**Survey says we like our First Amendment rights – whatever they are**

Americans deeply value their First Amendment rights to freely worship and to freely voice their views, but we are deeply divided on how to apply and regulate those freedoms, a [newly released survey discloses](https://survey.freedomforum.org/).

Therein is the 21st century challenge: Balancing long-protected freedoms against shortcuts through the First Amendment in the name of combatting society’s ills or protecting individual beliefs.

[“The First Amendment: Where America Stands”](https://survey.freedomforum.org/) isa surveycommissioned by the nonpartisan Freedom Forum. The survey sampled a representative group of more than 3,000 Americans on their attitudes and values about the freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly and petition.

For those who see these five freedoms as essential to democracy, there are welcome results in the survey: 94% of respondents see the First Amendment as vital and 63% would keep the 45 words of the amendment as adopted in 1791.

But — no surprise in our polarized society — 23% of all those polled would make some changes. A smaller group, 15% of respondents, said our core freedoms go too far.

**TESTING PROTECTIONS OF AND LIMITS ON OUR FREEDOMS**

The results reflect a time when Americans are much more active in testing both the protections of and limits on our freedoms. We’re engaged in court battles over how broadly religious liberty protects individual choices when those choices run counter to social movements. More of us have taken to the streets in recent years than in decades, but that resurgence has produced a conservative backlash in more than 40 state legislatures that threatens to chill the democratic principles of freely speaking truth to power that Americans prize.

For example, 36% percent of us would add new limits on free speech to battle “hate speech” — raising the deep challenge that what some see as hateful speech may be seen by others as simply the expression of a deeply held view or belief.

Some results may forecast a lessening of support for the five freedoms: 45% of people say they have not expressed an opinion for fear of negative reaction, with younger Americans more likely to say they have self-censored. The survey found 49% never have shared a political opinion on social media. Just three percent say the right of petition — to publicly seek change in government policies or laws — is the First Amendment freedom they value most; 69% of us never have participated in a rally, protest or march.

In an echo of [Freedom Forum surveys since 1997](https://www.freedomforuminstitute.org/first-amendment-center/state-of-the-first-amendment/), the new “Where America Stands” found many of us lack fundamental understanding of the First Amendment. About one in five (18%) couldn’t name one freedom in the amendment. Of those who could name at least one: 78% could identify free speech, followed by 49% naming religion, 39% assembly, 34% free press and 14% the right of petition. Just nine percent correctly identified all five.

There were some freedoms that respondents mistakenly thought are in the First Amendment: 18% percent said it protects the right to “bear arms,” which is the Second Amendment. Others said the “right to vote” (17%). Voting is considered the ultimate expression of the right of petition, but it’s not explicitly mentioned in the amendment. Some named the right to due process (15%), which is established by the Fifth and 14th Amendments.

**MISINFORMATION, PRESS AND SOCIAL MEDIA VALUES VERSUS PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS**

Some findings are more in the vein of wishful thinking than practical suggestions — which doesn’t mean we should ignore the sentiments. The survey found that 72% would outlaw political ads that “misrepresent the truth.” In an era of constant battles with misinformation, particularly online, that’s certainly a worthy goal. But the sentiment raises a multitude of conflicting questions: What is “truth?” How can we apply such laws without raising the specter of partisan censorship?

Then there is public opinion regarding a free press. A majority — 58% — see the news media as an essential watchdog on government, one of the core reasons the nation’s founders provided such strong protection for independent journalism — even the highly partisan newspapers and journals of their time.

But only 14% of respondents expressed strong trust in the news media of today, with public broadcasting rated highest. The survey also confirmed widespread polling in recent years that shows a majority of us live in so-called “news bubbles” — just 38% of respondents look to news outlets with different perspectives than their own.

More than two-thirds of those responding to the survey (69%) said social media companies should be responsible for what’s posted on their sites. But that desire raises the likelihood that in holding Twitter, Facebook and others accountable we will prompt much tighter restrictions by those companies on what we are able to post — with some predicting the death of social media as we know it — and the installation of cumbersome government regulations and processes.

More than any other, that social media quandary typifies the survey findings. New technologies and deep political and social divides challenge our traditional shared notions of freedoms. We have heavy debate and momentous decisions ahead.

But the survey shows far too many of us lack basic knowledge about the First Amendment to debate and decide in an informed way.

When it comes to our core freedoms, “ignorance is not bliss,” particularly when combined with fear and lack of engagement that can drive hasty actions and prompt political opportunists.

Ignorance about our rights is dangerous for democracy.

*Find the full survey results at* [*WhereAmericaStands.org*](https://survey.freedomforum.org/)*.*

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