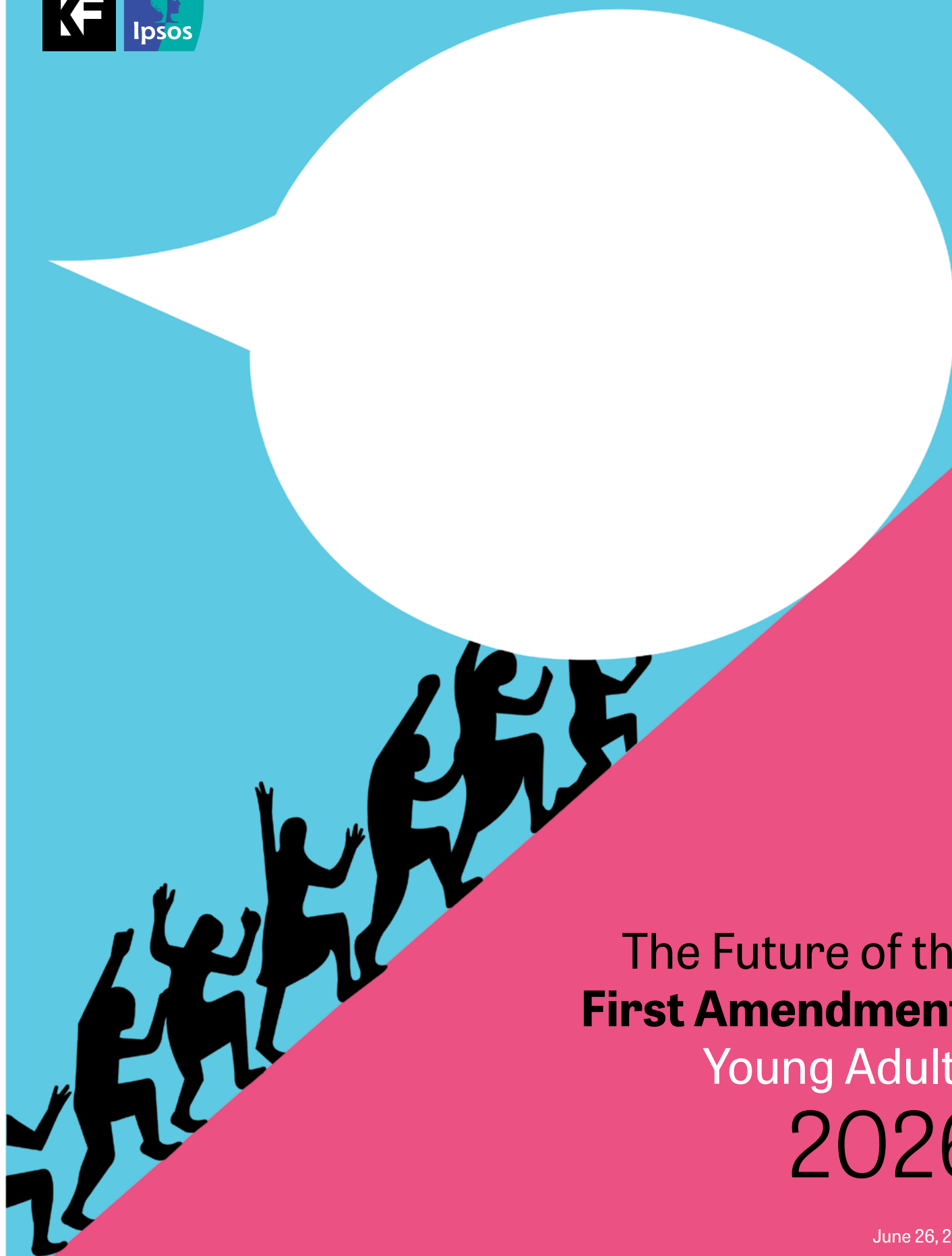




The Future of the
First Amendment:
Young Adults
2026

June 26, 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The latest Knight Foundation-Ipsos Future of the First Amendment study, which builds on research among college students dating back to 2016 and now examines attitudes among 18- to 29-year-olds, shows that young adults¹ largely view First Amendment rights as important. However, despite the perceived importance of those rights, most young adults do not view these rights as secure. Notably, compared to the most recent survey in 2024, there is a decline in the number of college students ages 18-24 who view freedom of speech and other First Amendment rights as secure in our society today.

This report delves into the dynamic and multifaceted issues surrounding free expression on campuses, in the workplace and in our society as a whole. Most young adults believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence, and some — particularly Black and Hispanic young adults — feel they have a hard time exercising their free speech rights without consequence. However, when it comes to the campus environment, fewer students report feeling uncomfortable due to speech compared with two years ago.

The top reason young adults hold back opinions is simply to keep personal views private. This survey indicates signs that some young people may not be actively expressing themselves online or are choosing to be more intentional about speech. About 1 in 4 cite fear of negative consequences like being “canceled” when around classmates, professors or colleagues. Yet few take action beyond distancing themselves from

others or calling out inappropriate comments. Notably, nearly two-thirds have never faced repercussions for expressing their views, and when consequences do occur, being blocked or unfollowed on social media tops the list.

Amid our rapidly transforming technological landscape, young adults prioritize personal data privacy and do not believe that First Amendment protections should be extended to AI-generated content. When assessing AI’s uses and potential, young adults are more cautious, with few supporting unrestricted access to AI tools or the generation of content that could include offensive or biased material.

Navigating the complexities of free expression remains paramount for young people, who now stand at the crossroads of technological change and evolving societal expectations. This research underscores the essential need for dialogue and understanding about First Amendment rights — from the classroom, to the workforce, to online spaces.

This study was conducted March 23 to April 7, 2026, by Ipsos using the probability-based KnowledgePanel® on behalf of Knight Foundation. This poll is based on a representative sample of 1,051 U.S. adults, ages 18-29. A supplemental sample of 493 additional undergraduate college students ages 18-24 was collected at the same time; this resulted in a total of 1,100 college students ages 18-24, including 391 from the main sample of adults ages 18-29.

¹ In this report, “young adults” refers to a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults ages 18-29.

KEY FINDINGS

Young adults in the U.S. overwhelmingly view freedom of speech as both personally important and a pillar of American democracy.

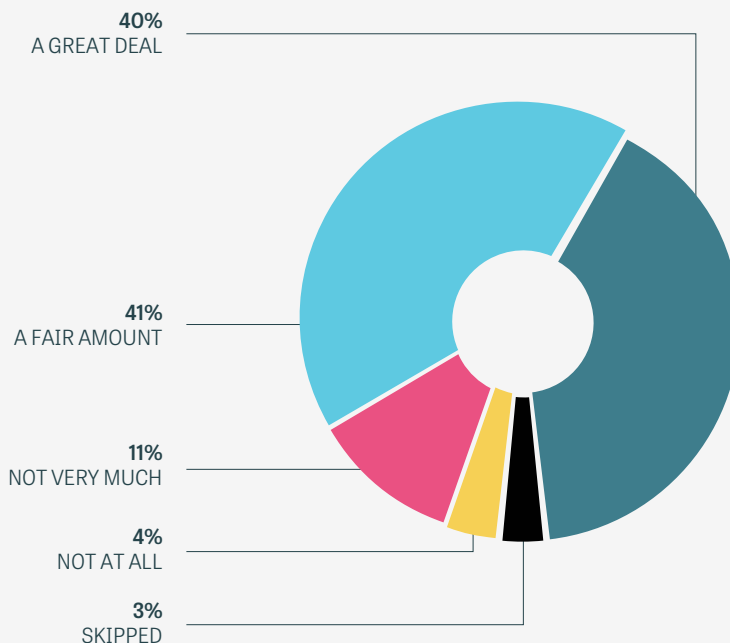
There is broad agreement on the importance of freedom of speech, as well as most other First Amendment rights, among white, Black, Hispanic, and Asian American and Pacific Islander adults under age 30, as well as among young Republicans, Democrats and independents. Nearly 9 in 10 (88%) agree that protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy. These attitudes have not significantly changed since 2021².

But several fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of speech, are viewed as increasingly under threat.

Only about a third of young adults (32%) say freedom of speech is secure; twice as many say it is under threat. There are comparable levels of concern over freedom of the press, the right to equal protection under the law and the right to privacy. Confidence in the security of freedom of speech, as well as other First Amendment rights, has declined sharply since 2021.

32% of young adults say freedom of speech is secure

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



Q2. How much, if at all, does the First Amendment protect people like you?
Base: All respondents, young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051)

² The 2021 survey was a national survey among Americans ages 18+ and included an oversample of current undergraduate college students. Any references to young adult data from 2021 refer to those aged 18-29 (n=469).

College student views of the security of First Amendment rights continue to decline

Fewer than 4 in 10 college students say freedom of speech is secure in the U.S. — the lowest level measured in a decade of Future of the First Amendment surveys. The pattern is similar for other First Amendment rights: This research captures new lows on the shares saying freedom of the press and freedom of religion, as well as the right to privacy and freedom to assemble, are secure. As the 2026 midterm elections approach, only half of college students say the right to vote is secure.

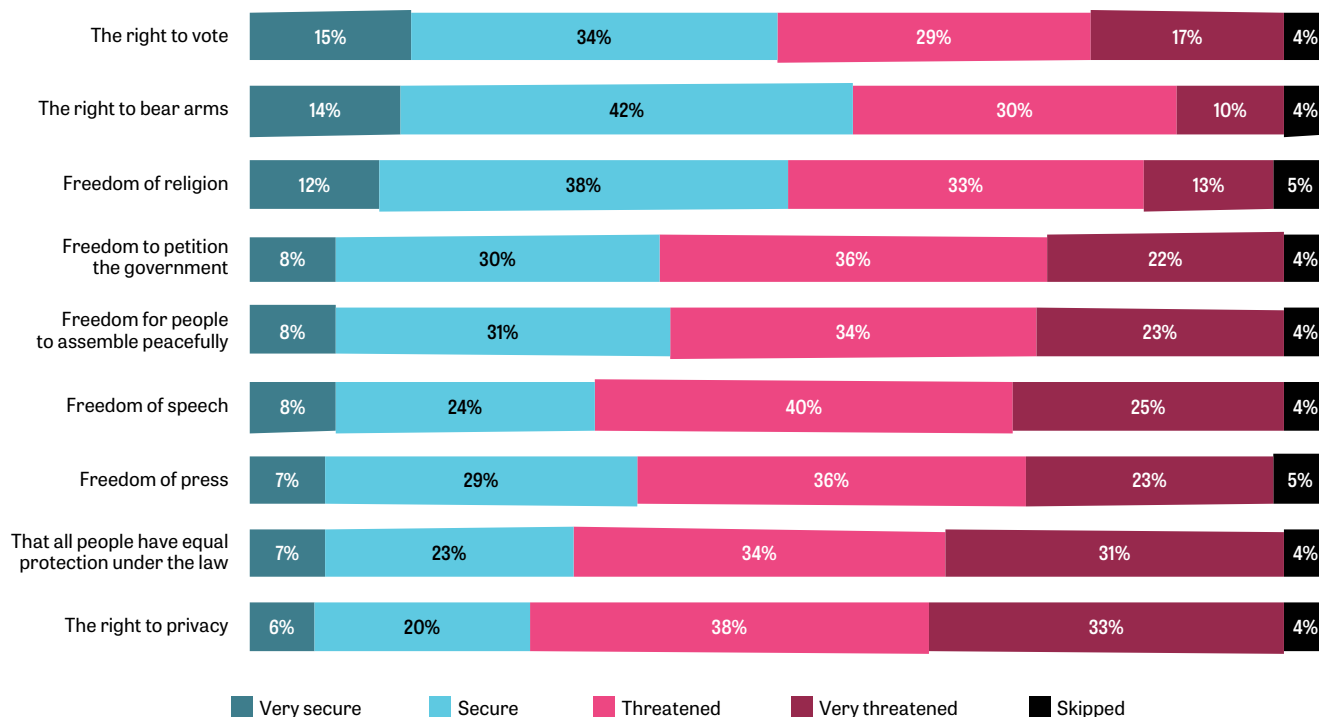
37%

of college students say freedom of speech is secure in the U.S.

Black and Hispanic young adults face bigger challenges in exercising First Amendment rights.

Only about a quarter of Black young adults (28%) and a third of Hispanics rate it as easy or very easy to use their right to free speech without consequence. White young adults are far more likely to say it is easy to exercise their right to free speech (53%).

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



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?
Base: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051)

The climate for speech on campus has changed.

Colleges and universities continue to navigate their role as spaces for open inquiry and the free exchange of ideas. After climbing steadily from 2017 to 2024, the share of college students who say they have ever felt uncomfortable by comments made about their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation has declined sharply. About 3 in 10 students (29%) say they have felt uncomfortable by comments about their identity; that is 15 percentage points lower than two years ago and the lowest share saying this since 2017.

Some young adults self-censor in the workplace and online, preferring to keep their views private instead of engaging in public spaces.

Some young adults — about 3 in 10 — say they often hold back their opinions on politics, race, immigration and other issues from their bosses and co-workers. That's somewhat higher than the shares saying they censor their views in other venues, such as on social media or with their friends and families. More young people express reticence about sharing their views in work settings because they prefer to keep their views private, rather than fear of being canceled or other reasons.

Young adults are divided over legal protections for hate speech.

A slim majority of all young adults believe that hate speech — attacks on people based on their race and other personal characteristics³ — should be protected by the First Amendment, while 42% say it should not. There are notable divides along racial and partisan lines, with white young adults and Republicans more likely to favor hate speech protections than their peers. However, reflecting internal tensions around speech among young people, there is broad support overall for banning hate speech on college campuses. As in the past, there is a similar sentiment in college students' opinions about hate speech.

Fewer college students equate speech with physical violence since 2024.

Most young adults believe that some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence. While this viewpoint is shared fairly equally across racial and ethnic groups, women are more likely than men to liken some forms of speech to violence. Among college students specifically, the share who equate speech to physical violence has dropped 11 percentage points since 2024, to 59%.

Most young adults don't believe that AI-generated content should be protected by the First Amendment.

As AI use increases, relatively few young adults support unrestricted AI content generation, if that includes offensive or biased material. Similarly, just 15% think it is extremely or very important to extend the same First Amendment protections to AI-generated content as to human-created content. There also is widespread concern over AI generating false or misleading information: Nearly 8 in 10 young people say AI-generated images and video make it harder for them to know what's true online.

29% of students have felt uncomfortable by comments about their identity

Half of young adults are wary of expressing themselves on social media.

Most young people believe online spaces are not conducive to constructive discourse. A majority say social media stifles free expression because some companies are suppressing certain views. Meanwhile, half of young adults say that in the past year, they have limited sharing their views, while about as many — including 6 in 10 women — say they have blocked or unfollowed someone because of their views.

3 The Knight-Ipsos survey defines hate speech for respondents as speech “which attacks people based on their race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation.”

KEY POPULATIONS

There are sizable differences in attitudes toward free speech among different groups of young adults. The widest gaps are among partisans: Democrats and Republicans have sharply divergent views over freedom of speech and expression, including over whether fundamental First Amendment rights are secure or threatened. Opinions and experiences regarding free speech also differ significantly by race, ethnicity and, in some cases, gender.

75% of Democrats say freedom of speech is threatened

Democrats

Large majorities of Democratic young adults attach great importance to all constitutional rights, except for the right to bear arms. Nine in 10 say protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy. But Democrats are also significantly more likely to believe that most fundamental rights and freedoms are not secure: 75% say freedom of speech is threatened, compared with 49% of Republicans. Democrats favor limits on hate speech: They are far more likely than Republicans to say hate speech should not be legally protected and that it should be banned on

college campuses, and they place greater importance on protecting people from offensive or biased AI-generated content. Democrats are more likely to believe that the government is pressuring social media companies to suppress perspectives it disagrees with. They also are more likely to want more personal control over the content they see online. Democrats have mixed views about whether they can use their own free speech rights without consequence; by contrast, a majority of Republicans say it is easy to use their rights without negative effects. In their everyday lives, most Democrats say they are not reluctant to share their views on politics and other issues in the workplace or at school, and they are more likely to take public action, including participating in protests and posting about political causes on social media.

In some important respects, the views of Democratic college students regarding free speech issues and the climate for speech on campus have changed substantially compared with prior Future of First Amendment surveys. The share saying freedom of speech is secure in the U.S. has fallen by more than 20 percentage points since 2024. At the same time, fewer Democratic students say they have felt uncomfortable on campus because of something said about their race or gender than did so two years ago.

Republicans

Republican young adults regard freedom of speech and other First Amendment rights as highly important — something true across the political spectrum. But Republicans diverge in their belief that most fundamental rights are secure. While nearly half of Republicans think freedom of speech is secure in the U.S., only about 1 in 5 Democrats share this view. Republicans overwhelmingly favor legal protections for hate speech, but, like Democrats, they believe hate speech should be banned on college campuses. In several circumstances, Republicans are skeptical of restrictions on speech, and they are more likely than Democrats or independents to see social media as stifling free expression, whether because users fear being attacked or shamed, or because people block views they disagree with. Yet Republicans are far less likely than Democrats to favor allowing people to criticize government and elected officials. Moreover, Republicans are the only partisan or demographic group in which a majority support permitting the government to strip visas from foreign students in response to certain types of speech. On emerging technology, Republicans are the most trusting of AI-generated information among all partisan groups.

The attitudes of Republican college students about the security of fundamental rights have become dramatically more positive. Nearly 6 in 10 Republican students say freedom of speech is secure, up from just 34% who said this in 2024. Since then, the partisan gap in assessments of the security of freedom of speech has roughly doubled.

Independents

Young adults who do not identify with either political party view freedom of speech and most other First Amendment rights as extremely or very important. Yet they are skeptical that these rights are secure: Only 3 in 10 think the right to free speech in this country is secure. In addition, less than half believe they can exercise their free speech rights without consequence.

A slight majority of Republican young adults believe that hate speech should be legally protected, while a much larger majority believe hate speech should be allowed on college campuses

59%

of Republican students say freedom of speech is secure

Independents are of two minds regarding hate speech: A slight majority believe that hate speech should be legally protected, while a much larger majority believe that hate speech should not be allowed on college campuses. Most independents say that the First Amendment doesn't go far enough in the rights it guarantees; relatively few think it goes too far. When it comes to AI, independents are the least likely of any partisan group to trust information from AI models. Like Democrats, they tend to place little importance on allowing AI to generate all types of content, even if offensive or biased, or on providing unrestricted access to AI tools for generating new ideas.

As in prior Future of First Amendment surveys, independent college students express concern over the security of freedom of speech and other First Amendment freedoms. Just 35% say freedom of speech is secure, the lowest level dating back to 2019.

White young adults

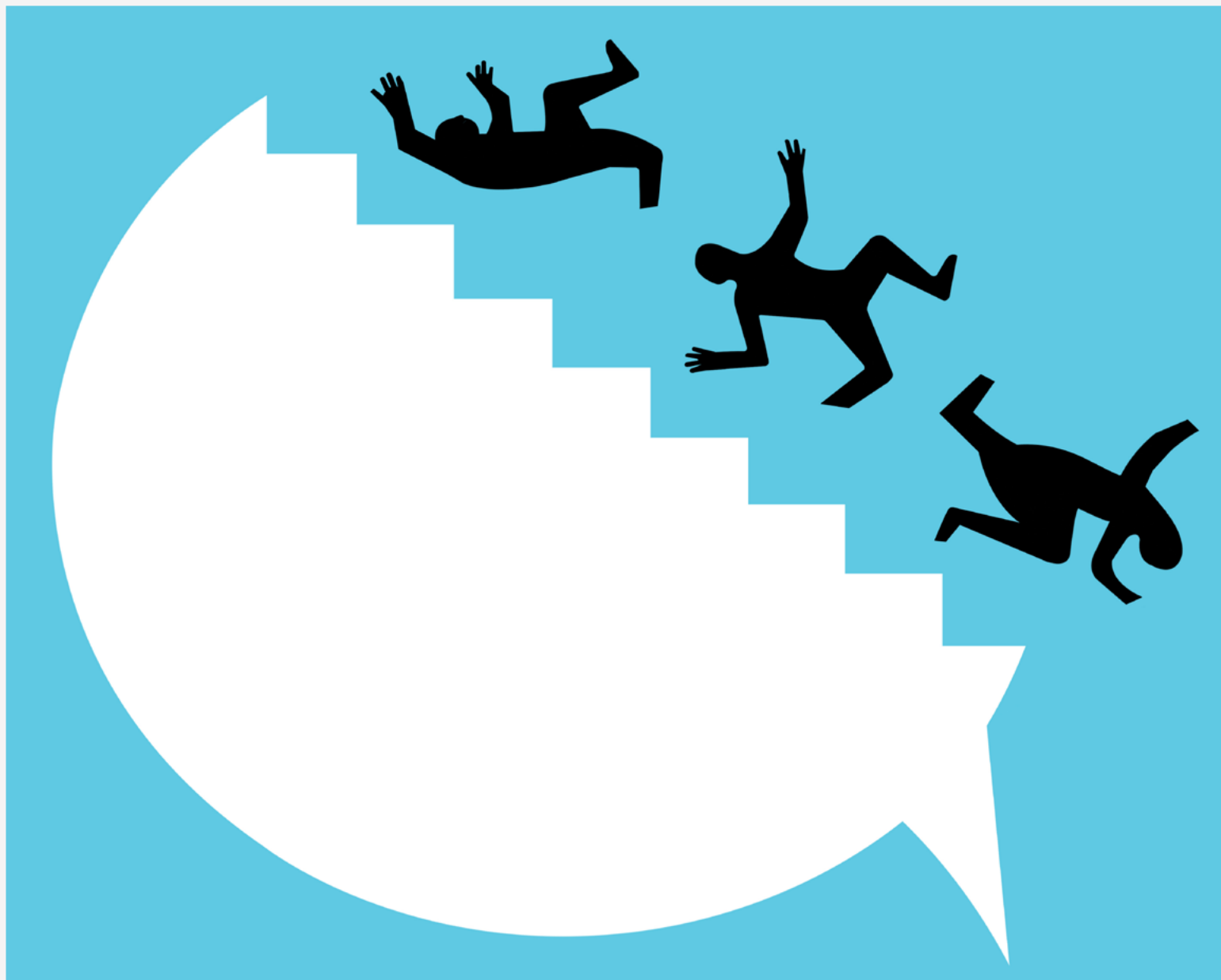
White young adults, like their Black, Hispanic and Asian counterparts, say that freedom of speech — and most other First Amendment rights — is under threat. Yet white young adults differ in their belief that “people like me” are able to take advantage of this right without consequence. About half of white young adults believe it is easy to use their free speech rights, compared with only about 3 in 10 Black and Hispanic adults. A majority of white 18- to 29-year-olds say that some forms of speech are as damaging as physical violence, and an even larger majority favor banning hate speech from college campuses. Yet, unlike Black and Hispanic young adults, a majority also think that hate speech should be protected by the First Amendment. White young people are much less likely to say that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs ensure that “people like me can express themselves.”

Black young adults

While a majority of Black young adults view freedom of speech as extremely or very important, fewer express this view than white or Hispanic adults. However, they also have greater skepticism about the extent to which the First Amendment protects “people like me.” Only about a quarter say it affords a great deal of protection, less than half the share of white adults who say this. Similarly, more young Black adults think it is hard, rather than easy, to use their free speech rights without consequence. However, the share of Black college students who say they have ever felt uncomfortable on campus because of something someone said about their race or another aspect of their identity has declined 16 percentage points since the previous survey in 2024.

Hispanic young adults

Nearly 9 in 10 Hispanic young adults say freedom of speech is very important personally, but only about a quarter say it is secure in the U.S. Hispanic young adults overwhelmingly say that free speech is an important part of American democracy; however, 81% agree with the statement “Our First Amendment rights are under attack” — which is somewhat higher than the number of white and Black young adults who say this. Hispanic young adults' views on whether they are able to use their free speech rights without consequence are closer to those of Black young adults than white young adults. In addition, only about a third say the First Amendment provides a great deal of protection for people like them. Hispanic young adults, like white and Black young adults, voice concern about the impact of AI on speech and expression. Only about 1 in 5 Hispanic young adults believe it is extremely or very important that AI-generated content should be



protected by the First Amendment; about twice as many say it is at least very important to protect people from AI-generated content they may find offensive.

Men and women

Young men and women have similar attitudes about the importance of freedom of speech, and sizable majorities of each believe it is under threat. Yet there are several important gender differences in opinions about the possible harm from some types of speech, as well as whether hate speech should be legally protected. About 6 in 10 women say some forms of

speech can be as damaging as physical violence, compared with roughly half of men. Women also are more likely to oppose legal protections for hate speech. Young women and men also have different experiences with speech in the workplace. Nearly 4 in 10 employed women say they have felt uncomfortable because of something someone said about their gender, or another aspect of their personal identity, compared with 2 in 10 men. In addition, women approach speech and expression on social media differently. Nearly 6 in 10 women say that, in the past year, they have blocked, muted or unfollowed someone on social media because of their perspectives; that compares with about 4 in 10 men.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DETAILED FINDINGS

Introduction

The climate for free speech in the United States in 2026 is increasingly fraught, amid efforts by the federal government to stifle some of its critics and persistent debates across the political spectrum about censorship, self-censorship and “cancel culture.”

Freedom of speech — *in principle* — is overwhelmingly embraced by young adults as integral to American democracy. Yet there is far less consensus about how this fundamental right should be interpreted and what it means for day-to-day interactions in workplaces, on college campuses and on social media.

“The Future of the First Amendment: Young Adults 2026” represents a significant expansion of Knight Foundation’s long-running research into attitudes about the First Amendment and freedom of speech in the U.S. The nationwide survey was conducted among more than 1,000 adults ages 18-29 in March and April 2026, with a supplement of current undergraduate students ages 18-24. This enables us for the first time to examine the opinions of all young adults, while also updating Knight’s long-running trends on college students’ views of the First Amendment rights and the climate for speech on campus.

Young adults — students and non-students alike — are acutely aware of the precarity of these rights. Majorities believe that several core First Amendment freedoms, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press, are under threat. Nearly three-quarters of young people agree that First Amendment rights are currently under attack.

College students, meanwhile, who already were deeply pessimistic about the state of First Amendment rights, have become even more so. The share of college students who say that freedom of speech is secure has fallen by about half since the first Future of the First Amendment survey a decade ago.

However, despite the broad support for First Amendment rights — and the widespread sense that they are in peril — many young adults favor limitations on speech in certain circumstances. Only about half favor legal protections for hate speech, which the Supreme Court has upheld, and most believe hate speech should be banned on college campuses.

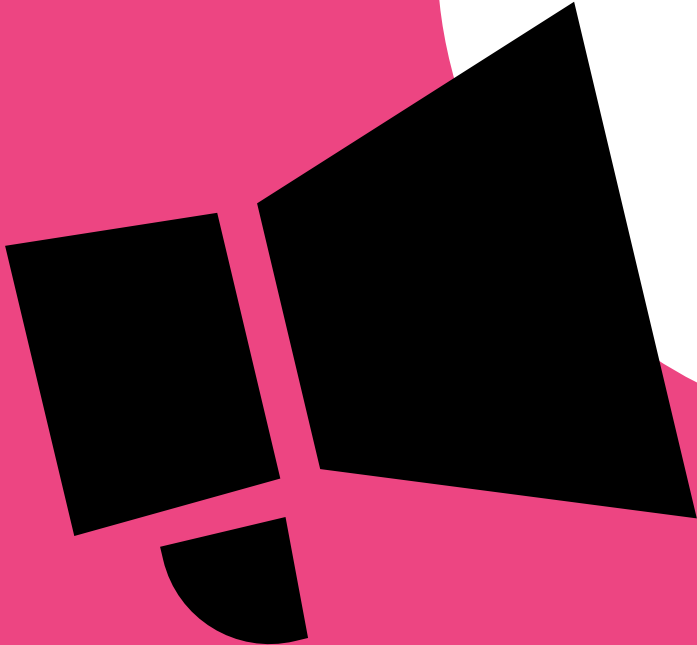
The rapid rise of artificial intelligence has spurred support for restrictions on some types of AI-generated content. A narrow majority of young adults say it is extremely or very important to restrict harmful AI-generated content, while a mere 15% believe it is extremely or very important to extend First Amendment protections to content generated by AI.

The new survey provides insight into whether young people hold back from sharing their views about politics, race and other topics in conversations at work, on campus and with friends and family. For the most part, they don't hold back, although they do so more frequently when talking with bosses or coworkers than in college settings or with friends and family.

Young adults are highly critical of the discourse on social media platforms; just a quarter describe the dialogue on these sites as “usually civil.” Many have taken steps to either limit sharing their own perspectives when online or have blocked or unfollowed someone because of that person's perspectives.

The survey finds that, like older Americans, Generation Z and other young adults often struggle in navigating the rapidly changing environment for speech and expression in this country. Their opinions on the First Amendment and freedom of speech are complex and, at times, seem contradictory. It is essential that instead of relying on tropes or stereotypes to characterize the attitudes of young people, we pay close attention to what they are actually telling us.

Many young adults have taken steps to either limit sharing their own perspectives when online or have blocked or unfollowed someone because of that person's perspectives.



01

**THE FIRST
AMENDMENT
AND
FREEDOM OF
EXPRESSION**

THE FIRST AMENDMENT AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

At a time of deep partisan division in the United States, young Americans in the two major parties and across all key demographic categories overwhelmingly agree on the importance of freedom of speech. In fact, of the nine First Amendment rights and freedoms included in the survey, freedom of speech ranks near the top, with 87% of adults ages 18-29 calling it extremely or very important to them personally, a similar trend to previous surveys.

Yet the virtual unanimity on the importance of these rights contrasts sharply with a widespread belief that these rights are not secure in today's America. Moreover, less than half of all young people say it is easy for people like them to use their free speech rights without consequence.

Free speech is widely viewed as important to American democracy

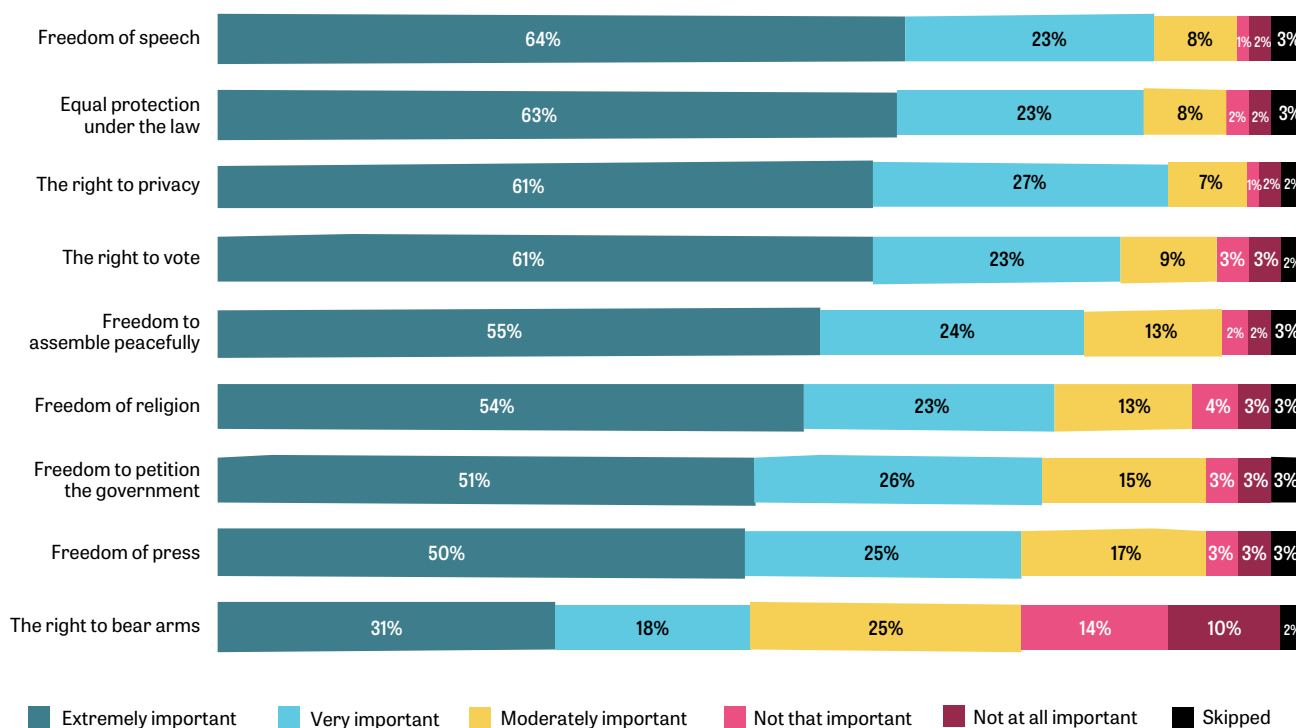
Support for freedom of speech is an essential value for young adults. Nearly every demographic and party affiliation measured views freedom of speech as extremely or very important personally, with at least 8 in 10 young adults across all groups sharing this view.

This is largely unchanged from the Future of the First Amendment survey five years ago, when 90% of young adults viewed freedom of speech as at least very important. Changes since then in the views of the importance of other rights and freedoms have been relatively small.

Less than half of all young adults say it is easy for people like them to use their free speech rights without consequence.

Young adults also overwhelmingly agree that protecting free speech is an important part of American democracy. However, while this view is widely shared across partisan and most demographic groups, Black young adults are less likely than white and Hispanic young adults to regard protection of free speech as essential to democracy.

How important are American rights and freedoms to you?



Q1. How important, if at all, are the following to you?
 Base: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051)

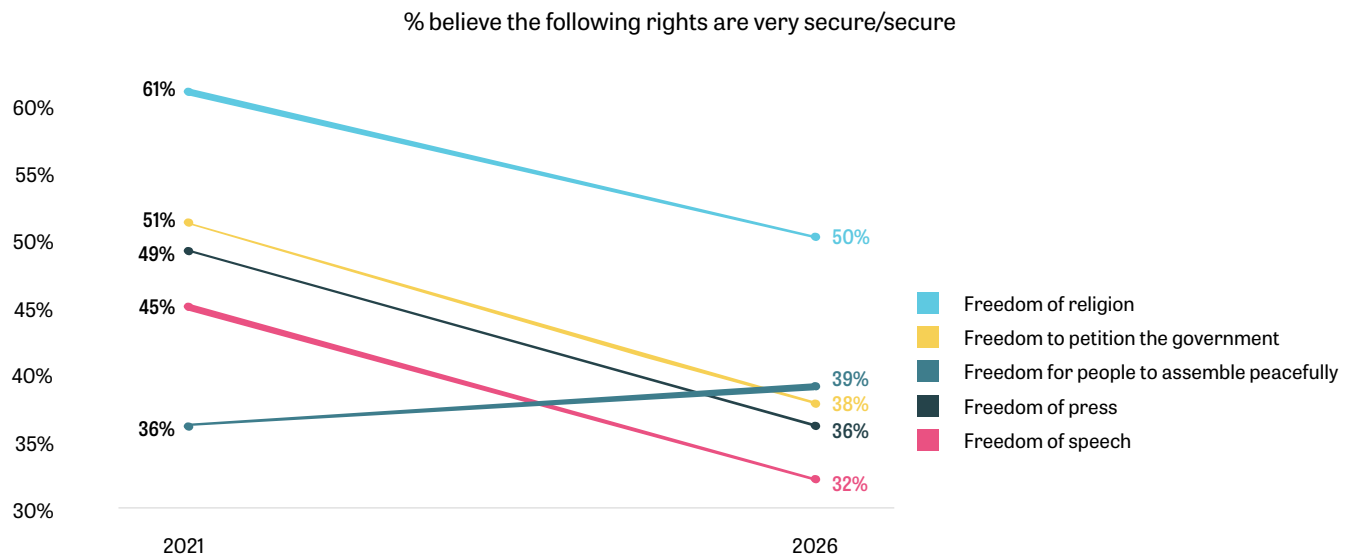


Fundamental rights are seen as increasingly under threat

Just 32% of young adults say freedom of speech is secure in the United States, while twice as many say it is threatened. Several other constitutional rights — including the right to privacy, the right to equal protection under the law, freedom of the press, freedom to petition the government and the right to peaceful assembly — also are widely viewed as under threat.

In several cases, attitudes about the security of fundamental rights have changed markedly. Since 2021, there have been 13-point declines in the percentages of young people saying free speech, the freedom to petition and the freedom of the press are secure. The share saying freedom of religion is secure also has fallen, from 61% to 50%.

Sense of security of the five freedoms among young adults



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?

Base: Total: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051); Republican (n=237); Democrat (n=324); Independent (n=474).

How easy is it for young adults to use First Amendment rights?

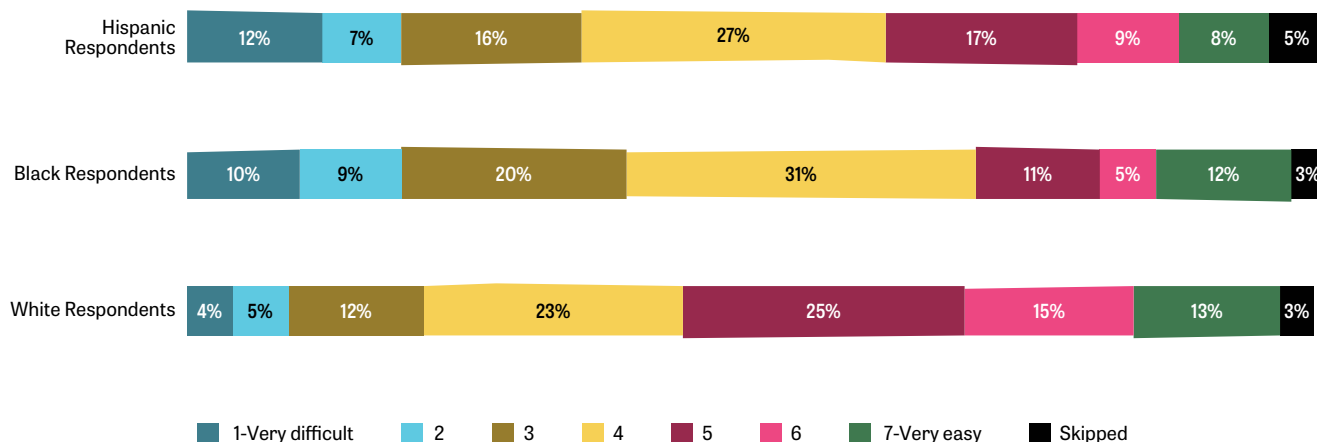
Most young adults say they feel protected at least a fair amount by the First Amendment, but less than half say they get a *great deal* of protection. Partisan differences in views on First Amendment protections mirror those in opinions about the security of freedom of speech: Far more Republicans than Democrats or independents say they feel a great deal of protection from the First Amendment.

The survey asks young people to rate how easy or difficult it is for “people like me” to use free speech rights without consequence, using a seven-point scale. Overall, 43% say this is very easy or easy, while 28% rate it very difficult or difficult.

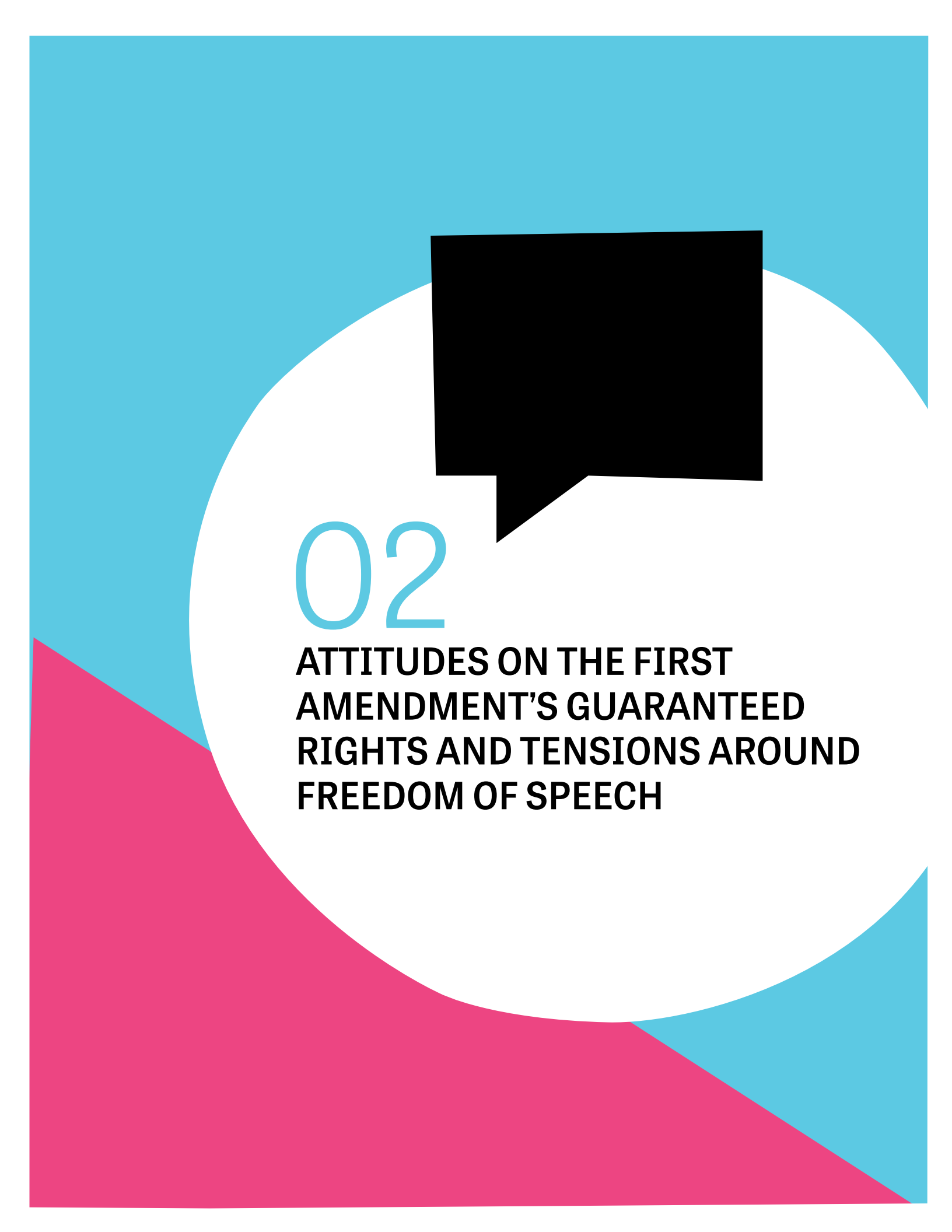
But attitudes vary widely across different groups of young people. Among white young adults, for

example, more than half (53%) judge it is easy for people like them to use their free speech rights without consequence. Far fewer Black (28%) and Hispanic (34%) young adults believe it is easy to freely express themselves. Education and exposure to First Amendment concepts also matter: half of young adults with at least a four-year college degree find it easy to express themselves without consequence (51%), compared with 40% of those without a degree. Similarly, those who took a First Amendment class in high school are more likely to say it's easy (49%) than those who did not (39%). Household income plays a role as well; just 29% of young adults in households earning under \$50,000 say it's easy to freely express themselves, compared with 42% of those earning \$50,000 to \$99,999 and 49% of those earning \$100,000 or more.

Ease of using free speech rights without consequence for people like you in America



Q8. How easy or difficult is it for people like you to use their free speech rights without consequence in America today? Base: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29, White (n=544); Black (n=156); Hispanic (n=232).



02

**ATTITUDES ON THE FIRST
AMENDMENT'S GUARANTEED
RIGHTS AND TENSIONS AROUND
FREEDOM OF SPEECH**

ATTITUDES ON THE FIRST AMENDMENT'S GUARANTEED RIGHTS AND TENSIONS AROUND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

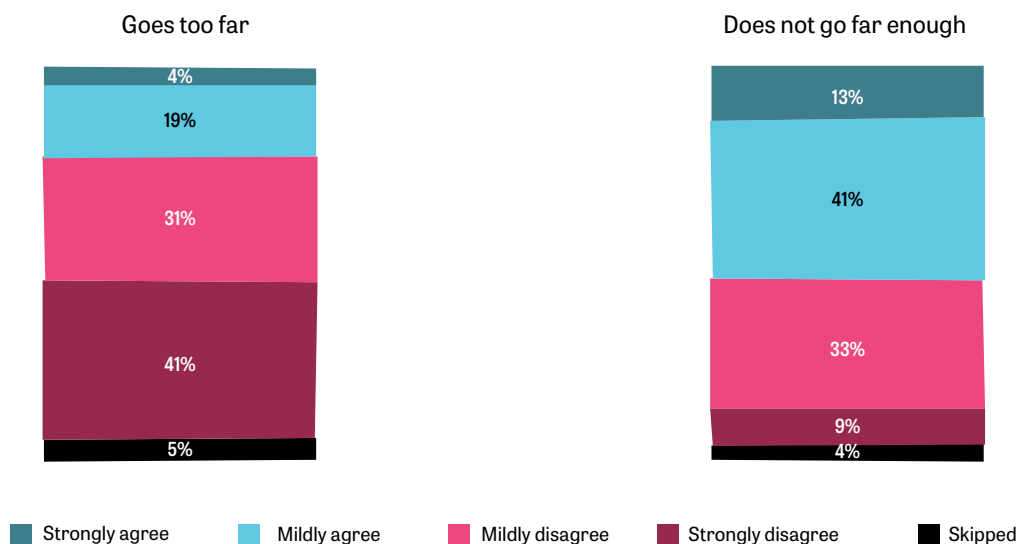
While young adults strongly support First Amendment rights and freedoms in general, they also favor limitations on some types of speech, particularly hate speech.

By roughly 3-to-1, young people reject the idea that the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. A smaller majority, by contrast, believe it doesn't go far enough.

Young people are divided on whether hate speech, which attacks people based on their race and other aspects of their personal identity, should be legally protected. But when it comes to the specific issue of hate speech on college campuses, they overwhelmingly say this should *not* be allowed.

Does the First Amendment go too far, or not far enough?

Young adults' views on whether the First Amendment goes too far or not far enough



Q5. 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. Young adults ages 18-29; Base: Split Sample A (n=515).

The First Amendment does not go far enough in the rights it guarantees. Young adults ages 18-29; Base: Split Sample B (n=536).

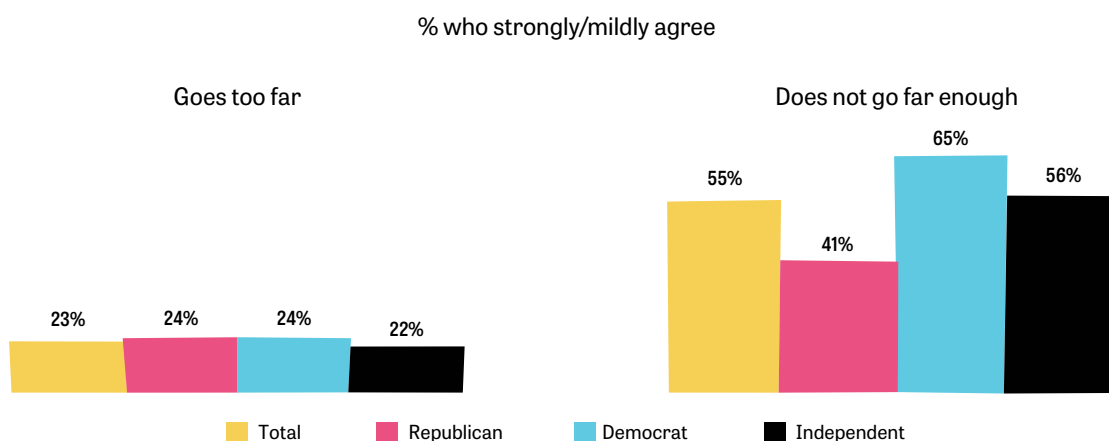
Young adults overall have the same general view of the First Amendment's guaranteed rights compared to young adults in the 2021 Future of the First Amendment survey. Less than a quarter — 23% — agree that the First Amendment goes too far, including 4% who *strongly* agree; 72% disagree, including 41% who do so *strongly*.

Notably, there are only slight partisan differences in these opinions. However, the belief that the First Amendment goes too far is more prevalent among Black and Hispanic young adults than among white and Asian young people. Similarly, those in households earning under \$50,000 are more likely to believe the

First Amendment goes too far compared with higher earners.

Partisan differences are much sharper in opinions about whether the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment go far enough. Majorities of both Democrats and independents favor an expansion of First Amendment rights; most Republicans disagree. A similar income gap emerges here, with lower-income young adults more likely to hold the sentiment that the First Amendment does not go far enough (66% compared with 50% among those in \$100,000-plus households).

Views on whether the First Amendment goes too far or not far enough by political party



Q5. 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. Young adults ages 18-29, Split Sample A (n=515), Republicans (n=120), Democrats (n=163), Independents (n=223).
 The First Amendment does not go far enough in the rights it guarantees. Young adults ages 18-29, Split Sample B (n=536), Republicans (n=117), Democrats (n=161), Independents (n=251).
 2026 Base: 18-24 current undergraduate students (n=1,100)
 2024 Base: All respondents (n=1,678); 2021 Base: Current students age 18-24 (n=1,023)

Republicans and Democrats are deeply split on legal protections for hate speech

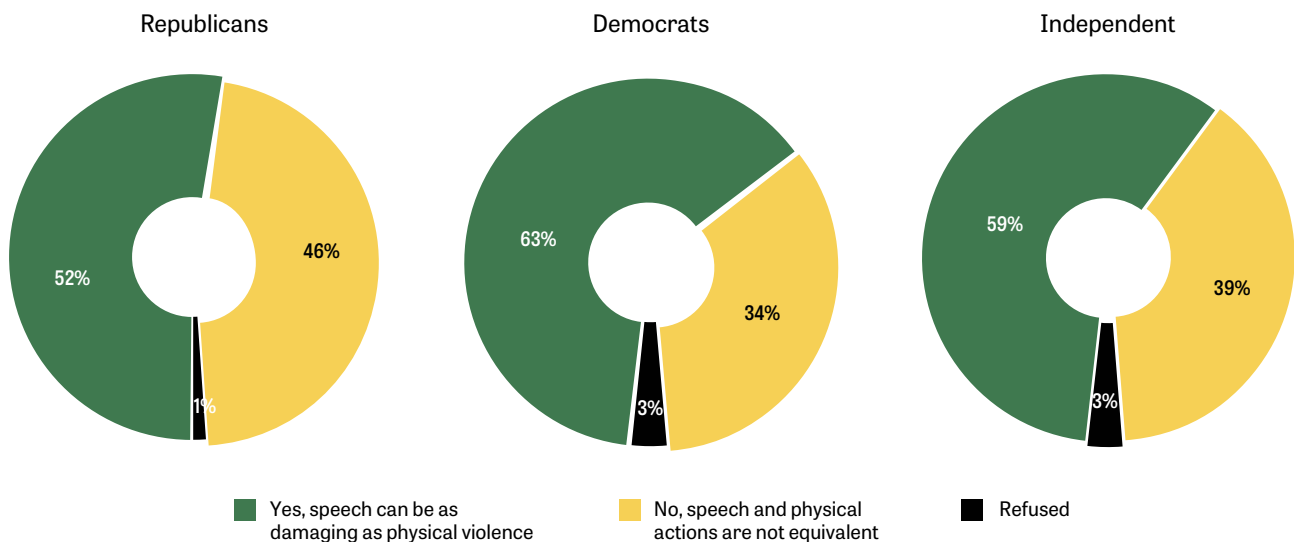
Young adults' views on whether hate speech should be legally protected are divided by political affiliation, as well as along race and gender lines. Overall, a narrow majority of young people think that hate speech should be protected, while roughly 4 in 10 say it should not.

Fully 70% of Republicans say hate speech should have legal protections, compared with 54% of political

independents and just 42% of Democrats. Race also is a major factor, with 59% of white young adults supportive of providing legal protections for hate speech, while 52% of Black young adults are opposed.

And while most young men view hate speech as a form of expression that should be legally protected, opinions among young women are evenly divided.

Do you believe some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence?



Q6. Do you believe that some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence to the recipient?

Base: All respondents, Republican (n=237); Democrat (n=324); Independent (n=474).

There is much greater agreement on banning hate speech on campuses: 71% of young adults, including majorities of all partisan and demographic groups, say hate speech should not be allowed. However, more Republicans than Democrats or independents favor permitting hate speech in colleges.

A majority of young people say speech can be as damaging as physical violence

Related to attitudes about hate speech, nearly 6 in 10 young people believe that some forms of speech can be as damaging to the recipient as physical violence.

The differences here — whether by political affiliation, race or gender — are relatively modest compared with opinions about hate speech. About half of Republicans, and 6 in 10 of both independents and Democrats, say some forms of speech can be as dangerous as physical violence.



03

**COLLEGE STUDENT
VIEWS ON FREE
EXPRESSION AND
CAMPUS SPEECH**

COLLEGE STUDENT VIEWS ON FREE EXPRESSION AND CAMPUS SPEECH

Over the past five years of the Future of the First Amendment surveys of college students, large majorities have consistently rated First Amendment rights as highly important. Today, 84% say freedom of speech is extremely or very important (with 58% viewing it as *extremely* important), a figure that has varied very little since 2021.

Yet over time, students' belief in the security of these rights has decreased substantially. Since this question was introduced in our 2016 college survey, the share of students who say freedom of speech is secure in the U.S. has fallen from 73% to 37%. There have been comparable declines in assessments of the security of freedom of the press, freedom to petition the government and the freedom to assemble peacefully.

Students have mixed views on whether it is easy or difficult to use their right to freedom of speech without consequence. Here again, however, the trend is negative, with the share saying it is very easy or easy declining since 2021.

When it comes to the climate for speech on campus, a majority of current students continue to say that some people are prevented from saying what they believe because others may be offended. However, this belief has become less widespread since its peak five years ago.

Notably, fewer students report they have felt uncomfortable as a result of comments made by others about their race, gender or some other aspect of their personal identity. About 3 in 10 say they have felt uncomfortable because of comments made by others, a 15-percentage-point decline since the most recent Future of the First Amendment survey in 2024.

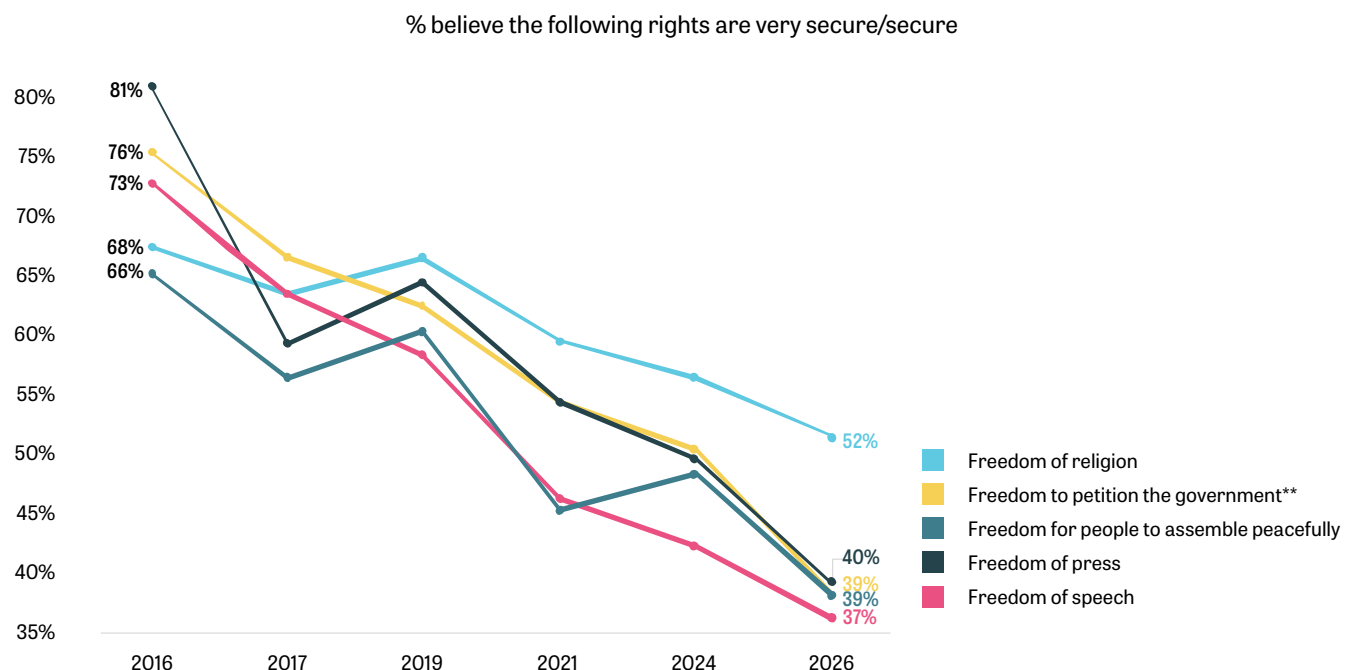
Since 2016, the share of college students who say freedom of speech is secure in the U.S. has fallen from 73% to 37%

College students see First Amendment freedoms as increasingly under threat

Two years ago, the survey found that, since 2016, “students have never felt less secure in the right to freedom of speech.” Today, fewer say the right to free speech is secure than did so then.

Other fundamental rights also are viewed as less secure. Like freedom of speech, the share of students saying freedom of the press is secure also has fallen by roughly half since the first Future of the First Amendment survey in 2016.

To what extent do college students think the five freedoms are secure today?



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following rights is secure or threatened in the country today?

2026 Base: 18-24 current undergraduate students (n=1,100)

2024 Base: All respondents (n=1,678), 2021 Base: Current students age 18-24 (n=1,023), 2019 base: All respondents (n=3,319), 2017 base: (n=3,014), 2016 base: (n=3,072)

*In 2019, question was “Do you think each of the following rights is very secure, secure, threatened, or very threatened in the country today?”

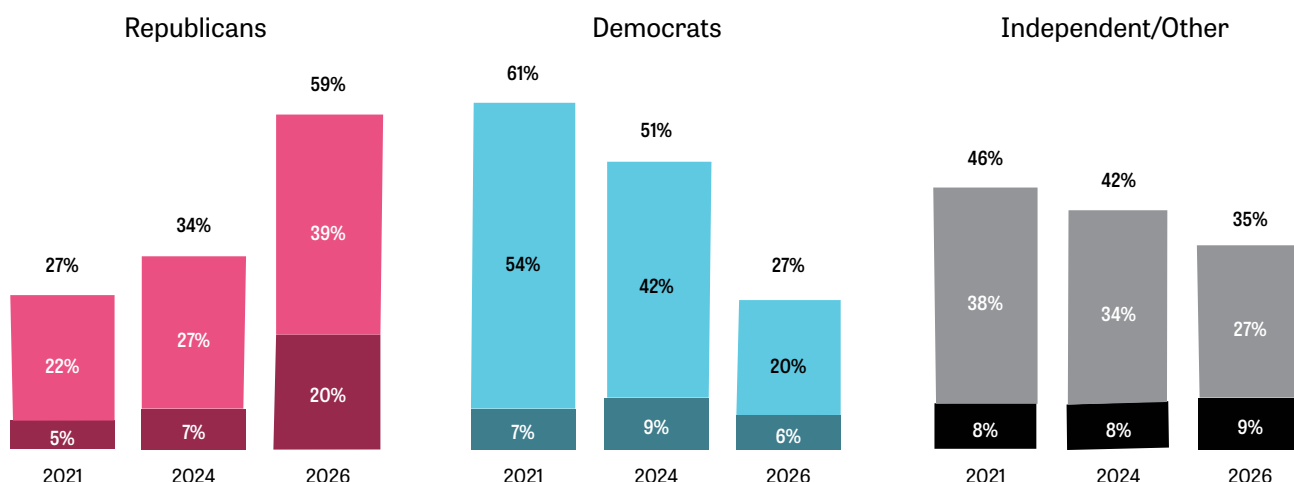
**In 2019 and prior statement read “Freedom to petition the government, meaning presenting requests to the government without fear of punishment”

Republican, Democrat, and independent students each view the security of freedom of speech very differently than they did just two years ago. Nearly 6 in 10 Republicans say freedom of speech is secure, up from roughly a third in 2024. Democrats have moved in the

opposite direction: The share of Democratic students who think the right to free speech is secure has fallen 24 percentage points. And only about a third of independents share this view, down slightly from 42%.

College student views on whether freedom of speech is secure by political party

Percent of students who feel freedom of speech is... very secure or secure today
Very secure (dark bars) + Secure (light bars)



Q3. To what extent do you think each of the following is secure or threatened in the country today? Freedom of speech

Base: 18-24 current undergraduate students; Republican (n=235); Democrat (n=427); Independent/Other (n=423)

2024 Base: All respondents; Republican (n=382); Democrat (n=527); Independent/Other (n=763)

2021 Base: Three-quarters of respondents saw "people like you"; Republican (n=167); Democrat (n=293); Independent/Other (n=318)

Fewer students believe they can express themselves without consequence

Students also have become less likely to say they can use their own rights to free expression without consequence. The survey asks students to rate how easy or difficult it is for "people like me" to use their free speech rights without consequence on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is very difficult and 7 is very easy.

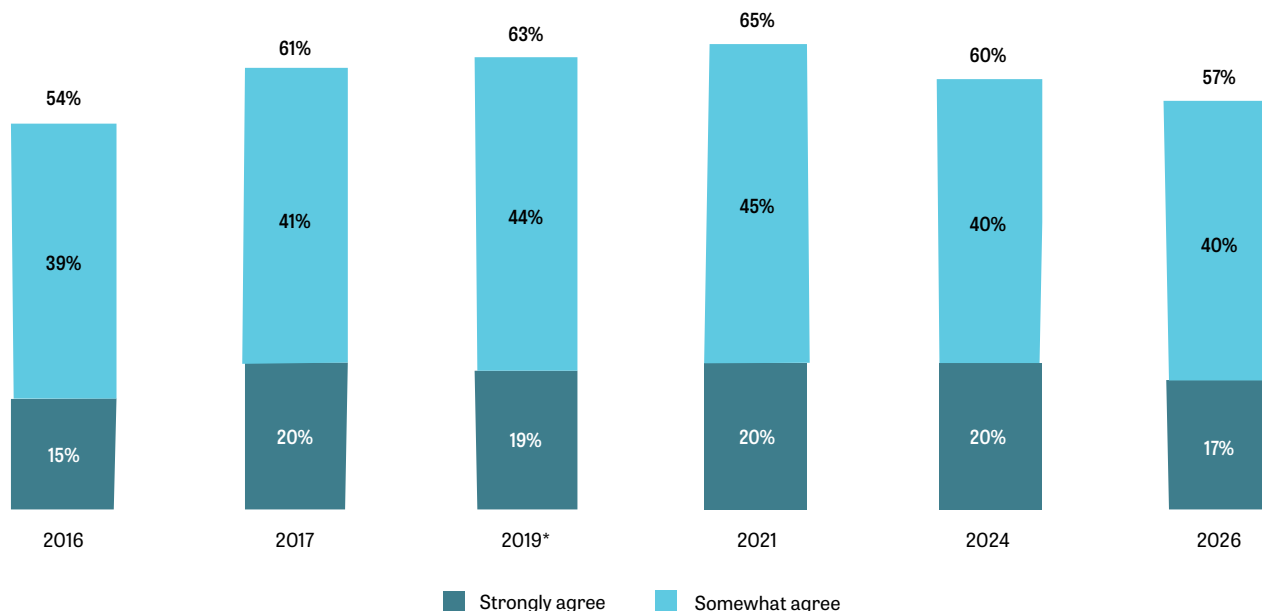
The average rating has fallen in each of the three surveys since 2021 and now stands at 4.31. For certain subgroups of students, particularly Black students, it is lower than that (their average rating is 3.62). Put another way, more Black students say it is difficult than easy to express themselves without consequence; among white students, the reverse is true.

The changing climate for speech on campus

A majority of college students think that self-censorship continues to limit educationally valuable conversations on campus. Nonetheless, the share expressing this view has fallen by 11 percentage points since 2016, to 55%.

There also has been a shift on a related question, which asks whether the climate for speech prevents people from saying what they believe. The share of students who think the climate at their school stifles some speech has changed only modestly in the past two years but, at 56%, is at its lowest level since 2016.

Agreement that students' college campus climate discourages people to speak their minds



Q7. For each of the following statements, please indicate if you agree or disagree: The climate at my school or on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive.

2026 Base: 18-24 current undergraduate students (n=1,100)

2024 Base: All respondents (n=1,678), 2021 Base: Current students age 18-24 (n=1,023), 2019 Base: All respondents (n=3,319), 2017 base: All respondents (n=3,014), 2016 base: All respondents (n=3,072)

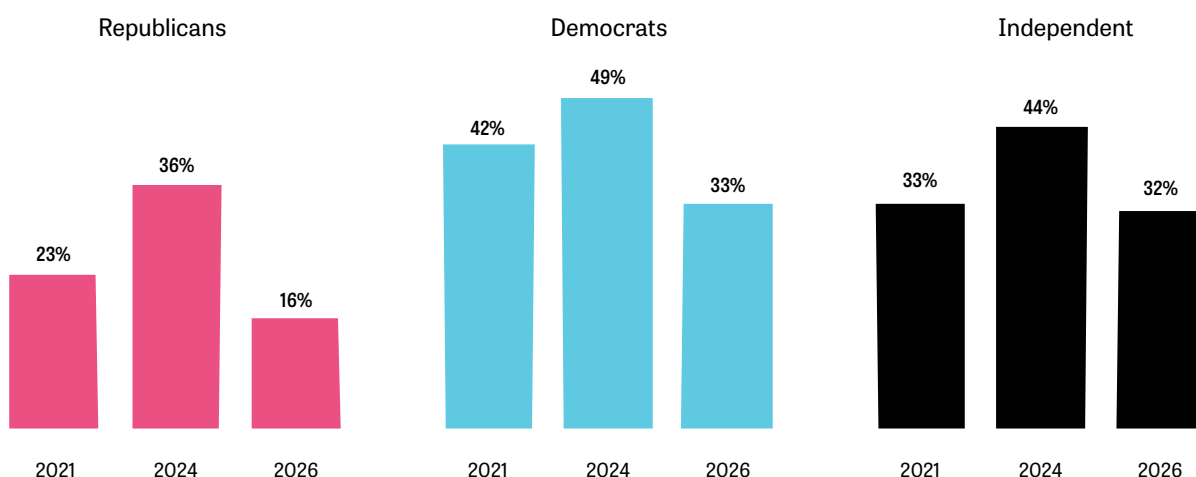
*In 2019, question for this item was "Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive."

Students also are much less likely to say that comments about their personal identity — whether or not it was directed at them — have ever made them feel uncomfortable. Fewer Republicans, Democrats and

independents report that they have felt uncomfortable because of such comments than said that just two years ago.

College students made uncomfortable by identity-related remarks

% of college students who have felt uncomfortable because of something someone said about their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation



Q26. Have you, personally, ever felt uncomfortable in a class, living area, public space or other part of campus because of something someone said in reference to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation - whether or not it was directed at you?

2026 Base: 18-24 current undergraduate students; Republican (n=235); Democrat (n=427); Independent/Other (n=423)

2024 Base: All respondents; Republicans (n=382); Democrats (n=527); Independent/Other (n=763)

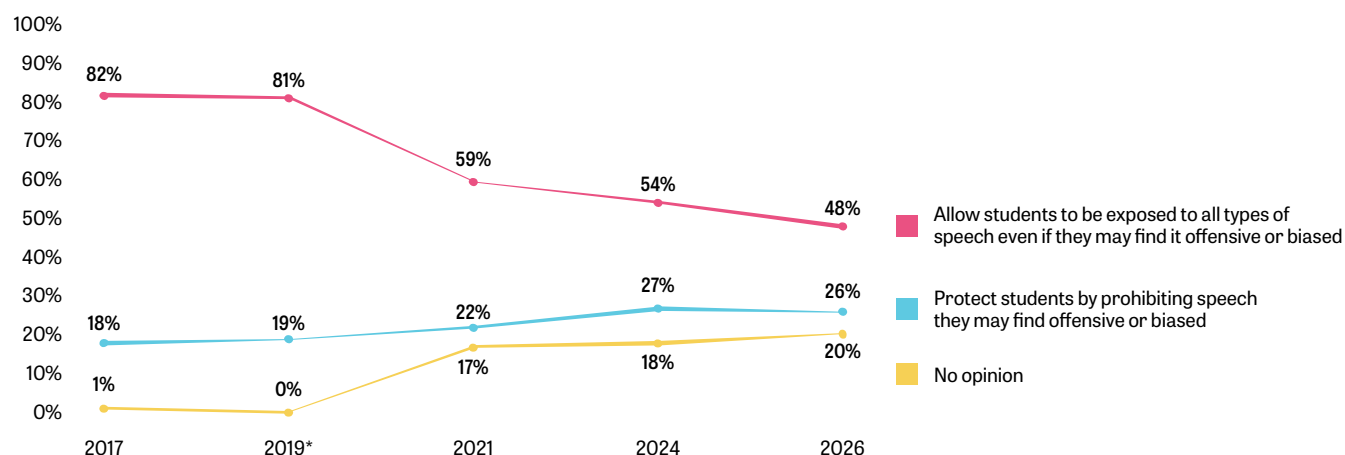
2021 Base: Current students age, 18-24; Republicans (n=225); Democrats (n=382); Independent/Other (n=409)

Views of campus speech policies

College students have become less supportive of allowing all kinds of speech on campus, even if it is viewed as offensive or biased. For the first time in a

Future of the First Amendment survey, support for colleges allowing even offensive speech has dipped below 50%. Fewer, roughly a quarter, say colleges should protect students by banning speech they find biased.

Should colleges prioritize free speech or protection from offensive speech?



Q11. If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to:

2026 Base: 18-24 current undergraduate students (n=1,100)

2024 Base: All respondents (n=1,678); 2021 Base: Current students age 18-24 (n=1,023); 2019 base: All respondents (n= 3,319); 2017 base: All respondents (n=3,014)

*2019 did not include "no opinion"

Since 2024, there has been a sharp drop in the share of Republican college students saying colleges should take a permissive approach to speech (70% to 55%). Democrat and independent college students' views have shown less change (45% to 40% and 53% to 56%, respectively). As a result, this is a rare case where partisan differences have narrowed.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the sharpest differences — among college students and non-students alike — are over government policies relating to speech. For example, while college students overall are opposed to the federal government taking away international student visas in response to certain kinds of speech, this

policy wins support from most Republicans.

Three in five Republican college students believe the government should be able to revoke the visas from international students in reaction to speech; only about a third of independents and even fewer Democrats agree. These policy divisions exist alongside broader concerns about expression on campus, though those concerns appear to be easing: 56% of college students say the climate at their school prevents some people from speaking freely for fear of offending others, down from a peak of 65% in 2021. Moreover, more than half report that self-censorship often or sometimes limits valuable educational discussions, a notable drop from 66% just two years ago.



04

**VIEWS ON
SPEECH IN THE
WORKPLACE**

VIEWS ON SPEECH IN THE WORKPLACE

The workplace has not been immune to the effects of a more polarized society, and there has been much debate over what companies should (and should not) do in terms of both policy and when to speak out. On the other hand, employees are navigating a new environment and how to best use their own speech. A majority of employed young adults believe companies have a right to speak out on social or political issues that affect their employees and that DEI policies ensure that people like them can express themselves.

When it comes to their own speech, strong majorities also report that they hold back their personal opinions with their coworkers or boss. Roughly 4 in 10 employed young adults cite wanting to keep personal perspectives private, yet around 1 in 5 do so out of concern for negative consequences. In this vein, about 3 in 10 report feeling uncomfortable in the workplace because of comments made in reference to their identity.

Views on employer speech

Among employed young adults, 72% agree that companies have a right to speak out on social or political issues that may affect their employees. In the same vein, 57% believe “DEI policies ensure people like me can express themselves.”

Notably, among working adults, Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to agree with both of these statements: 82% of Democrats agree that companies have a right to speak out on issues affecting employees, compared with 66% of Republicans, and the gap is even wider on DEI policies (80% to 36%).

About 3 in 10 employed young adults report feeling uncomfortable in the workplace because of comments made in reference to their identity.



Similarly, women are more likely than men to hold the sentiment that DEI policies ensure that people like them can express themselves (62% to 52%).

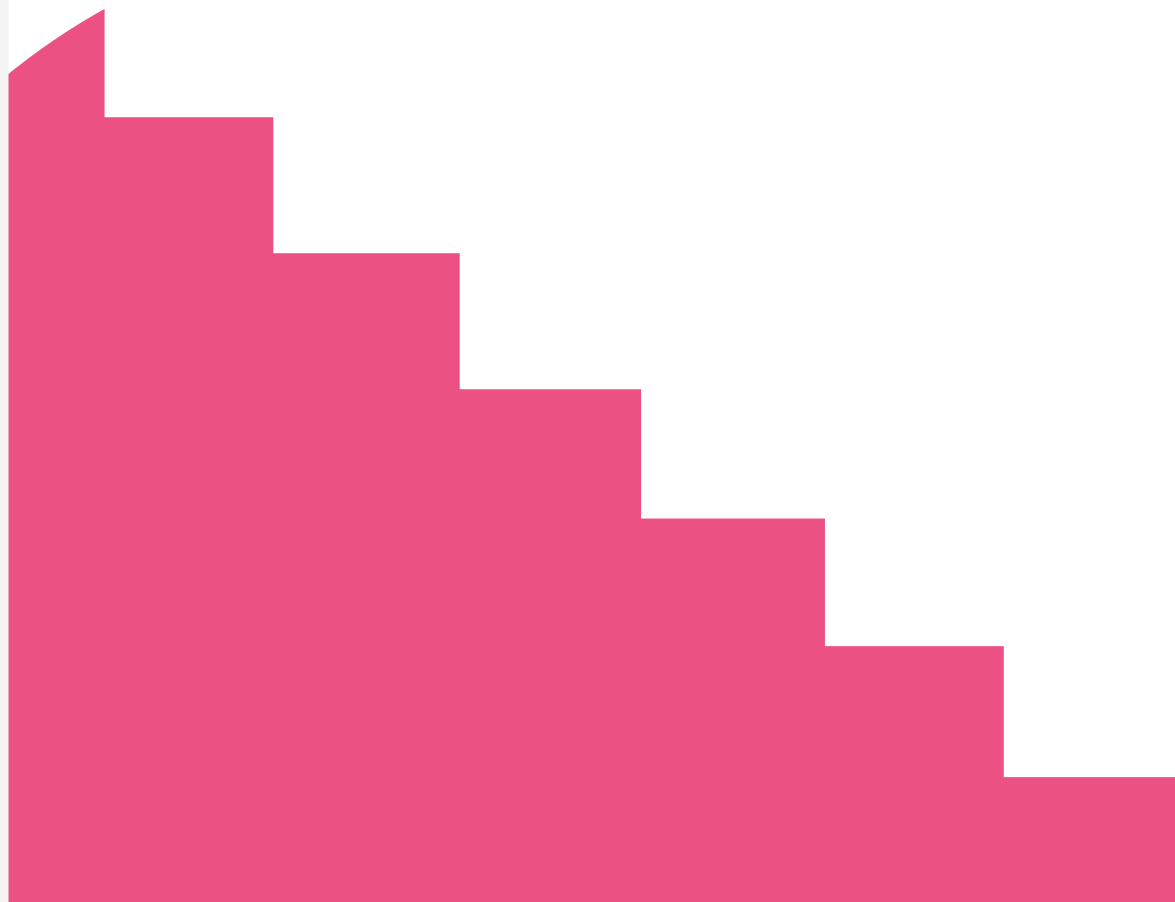
Views on personal speech

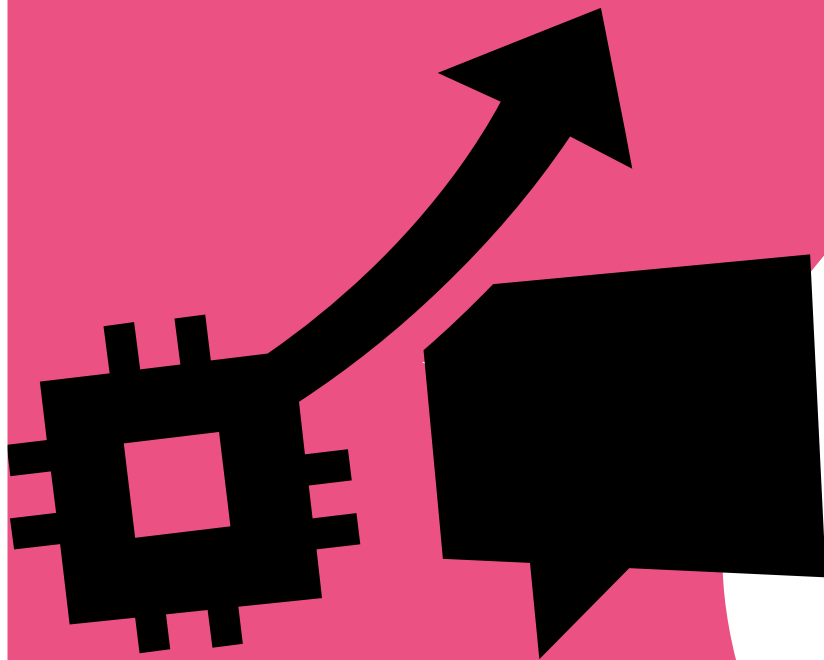
In terms of personal speech, about 7 in 10 employed young adults report holding back their personal opinions with either their coworkers (68%) or their boss (70%). Notably, there are no differences across different demographic groups.

Along these lines, at least 1 in 4 employed young adults report self-censoring on a number of sensitive topics with their coworkers or boss: domestic politics and political affiliation (30% and 28%, respectively), racial issues (27%, 26%), DEI (25% each), immigration policy (29%, 26%) and gender or LGBTQ+ issues (26%, 25%).

The most common reason for holding back personal opinions is a desire to keep personal perspectives private (40% say they do this with coworkers, 45% with their boss). Yet, a notable percentage also fear being “canceled” for expressing their perspectives (21%, 24%, respectively). Employed young adults with a household income of \$100,000-plus are significantly more likely to hold this sentiment than those in lower- or middle-income households. Moreover, employed young adults are significantly more likely than those who are not currently working to have limited sharing personal perspectives online in the past year (56% to 47%).

Some of this self-censorship has also translated to feelings of discomfort. Nearly 3 in 10 (29%) employed young adults have felt uncomfortable in the workplace because of something someone said in reference to their race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Women and Democrats are significantly more likely than men and Republicans to report feeling uncomfortable due to speech in the workplace.





05

**THE RISE OF
ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE
AND FREEDOM
OF SPEECH**

THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has opened a new front in the debate over speech and expression in the U.S. Young adults ages 18-29 are cautious in assessing the impact of this revolutionary technology and signal that AI-generated content should not enjoy the same First Amendment protections as human speech and expression.

There is broad support for imposing limits and restrictions on AI content. For example, 7 in 10 young adults reject the idea that restricting AI is tantamount to limiting people's freedom of speech. A smaller majority favor limiting harmful AI content, even at the cost of restricting some expression.

Young people are also skeptical about some of the possible upsides from AI, such as the prospect for enhanced creativity. Fewer than 2 in 10 say it is extremely or very important to allow unrestricted access to AI tools so people can generate new thoughts or ideas.

Young adults' opinions about AI come with a caveat, given its ever-increasing presence in daily life. The survey finds that less than half of young adults, but a majority of college students, have used AI in the past year for work or school. These figures are certain to increase dramatically in the years to come.

Fewer than 2 in 10 young adults say it is extremely or very important to allow unrestricted access to AI tools so people can generate new thoughts or ideas.

Priorities for AI: Privacy and limits on content

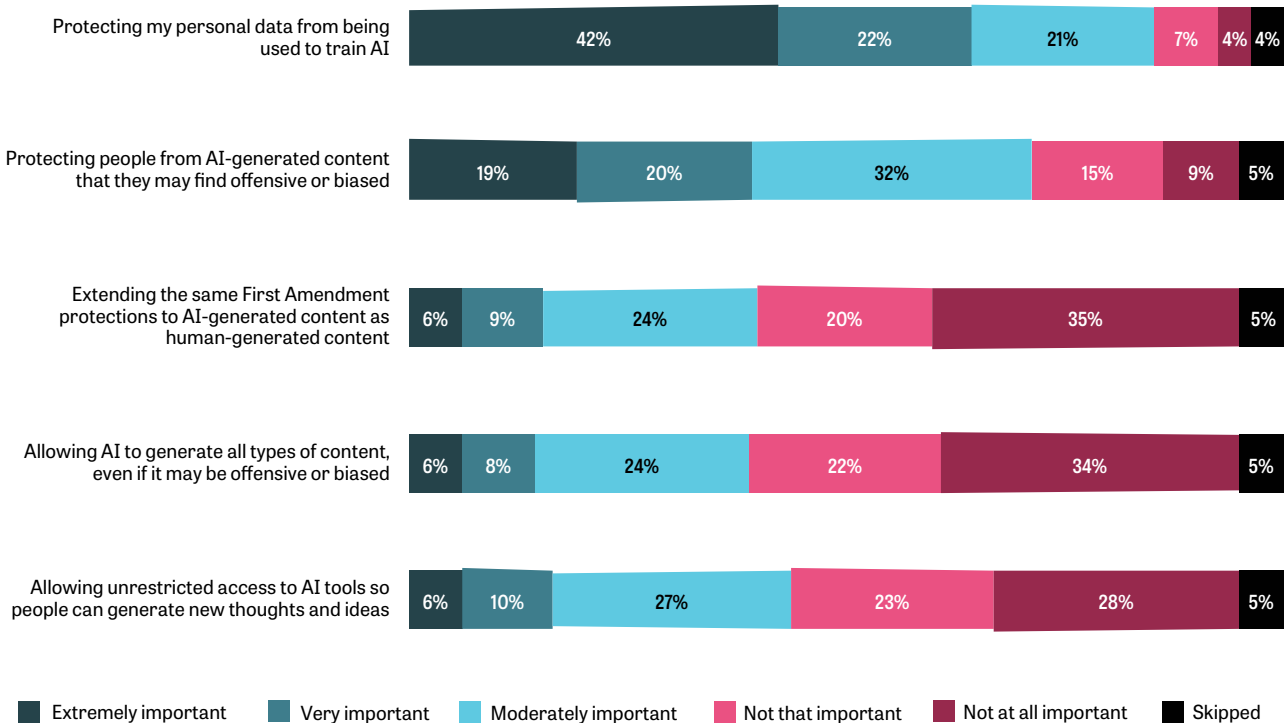
An overarching goal among young adults is ensuring that their personal data is not used to train AI models. Nearly two-thirds of young adults view this as extremely or very important, with an additional 21% saying it is moderately important. Only about 1 in 10 say this is not important.

Young people have greater reservations when it comes to other AI priorities. In general, more come down on the side of protection from AI than unfettered AI

content. Far more say it is extremely or very important to protect people from AI content that they may find offensive or biased than to allow all kinds of content, even if offensive or biased.

Only 15% rate it as extremely or very important to extend First Amendment protections to AI-generated content. A majority say this is either not too important or not at all important. There is minimal support for this idea among all partisan and demographic groups.

When thinking about the use of artificial intelligence (AI), how important do you consider each of the following to be?



Q16. When thinking about the use of artificial intelligence (AI), how important do you consider each of the following to be?
Base: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051)

Concerns about misinformation and knowing what's real in the era of AI

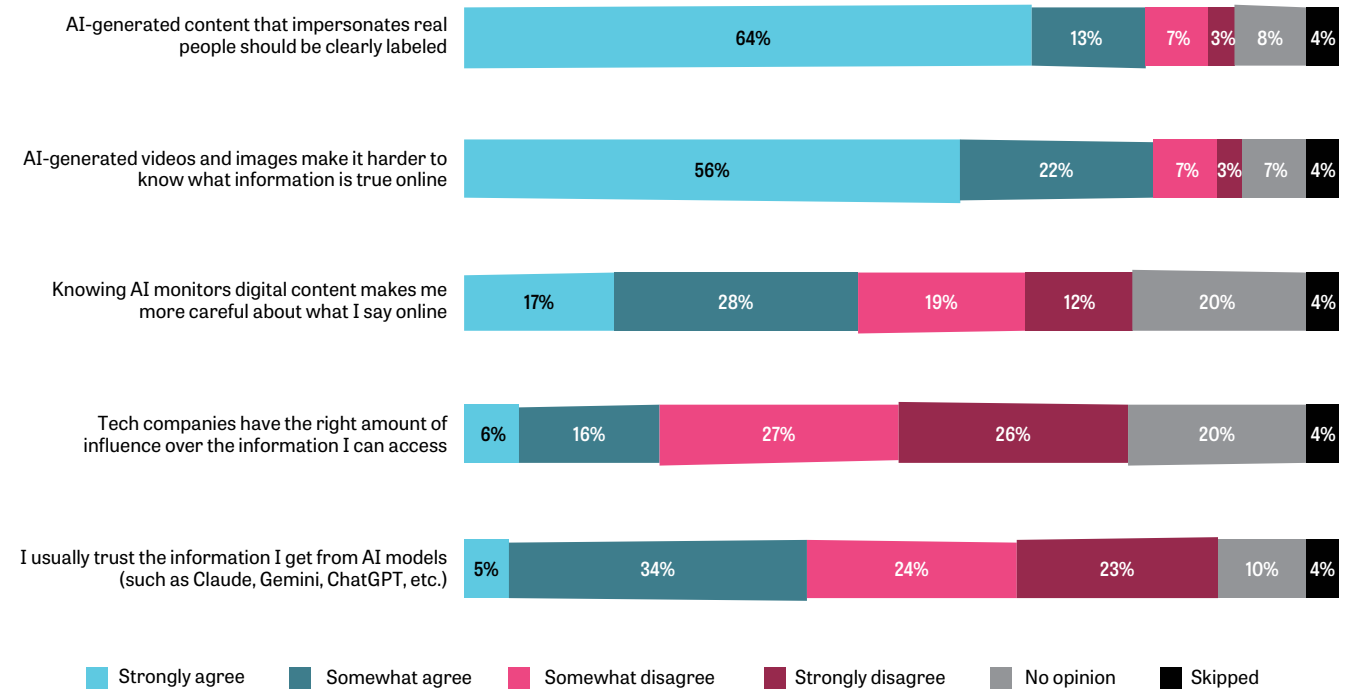
Young adults have long been concerned about the spread of misinformation. Roughly 7 in 10 say it is highly important to prevent the spread of false information, which is little changed among young adults from the Future of the First Amendment survey five years ago.

The rise of AI has exacerbated these concerns and left many young people unsure of what exactly is real or fake in the current era. A majority of young adults *strongly agree* that AI-generated videos make it harder

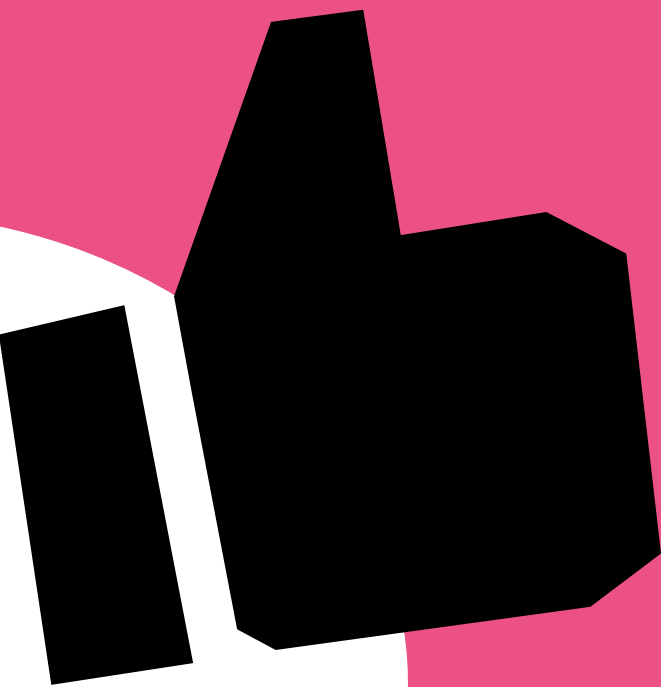
to know what is true; an additional 22% somewhat agree. There is even stronger agreement that AI content that impersonates real people should be clearly labeled.

Perhaps not surprisingly, young people have little trust in the information they get from AI models. Just 39% agree with the statement that they can usually trust the information they get from chatbots, while somewhat more (47%) disagree.

Trust and transparency perceptions of AI



Q17. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Base: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051)

A large, black, stylized thumbs-up icon is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the page. It is composed of several geometric shapes: a vertical rectangle for the thumb, a trapezoid for the hand, and a series of connected line segments for the fingers. The icon is set against a background of a pink upper half and a blue lower half, separated by a white circular area.

06

**VIEWS ON
SOCIAL MEDIA**

VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Young people have wide-ranging critiques of the environment for speech and expression on social media platforms. Many blame social media companies for stifling free expression by blocking certain views. They fault the government for pressuring these companies to suppress opinions the government doesn't agree with.

And about half of young adults say free expression is inhibited because people are afraid to share their views because they fear online attacks and shaming.

Given this, it is unsurprising that about half of young people say they have limited sharing their personal perspectives online in the past year, while nearly as many have blocked, muted or unfollowed someone on social media.

Social media companies are viewed as stifling free speech

The belief that social media stifles speech “because some companies are suppressing certain perspectives” draws wide agreement among partisan and demographic groups. Overall, nearly 6 in 10 agree with this statement while just 2 in 10 disagree.

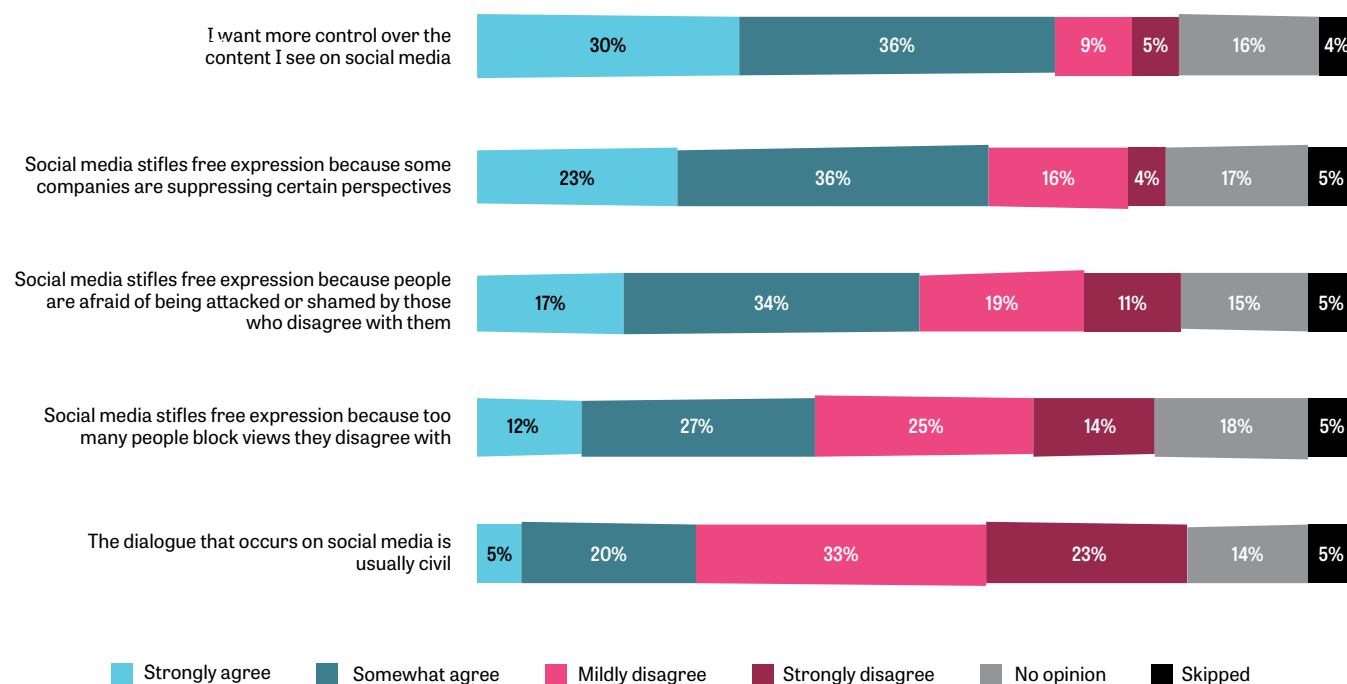
There are wider differences over the impact of the government on social media discourse. Republicans for the most part reject the contention that the government has “pressured” social media companies to suppress speech the government disagrees with. Less than half of Republicans say the government has pressured these companies, compared with 76% of Democrats and 56% of independents.

The belief that social media stifles speech “because some companies are suppressing certain perspectives” draws wide agreement among partisan and demographic groups.

On some points, there is extensive agreement among young people, regardless of their identity or political affiliation. First, there is a widespread desire to have more control over the content they see on social media. In addition, there is considerable opposition — among Republicans and Democrats alike — to the government actually telling the social media companies what content to restrict.

Finally, social media is generally viewed as antithetical to civil discourse. Just a quarter of young people ages 18-29 say the dialogue on social media is “civil,” while more than twice as many disagree. The share saying that dialogue is civil, already low at 32% five years ago, has declined further.

Attitudes toward social media and free expression



Q13. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Base: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051)

Young adults limit what they share and who they engage with online

Sizable shares of young adults — especially women — are adjusting how they interact online. Roughly half say they have limited sharing their personal views when online, while about as many say they have blocked or unfollowed someone because of their perspectives.

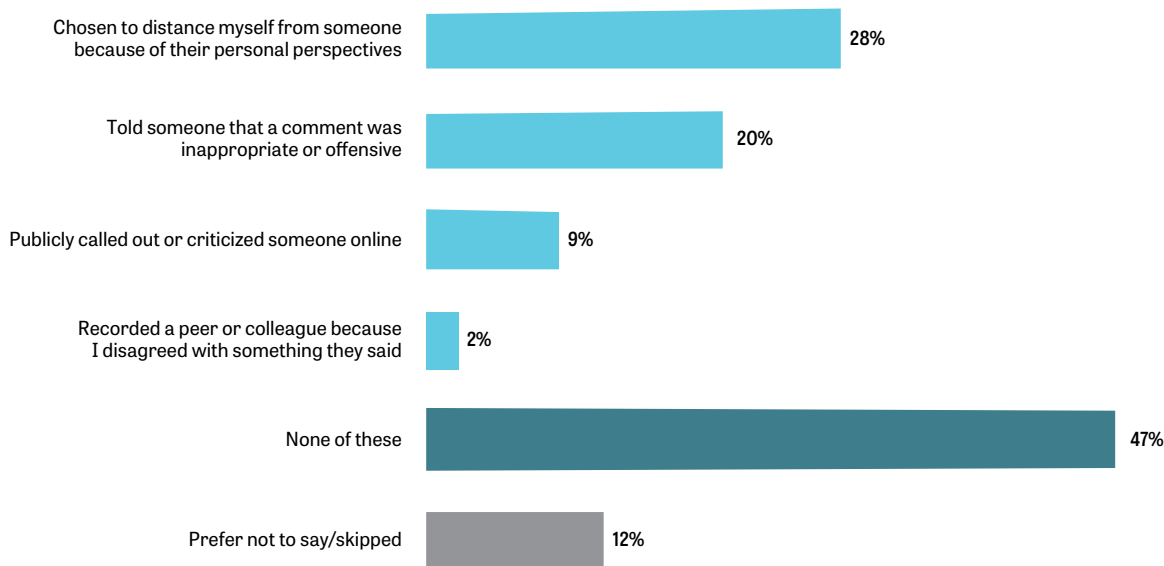
The gender differences are especially striking when it comes to blocking, muting or unfollowing another person. Nearly 6 in 10 women say they have done this in the past year, compared with 4 in 10 men.

Fewer young people have posted content anonymously than have taken steps to limit sharing their views or blocking people. But when asked about posting

anonymously, more say that it can make people more comfortable being honest than say that civil discussions are more likely when people post under their own names.

While there is evidence that many young adults are changing what they share and who they interact with online, about 4 in 10 say they have engaged with people with different perspectives in the past year. And 3 in 10 — including similar numbers of men, women and people of different races, political affiliations and household income levels — say they have engaged in discussions of controversial topics online.

Have you done any of the following regarding someone else's speech or expression in the past year?



Q24. Have you done any of the following regarding someone else's speech or expression in the past year? Select all that apply.
Base: All respondents, Young adults ages 18-29 (n=1,051)

CONCLUSION

This new study provides a detailed, comprehensive portrait of how young Americans approach complex issues relating to free speech and expression at a turbulent time in the U.S. For the first time, the study includes a robust sample of all adults ages 18-29, yet it also builds upon years of research into the attitudes and behaviors of college students in the U.S.

The current report echoes some of the themes from prior surveys of students: Young adults strongly believe in the importance of the right to free speech and expression but increasingly see that right in jeopardy. They deeply value free speech yet increasingly fear exercising it. This report reveals how a generation navigates speaking up in an era of polarization, social media scrutiny, rising levels of hateful rhetoric, and emerging AI threats.

It also examines the challenges young adults face in voicing their opinions in different venues, including the workplace. The report offers new insights into how they balance the desire to express themselves with the fear of possible consequences on social media. And it looks at the new frontier for AI-generated content, which most young adults view with trepidation. The report finds that many of the differences in

attitudes toward speech and expression by gender, race and political affiliation seen in past surveys of college students are also evident in the opinions of all young adults. Notably, with the change of political power in Washington, Republicans have become far more confident in the security of the First Amendment's right to free speech, while Democrats have become much less so.

Yet despite many differences, young adults are united in their belief that the First Amendment's rights are foundational to American democracy. Moreover, the long-term trend among college students shows steadfast, unflagging support for freedom of speech and other essential rights and freedoms.

For leaders in politics, business and education — and anyone invested in America's democratic future — understanding how young people view free speech is critical, especially as these rights face unprecedented challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This Ipsos poll was conducted March 23 – April 7, 2026, by Ipsos using the Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, on behalf of the Knight Foundation. This poll is based on a representative sample of 1,051 U.S. adults, ages 18 to 29.

A supplemental sample of 493 additional current undergraduate college students age 18-24 was collected at the same time; this resulted in a total of 1,100 college students age 18-24 including 391 from the main sample of adults ages 18 and 29. To collect additional completes among 18- to 24-year-olds, an additional sample of 18- to 24-year-old KnowledgePanel members were selected for this study. Knowledge Panelists were also asked if another member of their household was 18 to 24 years old and, where eligible, a second member of the household completed the survey.

In previous years, the samples were as follows:

- 2024: 18- to 24-year-olds who are current undergraduate college students (n=1,678)
- 2021: National survey of U.S. adults ages 18+, all trends limited to 18- to 29-year-olds (n=469); 18- to 24-year-olds who are current college students or enrolled in some post-high school education (n=1,023)
- 2019 (conducted by Gallup): Full-time undergraduate students (n=3,319)
- 2017 (conducted by Gallup): Full-time undergraduate students (n=3,014)
- 2016 (conducted by Gallup): Full-time undergraduate students (n=3,072)

This study expands upon previous research of college students and provides a representative snapshot of young adults ages 18-29

The study was conducted in both English and Spanish. The data for the total sample of adults ages 18-29 were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, education, census region, metropolitan status, household income, and language. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS).

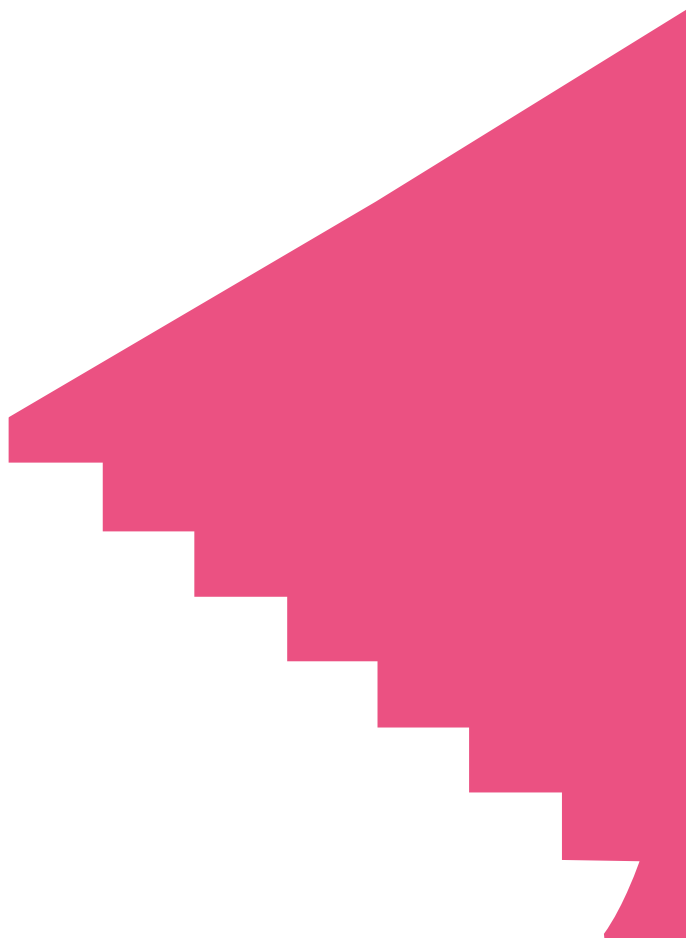
The weighting categories were as follows:

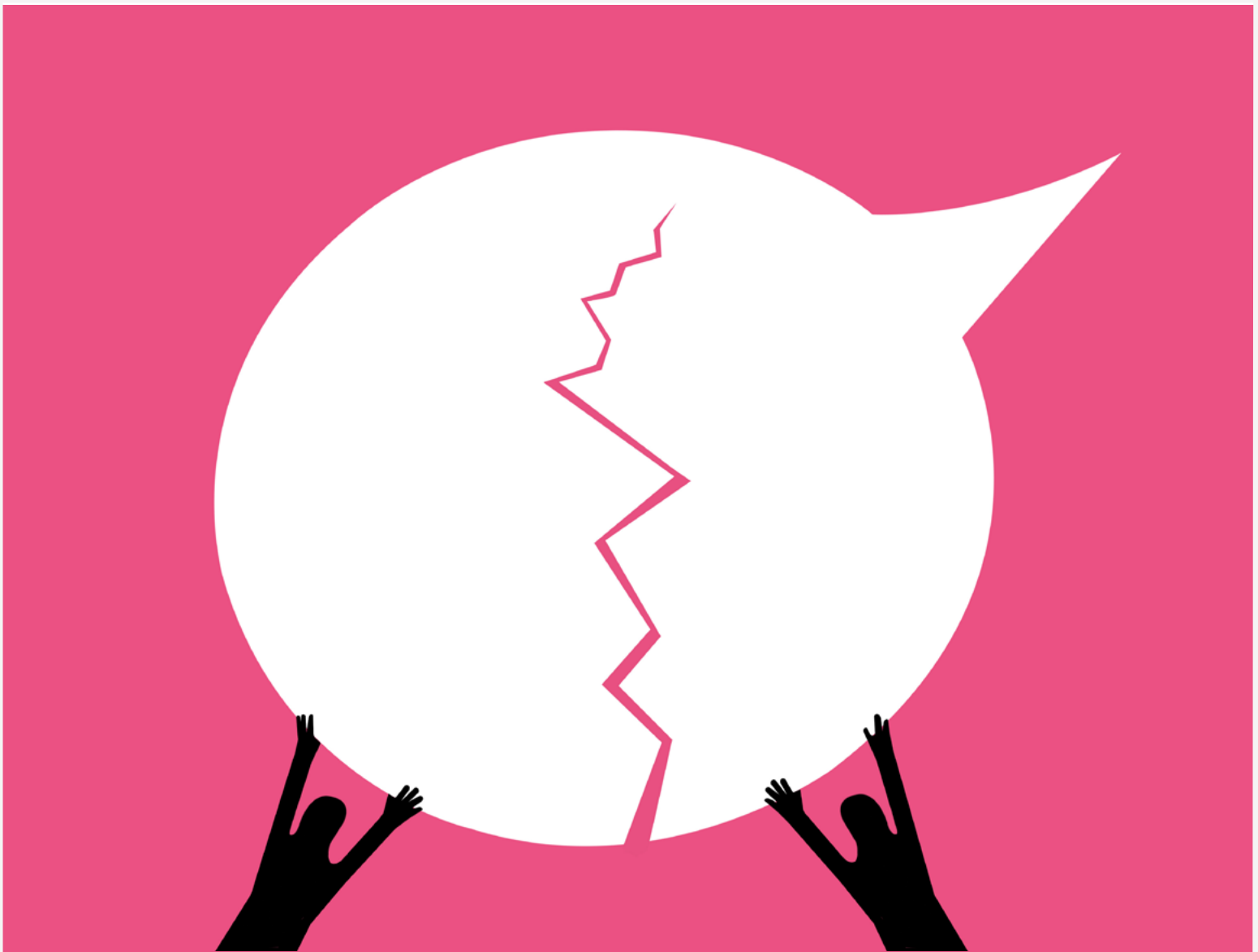
- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-21, 22-24, 25-27, 28-29)
- Race-Ethnicity (White/Non-Hispanic, Black/Non-Hispanic, Other or 2+ Races/Non-Hispanic, Hispanic)
- Education (Less than High School, High school, Some College, Bachelor or higher)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Metropolitan Status (Metro, Non-Metro)
- Household Income (under \$25K, \$25K-\$49,999, \$50K-\$74,999, \$75K-\$99,999, \$100K-\$149,999, \$150K and over)
- Language Dominance (English Dominant Hispanic, Bilingual Hispanic or Spanish Dominant Hispanic, Non-Hispanic)

The data for the sample of current undergraduate college students ages 18-24 were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, census region, metropolitan status, household income, and language. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS).

The weighting categories were as follows:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-21, 22-24)
- Race-Ethnicity (White/Non-Hispanic, Black/Non-Hispanic, Other or 2+ Races/Non-Hispanic, Hispanic)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Metropolitan Status (Metro, Non-Metro)
- Household Income (under \$25K, \$25K-\$49,999, \$50K-\$74,999, \$75K-\$99,999, \$100K-\$149,999, \$150K and over)
- Language Dominance (English Dominant Hispanic, Bilingual Hispanic or Spanish Dominant Hispanic, Non-Hispanic)





The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, for results based on the entire sample of 18–29-year-olds. The margin of error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.06 for all 18–29-year-olds. For current undergraduate college students, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, and the design effect was 1.22. In our reporting of the findings, percentage points are rounded off 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 different responses offered by each respondent.

