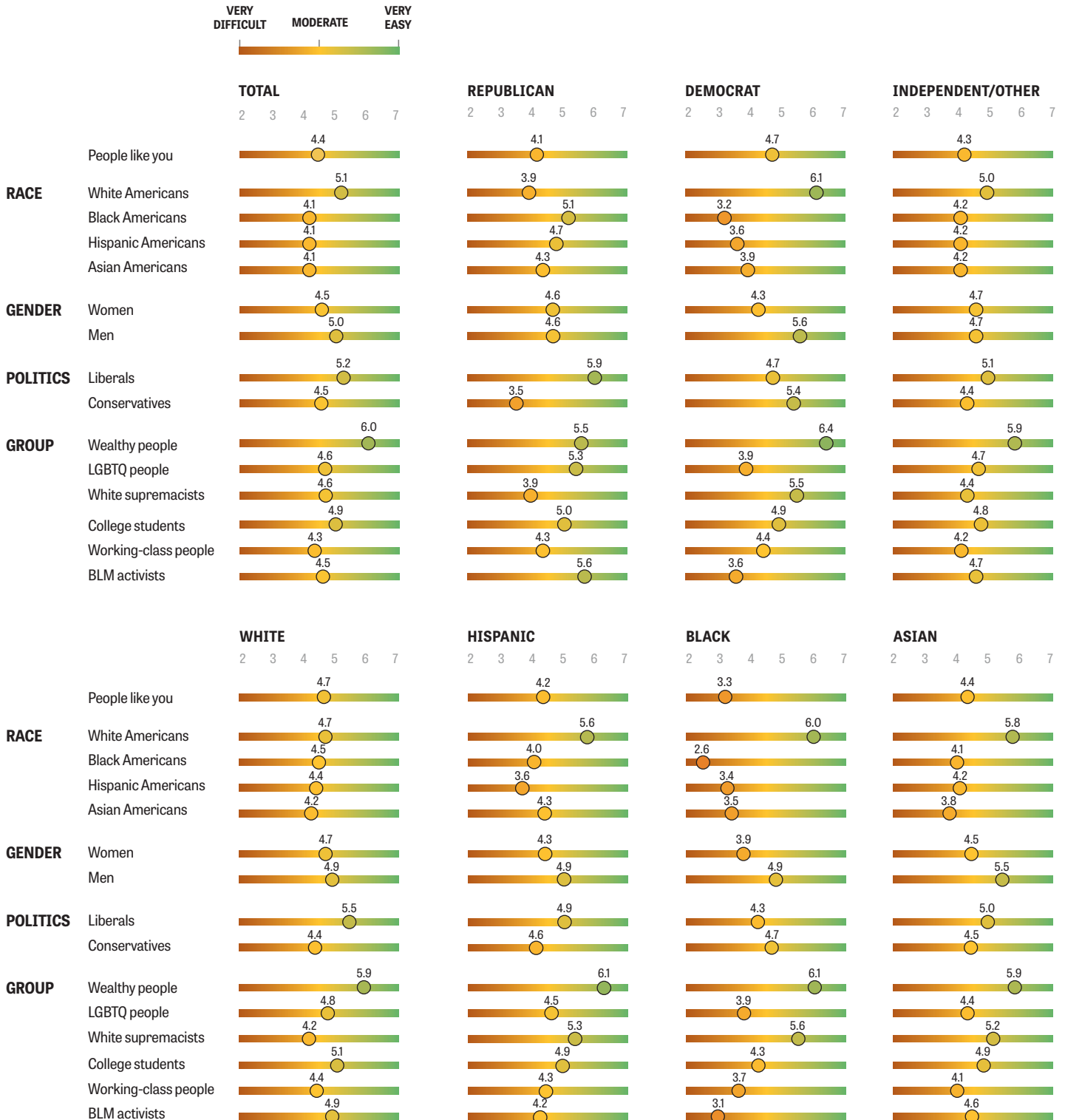
After asking Americans to rate their ability to use their free speech rights, the Knight-Ipsos survey then asked people to evaluate the ease or difficulty a set of groups have when using their free speech rights. Across all Americans, self-rating tends to be lower than the average rating for several different social or racial groups, meaning people believe many other social or racial groups have an easier time exercising their free speech rights than they do.

Partisan Americans see opposing political groups as having an easier time exercising their speech rights without consequences, although both Republicans and independents view liberals as having an easier time than conservatives. While Democrats and independents agree that white Americans enjoy easier speech than Black Americans, Republicans see white Americans as having a harder time than both Black and Hispanic Americans. Democrats think Black Americans, Muslims and immigrants have the hardest time exercising their speech rights, while Republicans think conservatives and white Americans are the most disadvantaged. On average, Americans agree wealthy people have an easier time than most.

Turning to race and ethnicity, the data shows somewhat similar patterns as with partisanship. However, Black respondents are noteworthy for the relatively low ease of free speech ratings they give to Black Lives Matter activists and Black Americans as a whole. Additionally, Hispanic and Asian Americans see liberals as having a slightly easier time expressing their free speech rights than conservatives.

Americans disagree on which groups are more marginalized in exercising speech rights—particularly when it comes to politics and race

How easy or difficult is it for the following people to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today?



Note: Responses were given on a scale (1=Hardest, 7=Easiest). These are a selection of the total number of groups the question asked about

KEY SPEECH EXPERIENCES

While previous research has focused on attitudes and policies toward the First Amendment, this Knight-Ipsos survey details people's experiences with free expression both in person and online.

Americans have different experiences with speech. Just under half report having felt uncomfortable because of something someone else said about their identity in person, and one in five report feeling unsafe for the same reasons. Of particular note, Black, Hispanic and Asian Americans are much more likely than white Americans to report feeling uncomfortable or unsafe because of the speech of others.

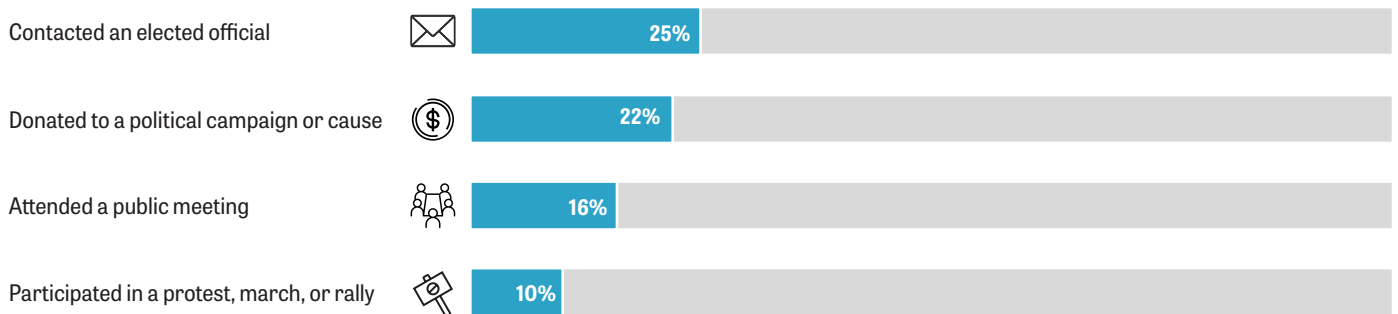
Meanwhile, a small fraction of Americans report that their speech or activity has been limited by social media platforms. Within this group, Republicans are slightly more likely than other groups to say they have been limited by social media platforms.

In the past year, few report exercising First Amendment rights in person, more on social media.

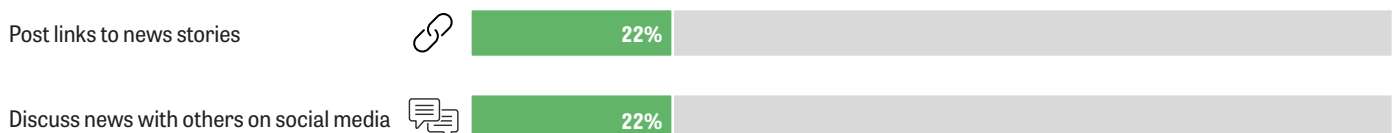
Though large majorities of Americans believe in the importance of protecting First Amendment rights, most reported online actions versus in person in the past year. About a quarter say they contacted an elected official or donated to a political campaign or cause. Just 16% say they have attended a public meeting, and only one in 10 has participated in a protest, march or rally in the past year, which included the summer of 2020. While the survey did not explicitly ask respondents whether they were less politically active because of the pandemic, social distancing may have played a role in limiting civic engagement.

Few exercise speech in person or talk about the news online

% Who have done the following in the last year



% Who do the following often or sometimes



Q33. Have you done the following in the last year? Q34. How often do you do each of the following on social media?
 Base: All respondents n=4,366

On social media, about half of Americans say they never post links to news stories or discuss the news with others. Less than a quarter say they post about or discuss the news on social media, at least sometimes. At the subgroup level, few differences exist. Millennials post or discuss the news with others on social media a bit more frequently than some other generations. Across race and ethnicity, there is no difference in the frequency with which different groups discuss news on social media. However, Hispanic Americans are more likely than white and Black Americans to post links to news stories.

Just under half of the public has felt uncomfortable because of others' speech, and one in five have felt unsafe.

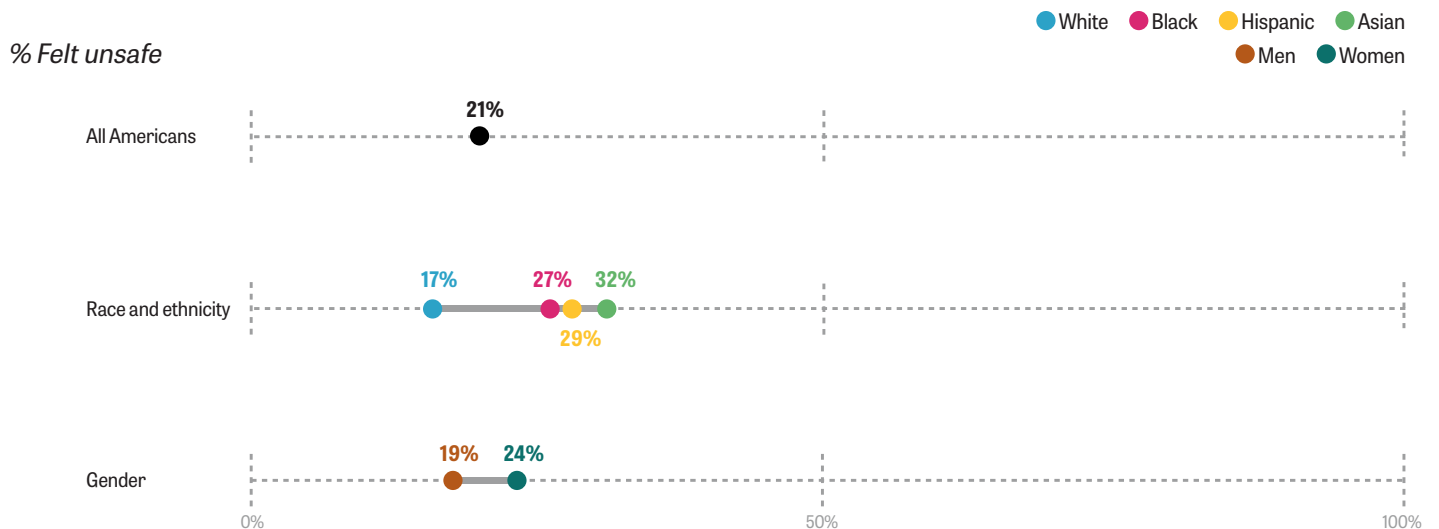
Overall, just under half of Americans say they have felt uncomfortable because of something someone

has said about their identity (race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation) in person, whether or not it was directed at them. Half also say they have experienced discomfort because of what someone said about a belief or political position they hold.

Across gender lines, women are more likely than men to say they've felt uncomfortable because of what others say about their identity. Meanwhile, racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than white Americans to report feeling uncomfortable because of what others have said about their identity in person, with 54% of Black and 50% of Hispanic Americans saying they have felt uncomfortable, compared with 43% of white Americans. However, when it comes to ideas or political positions, white Americans more often feel uncomfortable because of what others say about their beliefs than Black Americans.

One in five Americans have felt unsafe because of someone else's in-person comments about their identity

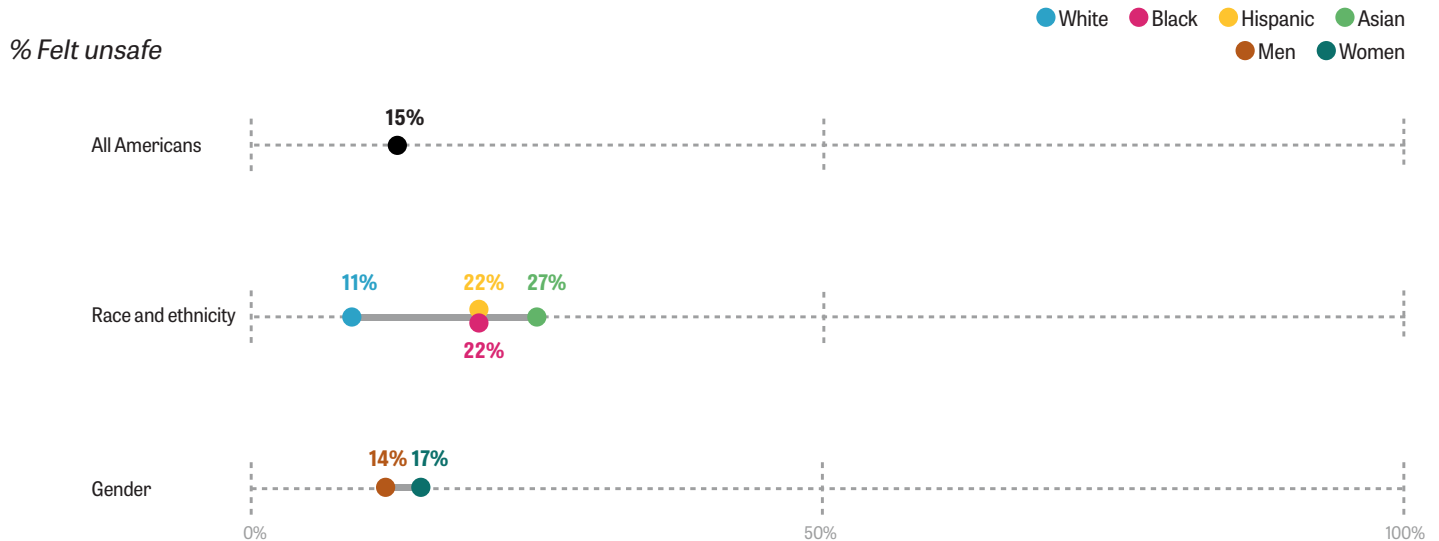
Have you ever felt unsafe because of something someone said, in person, in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, whether or not it was directed at you?



Q37a. Have you ever felt unsafe because of something someone said, in person, in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, whether or not it was directed at you? Base: Three-quarters of respondents n=3,298

Black, Hispanic and Asian Americans are more likely to have felt unsafe on social media because of someone else's comments about their identity

Have you ever felt unsafe because of something someone said, on social media, in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, whether or not it was directed at you?



Q38a. Have you ever felt unsafe because of something someone said, on social media, in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, whether or not it was directed at you?
 Base: Three-quarters of respondents n=3,310

This discomfort does not often translate to fear, as only one in five Americans say they have felt unsafe because of what someone said in person about their identity or beliefs, while about 60% say they have not felt unsafe. An additional fifth have no opinion. Again, women and racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to have felt unsafe because of what others say regarding their identity. Nevertheless, these feelings are not widespread; just one in four across these groups say this.

When it comes to comments on people's beliefs or identity on social media, Americans are slightly less likely to report feeling unsafe, with about one in six saying they've felt this way. Asian, Black and Hispanic Americans are most likely to say they've felt unsafe on social media because of what others have said about their identity and beliefs. However, not all Americans believe that feeling safe online is the most important outcome, when juxtaposed with free speech rights. According to a [2020 Pew Research Center survey](#), just over half (53%) say that people feeling safe online is the most important objective, compared with the

45% who say that people being able to speak their minds freely is most important.

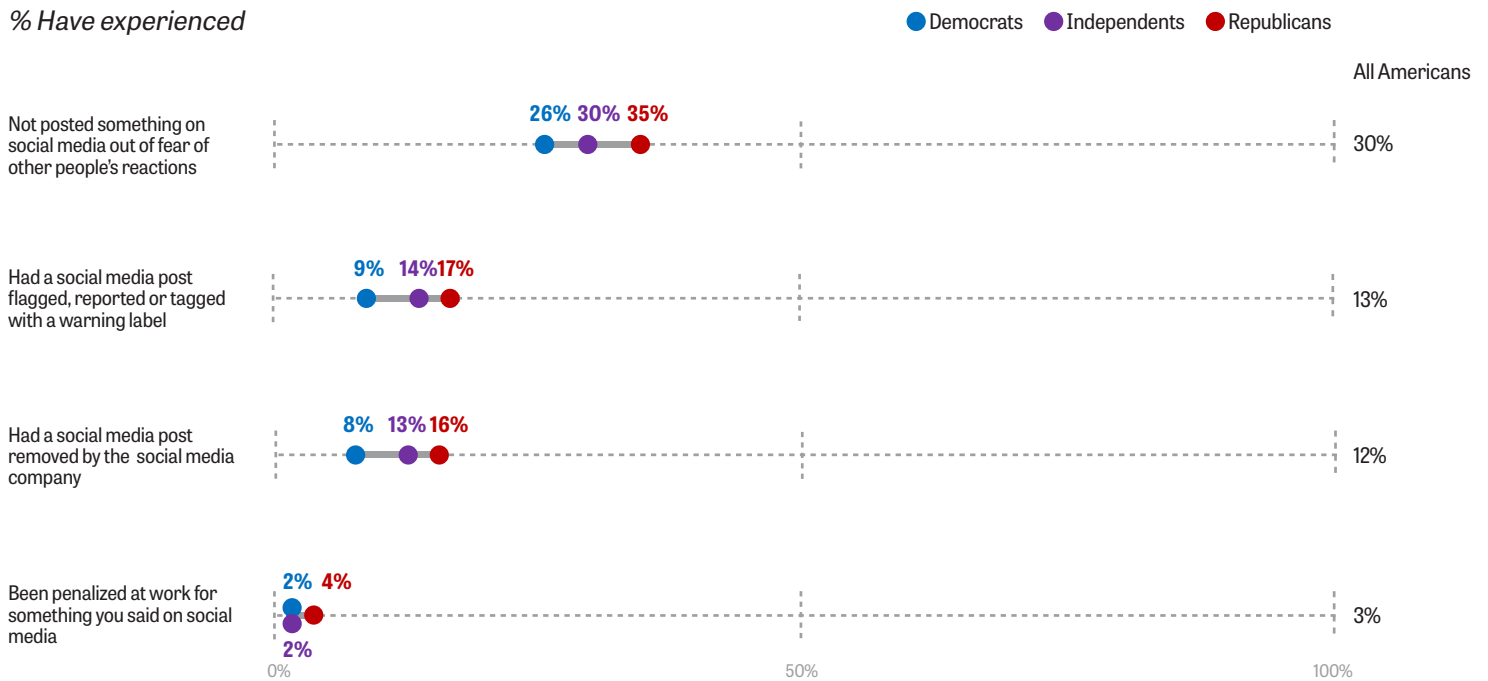
Republicans are more likely to have experience with social media content moderation policies.

Few Americans report experiencing infringements on their online speech. If anything, Americans are more likely to self-censor than have their content restricted. While one in three say they have not posted something out of fear of other people's reactions, far fewer, or just one in eight, say a social media company has either flagged (13%) or removed (12%) a social media post of theirs.

However, within this small group who have had their content flagged or removed, Republicans are more represented than Democrats. Sixteen percent of Republicans report having their posts removed by social media companies, eight points ahead of Democrats and three ahead of independents. However, roughly the same number of Republicans

Republicans are more likely to run into content moderation, and are more likely to say they hold back out of fear

Have you ever experienced the following?



Q35. Have you ever experienced the following?
Base: All respondents n=4,366

and independents report having a social media post flagged, reported or tagged, while fewer Democrats say the same.

Republicans are also more likely to report not posting out of fear of other people's reactions (35%), ahead of independents (30%) and Democrats (26%).

What is said on social media does not often spill over into Americans' work lives or their education: Just 3% of Americans say they have been penalized at work because of something they said on social media. Three percent of students also say their school has punished them for something they said on social media.

Americans report disjointed workplace and school policies toward speech on social media.

Related to the issue of individuals' being penalized at work or school because of something they said online, employer and school rules about social media speech are inconsistent. One-third of employed Americans say their workplace has rules about what they can post, one-third say there are no such rules, and one-third say they do not know if their employer restricts what they can post on social media.

Schools are even less clear on their social media policies for students. Among students, 57% say they are unsure whether their school has a policy about what they can say on social media. Only about one in five students say their school does have such rules, but about the same also say their school does not have policies about what students can post.

VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Online speech has become a central forum for the expression of ideas. Few Americans are concerned about any consequences that may arise from what they say on social media, though there is some confusion about what types of speech are protected online through the First Amendment, something that the Freedom Forum Institute also found in its [“2019 State of the First Amendment”](#) report. Still, even with this confusion, many believe that content moderation should largely be left to social media companies.

Yet, at the same time, Americans feel that hate speech on social media is a serious issue with significant differences by race and party affiliation. This builds on previous [Knight Foundation/Gallup](#) research that found students see the value in online discussions across these platforms but feel the discourse is not usually civil and suffers from the anonymity of the internet.

Few express concerns about suffering major consequences because of social media comments.

Overall, few Americans are concerned that their social media activity might lead to attacks or harassment, affect their job prospects or result in government prosecution.

However, there are some notable differences by race on this point. Black, Hispanic and Asian people are much more concerned about how their speech on social media may lead to real-world harm for them. In particular, one in three Hispanic people fear that what they say on social media could lead to government prosecution of them, twice the share of white Americans (16%) who share this concern. These findings also highlight the low levels of knowledge people hold around the First Amendment and their protections under it, given that it is very difficult for the government to prosecute someone based on what they say on social media.

Similarly, pluralities of Asian (40%) and Hispanic (42%) people are concerned that what they say on social media could lead to attacks or harassment.

There is limited difference by party identification on this point, with slightly more Democrats than Republicans or independents believing that what they say online could lead to harassment offline.

Americans agree that hate speech on social media is a problem.

Most respondents agree that there are some fundamental problems with social media discourse. Three in four believe it is too easy for people to say things anonymously on social media, while half believe that dialogues on social media are not usually civil. Likewise, half feel that social media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being attacked or shamed by those who disagree with them.

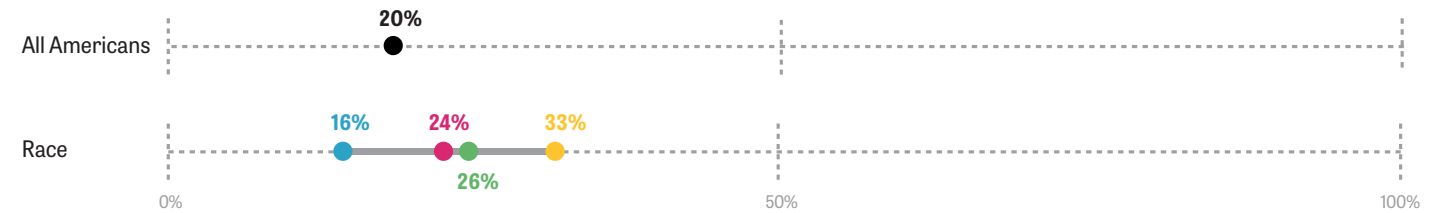
People of are color more likely to feel that what they say on social media could harm them

How concerned, if at all, are you that what you say or post on social media _____?

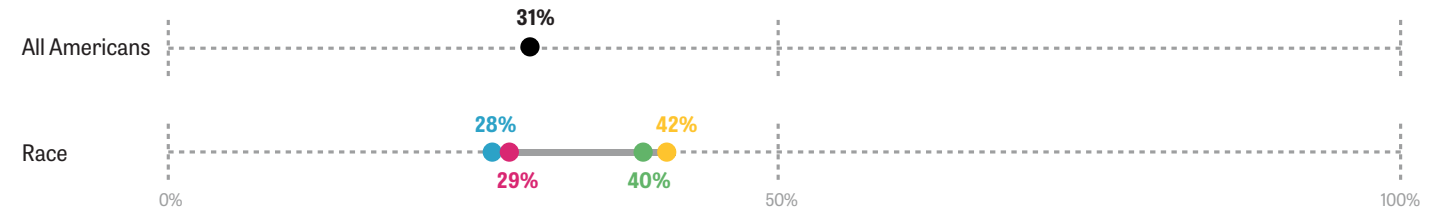
% Very/Somewhat concerned

● White ● Black ● Hispanic ● Asian

WOULD RESULT IN GOVERNMENT PROSECUTION OF YOU



WOULD LEAD TO ATTACKS OR HARASSMENT



Q42. How concerned, if at all, are you that what you say or post on social media...?
Base: All respondents, n=4,366

Furthermore, Americans believe that hate speech on social media is a serious problem. Close to half believe that it should fall to social media companies in some capacity to address the issue, despite the public holding relatively limited trust in social media companies themselves.

Party identification and race produce significant differences when it comes to hate speech online. Asian, Black and Hispanic respondents are more likely to feel hate speech is a very or somewhat serious problem on social media sites compared with white respondents. An even more significant gulf exists across Democrats and Republicans, with 88% of Democrats and 58% of Republicans agreeing that it is a problem. Independents fall somewhere in the middle, at 71%.

To contextualize this breakdown in opinion, prior research underscores that Americans have differing interpretations of hate speech. As a 2017 [Cato Institute survey](#) found, a majority of Black Americans, Latino

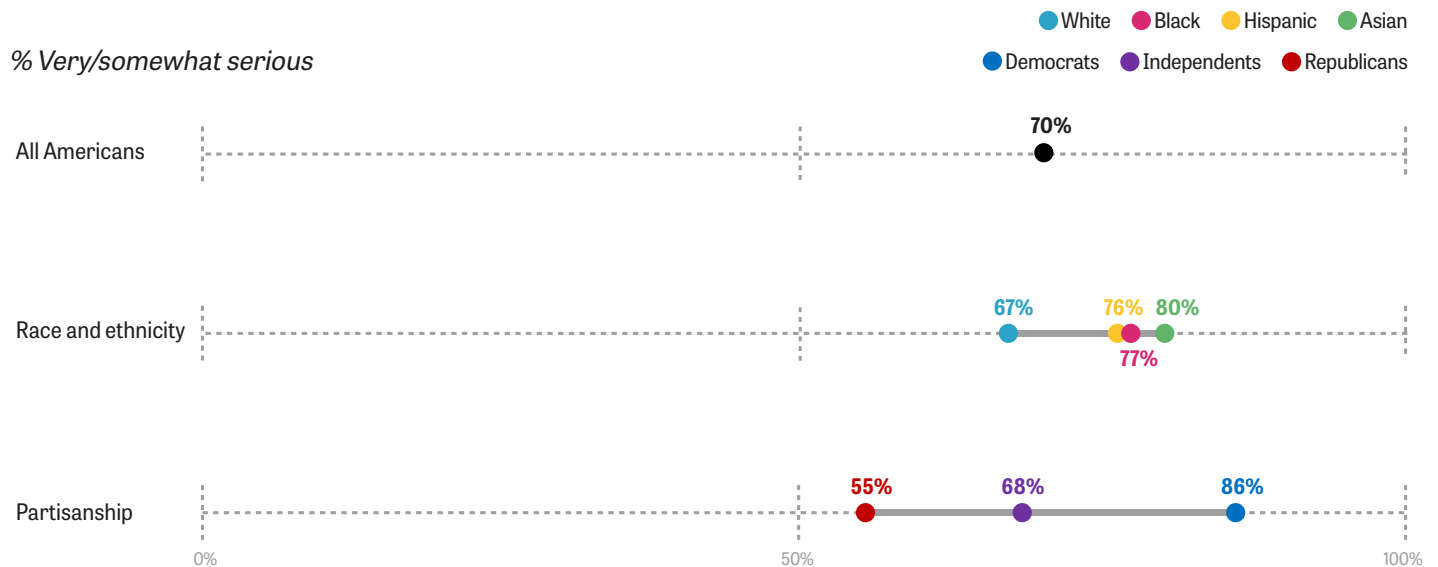
Americans and Democrats defined hate speech as “an act of violence.” Meanwhile, less than half of Republicans and white Americans said the same.

More Americans think moderating speech on social media should be left to platforms than to government or other entities.

While hate speech is concerning to most Americans, opinion splinters on who is responsible for moderating what is said on social media. Most believe that individual social media users should take personal responsibility for what they view and post on these sites, as this applies to both speech in general (58%) and hate speech (59%) on these platforms. However, other research has shown that people will protest limits to free speech only when it affects an in-group member, demonstrating how perceptions of content regulation are filtered

Democrats and Americans of color are more likely to see hate speech on social media as a very serious problem

How serious of a problem is hate speech on social media?



Q27a. Turning now to hate speech, meaning speech or writing that may be viewed as offensive or prejudiced against someone on the basis of their sex, race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. In general, how serious of a problem do you think hate speech is on social media sites and apps like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube? Base: Half of respondents n=2,158

through people's identities and go beyond the realm of the individual.⁵

To that end, regulation and oversight are thornier issues. Few believe that social media users (27%) or the government (14%) should determine the appropriate limits of what people can say on social media. Among people who feel speech on social media should operate through certain norms or standards, the preference is for the private sector to act as a moderator in this role, either through social media companies themselves (53%) or an independent body, like a fact-checking organization (41%) or oversight board (34%).

Opinions are divided on whether social media companies should more aggressively remove content that violates their standards. Half feel these

companies should do so to combat hate speech, but one in five hold no opinion on the matter. People feel this way even though just 17% say they trust social media companies.

The nature of what free speech looks like on social media also divides Americans. Half believe social media should be a place where people can express their views, including those that are offensive, while another half feel that speech on social media should be restricted by societal norms.

Related to this, many Americans want social media companies to prohibit speech that is threatening or racist or bigoted, as we will explain in greater detail below.

⁵ Paolo Antonetti and Benedetta Crisafulli, "I Will Defend Your Right to Free Speech, Provided I Agree With You": How Social Media Users React (or Not) to Online Out-Group Aggression," *Psychology & Marketing*, Volume 38, Issue 10, October 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21447>.

PUBLIC VIEWS OF ACCEPTABLE SPEECH

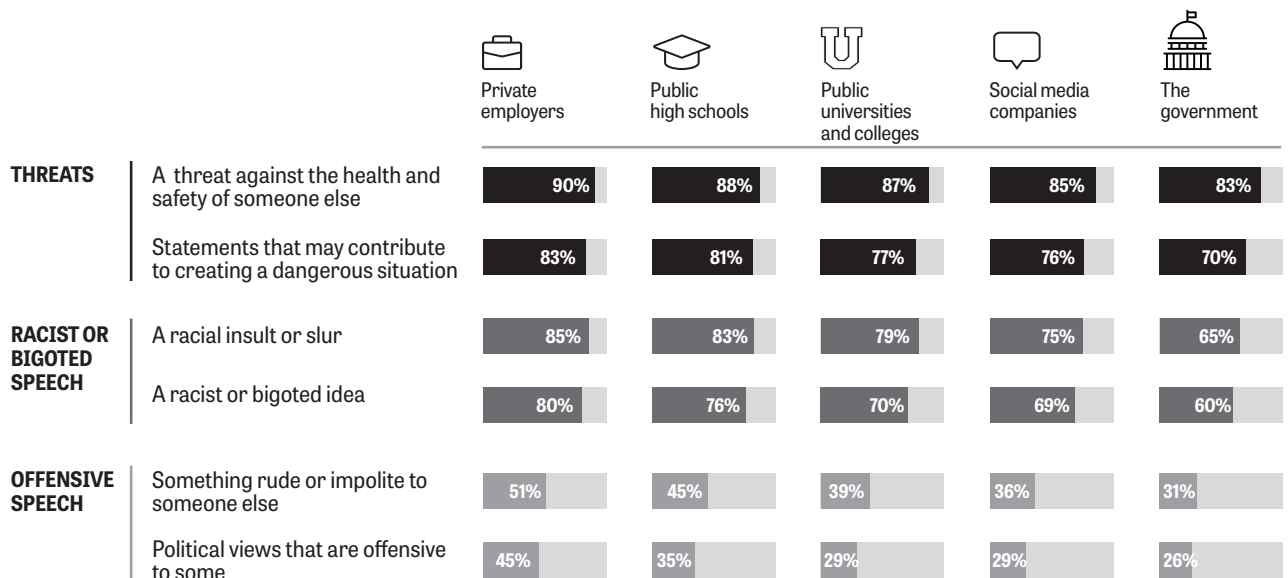
American views on what speech should be allowed and what should be prohibited across public and private institutions are complex.

To investigate where the public stands today, the Knight-Ipsos survey asked Americans whether they believe certain institutions should prohibit certain types of speech, such as threats of violence, or racist or bigoted ideas. The five institutions in question were the government, private employers, social media companies, public colleges and universities, and public high schools.⁶ These were asked in the abstract without specific examples of who at the institution might make the decisions.

The current findings suggest that a growing number of Americans believe that the government should intervene when people make public statements that are offensive to racial or ethnic minorities. Prior Pew research, conducted as [recently as 2015](#), found that a majority (67%) said that people should be able to make statements that are offensive to minority groups. According to Knight-Ipsos research, a majority now believe that the government should intervene.

Americans are more likely to believe nongovernmental entities should prohibit certain forms of speech

% Who believe that the following organizations should prohibit the following types of speech in certain instances



Q7-12. For each of the following scenarios, please indicate whether the behavior should be allowed or prohibited.
Base: All respondents n=4,366

⁶ The survey did not differentiate among types of government, meaning that there is no distinction in views depending on whether the prohibitions were to stem from local, state or federal government.

Americans want limits on threatening, violent and racist speech.

A large majority believe that government should intervene around potentially dangerous speech, prohibiting speech that threatens the health and safety of someone (83%). In fact, free speech protections do not extend to true threats of violence. Almost as many (70%) believe the government should prohibit statements that contribute to creating dangerous situations.

Moving into areas that are generally considered protected speech, a majority (65%) also agree the government should prohibit people from expressing racial slurs, insults and ideas. Similar numbers (60%) say that the government should prohibit people from sharing “a racist or bigoted idea.”

Support for government intervention tapers off when it comes to speech that is rude (31%) or explicitly

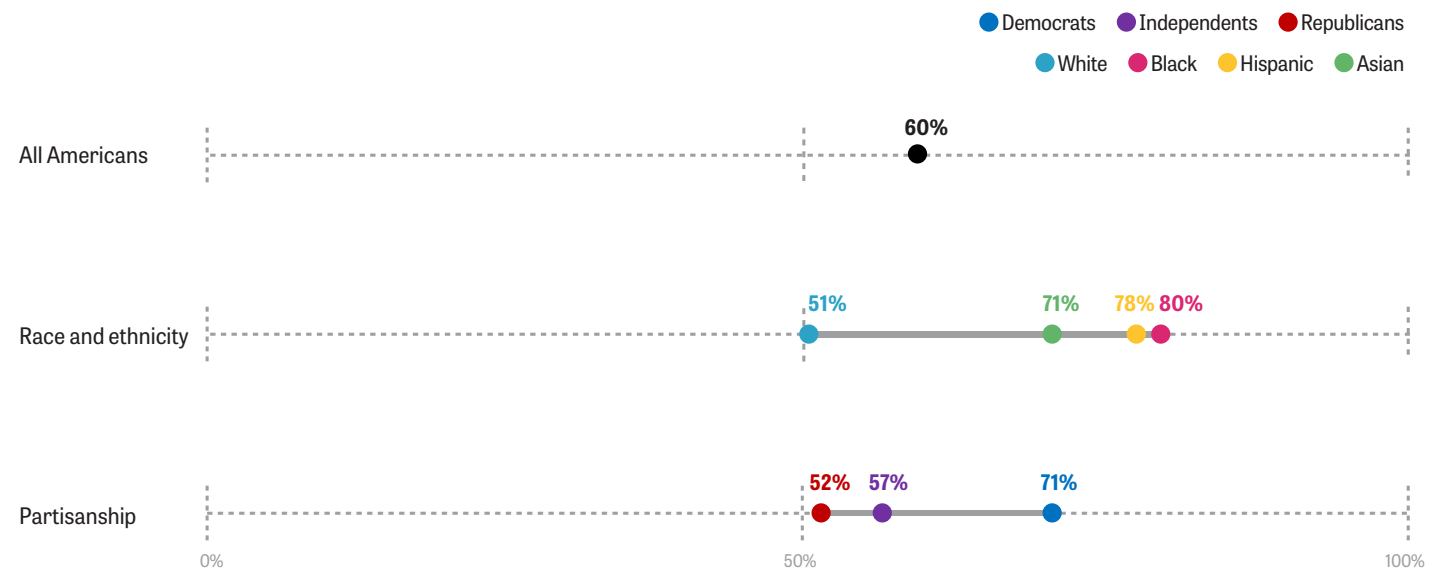
political (26%). Only in these instances do a clear minority believe that the government should prohibit such speech.

Additionally, where people exercise their free speech rights affects whether Americans believe certain types of speech should be prohibited. People tend to believe that nongovernmental entities, such as private employers, educational institutions and social media companies, should limit speech, particularly around racial insults, slurs or bigoted ideas. Americans tend to believe that these nongovernmental entities should limit speech more than the government.

There are considerable differences by race and partisanship in opinions on what types of speech should be prohibited. Looking at two examples of speech that are generally thought of as protected illustrates these differences.

Most believe the government should prohibit people from sharing a racist or bigoted idea

% Who believe the government should prohibit people from sharing a racist or bigoted idea



Q10. For each of the following scenarios, please indicate whether the behavior should be allowed or prohibited. Should the government allow or prohibit a person sharing a racist or bigoted idea?
 Base: All respondents n=4,366

Three in five Americans believe the government should prohibit the sharing of racist or bigoted ideas. This majority holds across all major subgroups. However, significant differences exist between Republicans and independents, among whom only about half believe racist or bigoted ideas should be prohibited, and Democrats, among whom a clear majority support prohibition.

Looking at racial and ethnic differences underlines this partisan difference. A large majority of all racial or ethnic minority groups—Black, Hispanic and Asian—say the government should prohibit sharing racist or bigoted ideas. Compare that to only half of white Americans. These findings deviate from [trended data from the General Social Survey \(GSS\) on a similar topic](#). As of 2018, majorities of Americans supported racists being allowed to make a speech. There were not large differences by race or political affiliation either.

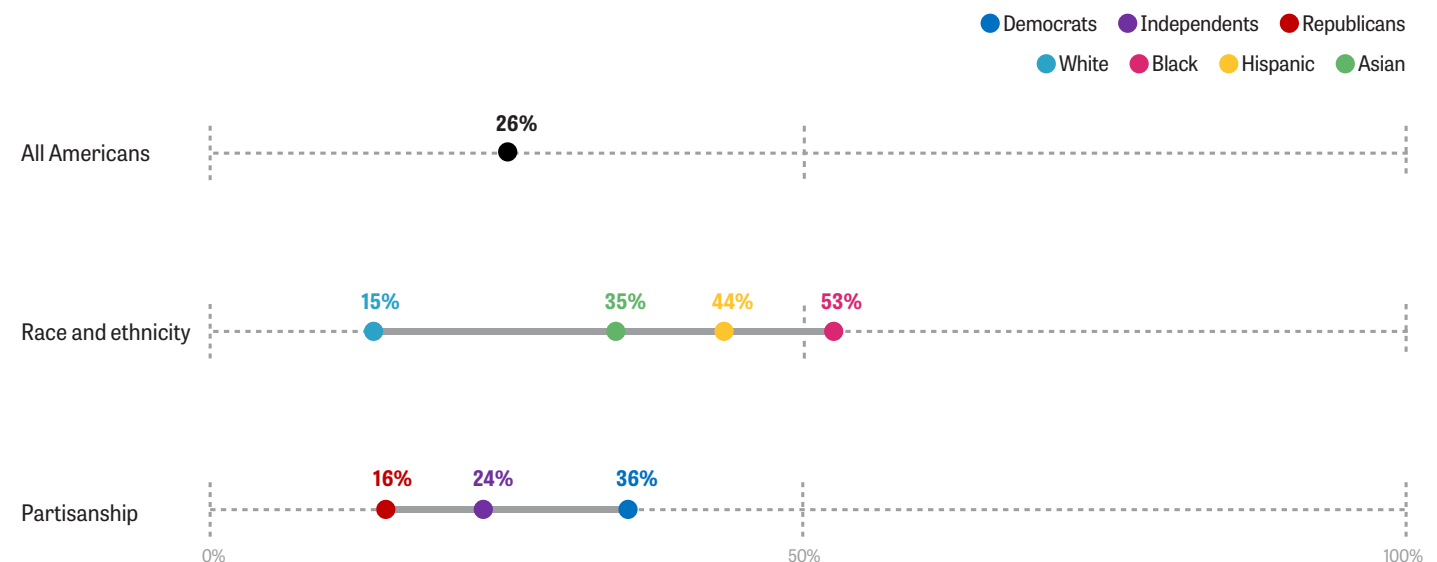
However, this breakdown in opinion around racist or bigoted speech may relate to differences in how various groups perceive such speech. Depending on how it is expressed, racist or bigoted speech could be construed as hate speech. The groups most likely to believe racist or bigoted speech should be prohibited are also more likely to perceive hate speech as an **act of violence** and to believe that hate speech can lead to violence against minority groups.

Only a quarter of Americans believe that the government should prohibit sharing political views that are offensive. Here, too, we see significant differences by race and partisanship.

Members of minority groups, particularly Black Americans, are more likely to support a prohibition of sharing offensive political views. Comparatively, only one in eight white Americans share that view. This raises the question of how connected offensive political views and racist ideas are in the minds of Americans.

Few think the government should prohibit a person from sharing political views that are offensive to some

% Who believe the government should prohibit a person from sharing political views that are offensive to some

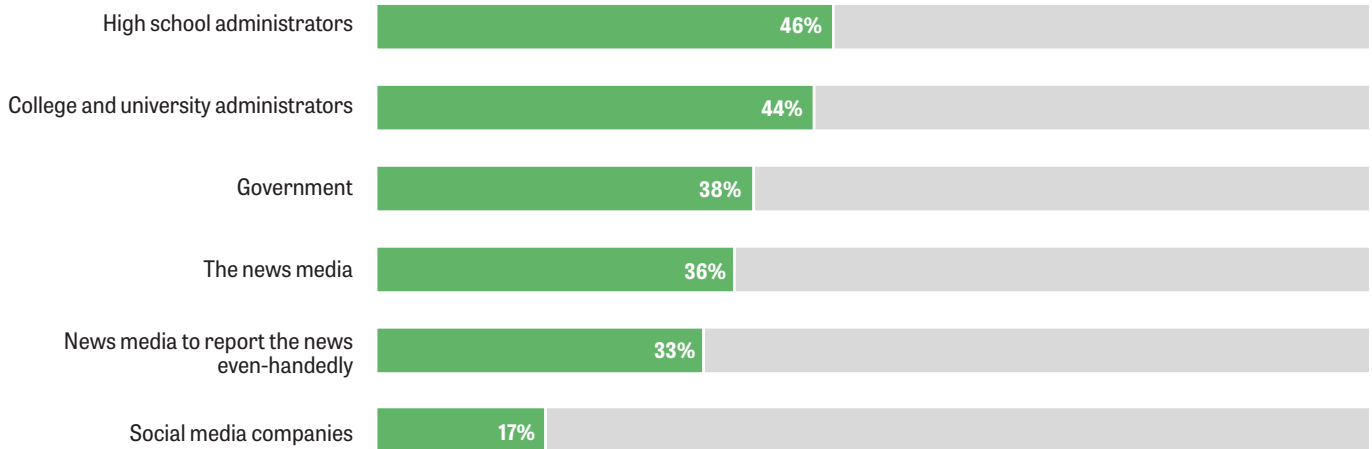


Q11. For each of the following scenarios, please indicate whether the behavior should be allowed or prohibited. Should the government allow or prohibit a person sharing political views that are offensive to some?
 Base: All respondents n=4,366

Americans have little trust in institutions

How much do you trust the following?

% Great deal/A fair amount of trust



Q45 How much do you trust the following?
Base: All respondents n=4,366

Americans have little trust in institutions, particularly social media platforms.

While Americans want public and private entities to prohibit violent and racist speech, at the same time, Americans from all walks of life have minimal faith in many of those institutions.

Only 38% of Americans say they trust the government a great deal or a fair amount. School administrators are better regarded, but still, under half of Americans have a high degree of trust in these institutions. Americans have the least faith (among the institutions tested) in social media companies. Here only about one in eight Americans express significant levels of trust.

Americans support protests in general but are wary of violence.

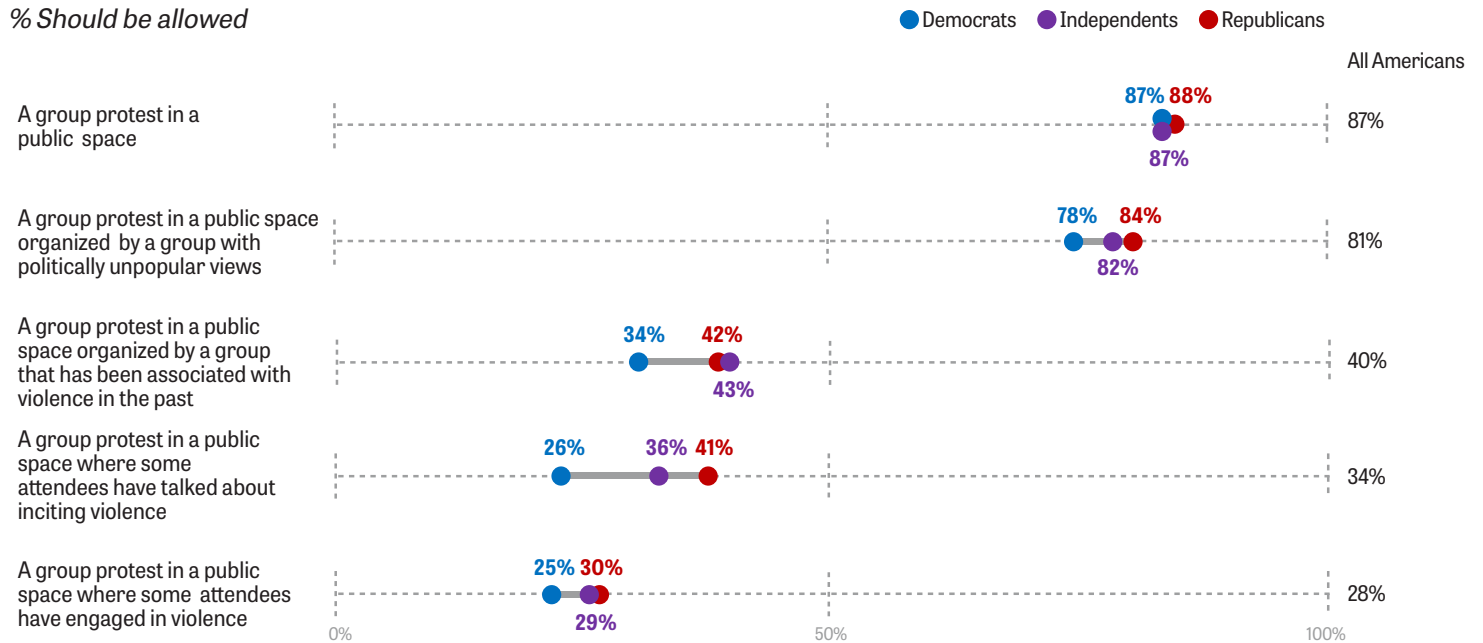
A large majority of Americans believe that protests should be allowed in public spaces, but support for this collapses if the group protesting either incites violence or has engaged in violence in the past.

Overall, 87% of all Americans believe the government should allow group protests to take place in public spaces, while slightly fewer (81%) believe that public protests from groups holding politically unpopular views should be allowed. This is similar to what [trended data from the GSS finds](#), with most Americans supporting people's right to protest.

Regardless of whether the protesters are associated with violence, more highly educated Americans tend to believe that the government should allow such protests. Those holding a bachelor's degree are most open to this, with support falling as educational achievement declines. Concerning the government specifically allowing groups to protest that have been associated with violence in the past, men, Republicans and white Americans are more open to this than others. However, support weakens across all groups if attendees of the protest engaged in violence.

Prior research found that Americans are more open to calls for violent protests relative to the rest of the globe, with 44% of Americans agreeing that people should be able to call for violent protests, compared

Americans believe protests should be allowed in public spaces, unless violence is involved



Q14. Should the following be allowed or prohibited by the government?
 Base: All respondents n=4,366

with 25% across 38 countries.⁷

Americans do not encourage hostile speech in their social groups.

Just as Americans want institutions to prohibit threatening or racist speech in the abstract, most say their social groups would push back against such speech were it to occur in their presence. A majority say that their social circle would not condone one of its members making certain types of harmful speech, such as a threat of violence. Around eight in 10 say people in their immediate social circle would react negatively if they heard another threaten the health and safety of someone else, while seven in 10 would react negatively if someone were to make statements that could lead to a dangerous situation.

Interestingly, similar numbers say that their social circle would react negatively if they heard someone

use a racial insult or slur or shared a racist or bigoted idea. About three in four say that this would elicit a negative reception within their social group.

7 Richard Wike and Katie Simmons, "Global Support for Principle of Free Expression, but Opposition to Some Forms of Speech," Pew Research Center, November 18, 2015.

However, certain groups are less likely to say that their social group would respond negatively to hearing a member express a racist or bigoted idea, namely, those with lower levels of education. Among people with less

than a high school education, 57% say they would respond negatively, compared with 82% among those with a bachelor's degree or more. A similar pattern plays out regarding threats of violence.

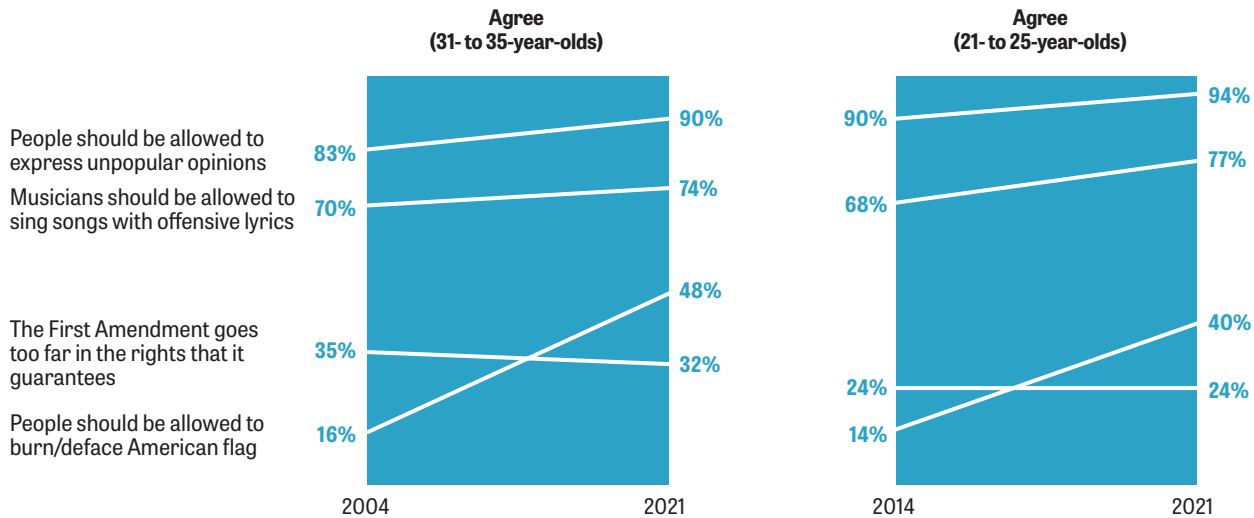
Fewer across the general public (55%) believe their social circle would react negatively to hearing a member say something rude or impolite, while 36% would react negatively to someone sharing offensive political views. However, on the latter point, Democrats are more likely to say their social circle would react negatively (45%) than independents (35%) or Republicans (29%).

HIGH SCHOOLERS THEN AND NOW

Previous Knight Foundation research set out to understand how high school students and college students understand free speech and its role in democracy. Analyzing these reports and trending them with this new study on adults' views on free speech uncovers how opinions on this topic are molded early in life. Knight Foundation has regularly surveyed high schoolers since 2004 about their views on free speech. The most recent Knight-Ipsos survey offers insight on how opinion has shifted among the high school age cohort surveyed in 2004

Views on First Amendment and speech are relatively stable, growing slightly more pro-speech into adulthood

% Agree with the following statements



Q15. Based on your own feelings about the First Amendment, how do you feel about the following statement: "The First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees."
 *In 2004 & 2014, scale included a "don't know" option.
 Q16. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree: "People should be allowed to express unpopular opinions" n=1,469; "People should be allowed to burn or deface the American flag as a political statement" n= 1,438; "Musicians should be allowed to sing songs with lyrics that others might find offensive" n= 1,464.
 Base for 2021, age 21-25 n=599; age 31-35 n=305

and 2014, who are now in their early to mid-30s and early 20s, respectively.

At all points in time, from 2004 to 2014 to today, Americans express near-universal support for people expressing unpopular opinions, indicating that support for free speech protections develops early. However, as Americans grow older, analysis indicates that these views are relatively stable, with a soft increase in support for some of the more nuanced concepts encompassed by the First Amendment. Upon entering adulthood, both age cohorts have become more supportive of the right to burn the American flag and to sing music with offensive lyrics.

THE BROADER RESEARCH LANDSCAPE

This Knight-Ipsos report builds upon and is indebted to a larger body of academic and popular research on issues of free speech and free expression. The following is a sampling of some of the principal research initiatives that laid the groundwork for the creation of this study.

The GSS offers a broad overview on how attitudes toward different forms of potentially controversial speech have evolved over time.⁸ Trended GSS data indicates that tolerance for many types of speech and expression has actually increased from the mid-1970s, with the exception of racist speech. Tolerance for racist speech has held flat.

A Cato Institute study conducted in 2017 found that views of free speech are strongly influenced by phrasing and terminology used and that significant numbers of Americans believe that “political correctness” silences discussion, with partisanship playing a role in these beliefs.⁹ But

actual interpretations of these terms vary widely, underlining that the way speech is framed influences its reception across different identity groups. Americans are cognizant of these nuances; a majority (82%) agree that people cannot agree on what speech is hateful or offensive.

Annual research by the Freedom Forum Institute since 1997, including their long-standing State of the First Amendment series, investigates many topics and common misconceptions around speech rights over time.¹⁰ Their 2019 survey revealed broader public awareness of general First Amendment protections, but prevalent misunderstanding as to how and where they apply. For example, many respondents indicated concern that social media companies were violating individuals’ First Amendment rights by sanctioning their speech online even though they are private, nongovernment entities.

A Pew Research Center survey of global democratic ideals underlines the strength of support for free expression in the United States, particularly as compared with the global average.¹¹ Pew’s research also emphasizes the extent to which Americans oppose government censorship, while also offering a prior benchmark for views on how the government should respond to speech that is offensive to minority groups. While a majority oppose the government preventing people from making such speech, in keeping with opposition to government intervention, certain groups, such as younger and more highly educated people, were more open to it.

Prior Gallup-Knight research surveyed college students’ attitudes toward the First Amendment,

8 “Trends: Civil Liberties,” GSS Data Explorer, General Social Survey, <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/trends/Civil%20Liberties?measure=spkrac>.

9 “The State of Free Speech and Tolerance in America,” Cato Institute/YouGov survey of 2,300 Americans conducted Aug. 15-23, 2017, <https://www.cato.org/survey-reports/state-free-speech-tolerance-america>.

10 Freedom Forum Institute, “State of the First Amendment” surveys, 2015-19, <https://www.freedomforuminstitute.org/first-amendment-center/state-of-the-first-amendment/>.

11 Richard Wike and Katie Simmons, “Global Support for Principle of Free Expression, but Opposition to Some Forms of Speech,” Pew Research Center, survey of 40,786 adults ages 18 and older in 38 countries, conducted April 5 to May 21, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/11/18/global-support-for-principle-of-free-expression-but-opposition-to-some-forms-of-speech/>.

campus speech and social media in 2016,¹² 2017¹³ and 2019.¹⁴ Findings showed that college students broadly support free speech but saw both free speech and the free press as less secure than they did in 2016. Racial and gender gaps were present around how students see the First Amendment and whether colleges should protect students from certain speech. Most students believed their campus climate can prevent people from expressing their views openly, and view social media as the central forum for campus discussion. Students increasingly favored campus restrictions on speech that targets minority groups.

Beyond college students, previous Knight Foundation research explored attitudes among high schoolers on the First Amendment.¹⁵ This body of research found that between 2004 and 2018, fewer high school students believed that the First Amendment went too far in the rights it guarantees. Additionally, Knight explored students' complicated attitudes toward free speech on social media, finding that while many feel social media companies should limit hate speech on their platforms, many also believe social media stifles free expression because people are afraid of being attacked or shamed by those who disagree with them. In keeping with those sentiments, most students felt it was too easy for people to say things anonymously on social media.

These reports—along with many others—guided the Knight-Ipsos collaboration in numerous ways. It would not have been possible to achieve the breadth and depth of the Knight-Ipsos report without the insightful and nuanced research of years past.

“Free Expression in America Post-2020” seeks to establish an in-depth picture of views and experiences of speech and expression in America today. While providing insights into the country as a whole, it includes a view of important nuances across diverse demographic groups to illuminate where Americans are united and divided when it comes to speech rights.

This report also provides a unique look at the post-2020 free speech landscape. The year prior to this survey being fielded was characterized by a presidential election with strong voter turnout, an administration change, and attempts to disrupt election certification efforts on Jan. 6, 2021. The country also experienced a pandemic and COVID-19 misinformation challenges, widespread racial injustice demonstrations, economic crises, and renewed debate around social media oversight decisions—all of which have resonance for perceptions of free expression and First Amendment rights today. As the nation seeks a solution to these common challenges, it will be important to build upon this report's nuanced findings of the American experience and normative views on speech and expression.

12 “Free Expression on Campus: A Survey of U.S. College Students and U.S. Adults,” Knight Foundation/Gallup/Newsom Institute survey of 3,072 U.S. college students ages 18 to 24, conducted Feb. 29 through March 15, 2016; and 2,031 U.S. adults age 18+, conducted March 5-8, 2016, <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/free-speech-campus-conference-explores-student-attitudes-toward-1st-amendment/>.

13 “Free Expression on Campus: What College Students Think About First Amendment Issues,” Knight Foundation/Gallup/American Council on Education/Charles Koch Institute/Stanton Foundation survey of 3,014 U.S. college students ages 18 to 24 conducted Nov. 1 through Dec. 10, 2017, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/free-expression-on-campus-what-college-students-think-about-first-amendment-issues/>.

14 “The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report,” Knight Foundation/Gallup survey of 3,319 U.S. college students ages 18 to 24, conducted Oct. 28 through Dec. 19, 2019, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/the-first-amendment-on-campus-2020-report-college-students-views-of-free-expression/>.

15 “High School Student Views on the First Amendment: Trends in the 21st Century,” Knight Foundation, November 2019, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/high-school-student-views-on-the-first-amendment-trends-in-the-21st-century/>.

CONCLUSION

Freedom of expression is among the most highly regarded ideals of American society. However, speech rights have become a battleground in the ongoing partisan conflicts afflicting the United States, and not all Americans come to the table with the same understanding and experience of those rights.

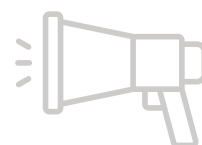
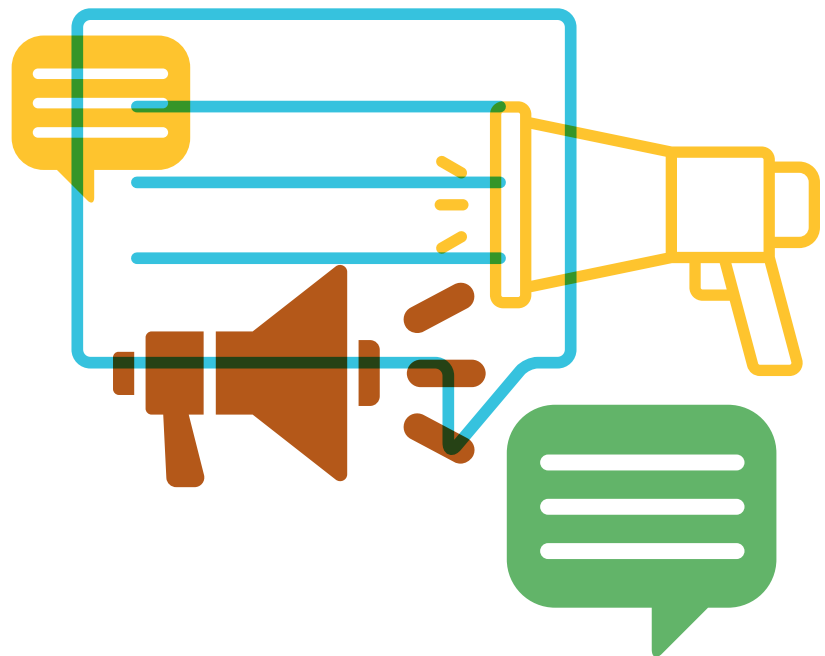
This research illustrates how the value of free speech is universal in American society. Americans of all walks of life recognize its value in promoting discourse, enabling a wide variety of views and protecting the voices of minority groups.

The key challenges are of interpretation, experience and in-group identity. This study provides an in-depth examination of the complicated and nuanced understanding Americans have of speech and its application in an increasingly digital world.

As in many other areas, partisanship has affected the interpretations of the freedom of speech. Views on free expression are filtered through partisan imperatives. For many, whether speech is legitimate depends on whether it aligns with one's political in-group.

Additionally, the experience of freedom of speech is filtered through the different prisms of race. Minority Americans, particularly Black Americans, do not feel they are as protected by these rights and report having the most negative experiences with speech.

The battles over speech are real, and they build on people's experiences, feelings and opinions. The heartening news, however, is that Americans are united around the ideals of free speech and its essential value in society. That foundation remains strong, even as we continue to struggle with how these ideals should be put into practice.



METHODOLOGY

This Ipsos poll was conducted July 30 to Aug. 16, 2021, by Ipsos using the KnowledgePanel® on behalf of Knight Foundation. This poll is based on a representative sample of 4,366 U.S. adults, age 18 or older, with oversamples among non-Hispanic Black/African Americans, non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islanders, non-Hispanic Other/2+ plus races, and Hispanics.

The study was conducted in English and Spanish. The data for the main adult sample were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, census region, metropolitan status, language proficiency, gender by age by race/ethnicity, education by race/ethnicity, and census region by race/ethnicity. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) from the U.S. Census Bureau, except for Metropolitan Status, which came from the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS). The weighting categories were as follows:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60+)
- Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)
- Education (Less than High School, High School Grad, Some College, Bachelor or Higher)
- Household Income (Under \$25,000, \$25,000-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, \$100,000-\$149,999, \$150,000 and Over)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South and West)
- Metropolitan Status (Metro, Non-Metro)
- Language Proficiency (English Proficient Hispanic, Bilingual Hispanic, Spanish Proficient Hispanic, Non-Hispanic)
- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-44, 45+), by Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)
- Education (Some College or Less, Bachelor or Higher) by Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) by Race-Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic African American, Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic Other/2+ Races, Hispanic)

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 1.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, for results based on the entire sample of adults. The margin of error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.36 for all adults. In our reporting of the findings, percentage points are rounded to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. In questions that permit multiple responses, columns may total substantially more than 100%, depending on the number of responses offered by each participant.