

Freedom of Speech, Ideological Diversity, and Institutional Trust

DEI, Offensive and Ideological Speech,
Social Norms, and Economics

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Executive Summary

We examine data on Millennials and Gen Zs related to two specific trends that impact free speech. The first trend we discuss is a decline in institutional trust. One outcome of this trend is that fewer Americans think the government is doing a good job protecting basic rights, including free speech. The second trend is a national debate about the diversity, equity, and inclusion movement (DEI). One outcome of this trend is more divisiveness about non-inclusive speech, speech someone could consider offensive, or speech that is ideologically opposed to one's own views. Compared to older generations, Millennials and Gen Zs are more tolerant toward race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. However, research on the I-Gen or Gen Z generation suggests this cohort, currently aged about 12 to 26, is less supportive of ideological diversity and therefore less tolerant of free speech.¹

Our data suggest Gen Zs and Millennials do not trust the government or the media or think either institution is competent to curb offensive speech that is rude impolite or ideological. Three in five support offensive speech in social media; however, there is a sharp divide between Liberals and Conservatives with about 52% of the former and 79% of the latter supporting offensive speech. Less than half of both cohorts think the media should be required by law to present balanced views. This is a significant decline from previous generations. In the 1970s about three in five Americans thought balanced media coverage related to political views was an important social norm and perhaps should be required.

Many DEI conversations are related to how to increase equitable outcomes. Millennials are entering middle age and recent data show that after a rough start, they are becoming economically secure. Their views about free speech and how it relates to DEI are important. On some metrics, Millennials look like adults surveyed in the late 1970s. Most (72%) agree with blunt statements such as “No matter how fairly we treat everyone, some people will turn out better than others.” At least three in five agree people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard and that salary should be tied to ability. Differences by race and ethnicity are slight while differences by ideology are extreme. Gen Zs are slightly lower on these statistics and show the same ideological divisions.

Overall, Millennials and Gen Zs think free speech is a right and there should be wide latitude for free speech. Ideological polarization will continue to shape the conflict between DEI and free speech rights.

¹ Twenge, Jean M. (2018) *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. Twenge, Jean M. (2014) *Generation Me - Revised and Updated: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before*.

Conceptual Support for Free Speech

Americans value free speech and the right of citizens to speak out against ideas they don't agree with. General questions about the importance of free speech elicit high levels of agreement. These levels have not changed dramatically for almost a century. In a 1938 survey, for example, 96% of Americans chose yes when asked: "Do you believe in freedom of speech?"² In a 2022 survey, 87% of all Americans said free speech is an extremely or very important right of all Americans.³ In Figure 1, few Millennials and Gen Zs think it's possible to decide what speech is appropriate.

At the same time, the more extreme the speech the less support it usually receives. In 1938, for example, 40% of Americans said it was okay for radicals to hold meetings and express their views in the community while 36% said communists could and 35% said fascists could."⁴ Among younger Americans, the number who agree with allowing extreme groups to express their views is roughly like that of Americans in 1938. With extreme political speech, where we would expect lower agreement, Millennials and Gen Zs largely reflect ideas that are almost a century old (Figure 2).

| Figure 1. I would not trust any person to decide what opinions can be expressed and what must be silenced. | | | |
|--|-------|---------|----------|
| | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
| Older Gen Zs (18-25) | 61% | 28% | 11% |
| Younger Millennials (26-32) | 67% | 24% | 9% |
| Older Millennials (33-41) | 68% | 21% | 11% |

| Figure 2. Fascists, neo-Nazis, and other extreme groups should be allowed to hold public meetings and marches. | | | |
|--|-------|---------|----------|
| | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
| Older Gen Zs (18-25) | 29% | 23% | 48% |
| Younger Millennials (26-32) | 33% | 25% | 42% |
| Older Millennials (33-41) | 32% | 25% | 44% |

² McCloskey, Herbert and John Zaller (1984). *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

³ Free Expression in America Post-2020 (2021). A Knight Foundation-Ipsos study from the Knight Free Expression Research Series.

⁴ Gallup Organization (1938). Gallup Poll # 1938-0125: Government Spending/Roosevelt Administration, Question 6 [USGALLUP.38-125.QA02B]. Gallup Organization. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

Declining Intuitional Trust

Polls show declining trust in the government, news media organizations, and social media companies. The Knight Foundation’s 2022 survey of free speech shows 38% of Americans trust the government, 36% the news media, and 17% the social media companies. The Edelman 2022 Trust Barometer shows almost half of Americans think government and media are divisive forces in society.⁵

Millennials and Gen Zs have low expectations of elected representatives and think they should pay more attention to the views of citizens. As shown in Figure 3, most think elected representatives usually vote based on their own ideas and goals. Millennials are significantly more likely to think this than Gen Zs.

| Figure 3. Elected representatives usually vote based on their own ideas and goals. | | | |
|--|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
| Older Gen Zs (18-25) | 62% | 26% | 13% |
| Younger Millennials (26-32) | 66% | 21% | 13% |
| Older Millennials (33-41) | 67% | 19% | 14% |

As shown in Figure 4, while they are divided on how much they think the government should pay attention to the opinions of average citizens, they are significantly less likely than previous generations of adults to think the views of experts should be prioritized. In a 1978-79 survey asking this item, 53% of adults agreed the government should pay the most attention to the opinions of experts.⁶

| Figure 4. When making new laws, the government should pay the most attention to the opinions of experts, not the average citizen. | | | |
|---|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
| Older Gen Zs (18-25) | 36% | 27% | 36% |
| Younger Millennial (26-32) | 35% | 27% | 38% |
| Older Millennial (33-41) | 33% | 27% | 40% |

Declining trust and a growing belief that society is polarized make it difficult to agree on social norms about free speech. As outlined in Figure 5, data from Associated Press surveys in 2015 and 2021 shows less than half of Americans think the government is doing a good job protecting

⁵ Edelman 2022 Trust Barometer. See <https://www.edelman.com/trust/trust-barometer>

⁶ McCloskey, Herbert and John Zaller (1984). *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

free speech and freedom of the press. The 2021 data show a sharp decline from data collected in 2015.⁷

| Figure 5. The following are some examples of rights and freedoms listed in the Bill of Rights or that are protected under various American laws and court rulings. Is the US government doing a...job of protecting that particular right or freedom? (Associated Press 2015 and 2021). | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| | somewhat or very good | neither good nor bad | somewhat or very poor |
| Freedom of the speech | | | |
| ▪ 2015 | 59% | 17% | 23% |
| ▪ 2021 | 45% | 23% | 32% |
| Freedom of the press | | | |
| ▪ 2015 | 58% | 17% | 23% |
| ▪ 2021 | 44% | 29% | 27% |

Polarization About Offensive Speech Related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Knight Foundation survey previously described also shows 68% of Americans recognize that free speech rights will conflict with “diversity and inclusion” efforts. Most think speech promoting violence should be prohibited. About three in five also think racist and bigoted speech should be prohibited. Most think that speech that is rude and impolite and expresses a political view someone else might find offensive should be permitted. These trends are encapsulated in Figure 5.

⁷ Associated Press (2015). Associated Press Poll: December 2015, Question 8 [USAP.123015N.R07F]. AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Associated Press (2021). Associated Press-NORC Survey, Question 10 [31118580.00078]. AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

| Figure 5. The percentage of Americans who believe certain organizations should prohibit certain types of speech. (Knight Foundation) | | | | | |
|--|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| | Private Employers | Public High Schools | Public Universities and Colleges | Social Media Companies | The Government |
| 1. Threats | | | | | |
| A threat against the health and safety of someone else | 90% | 88% | 87% | 85% | 83% |
| Statements that may contribute to creating a dangerous situation | 83% | 81% | 77% | 76% | 70% |
| 2. Racist or Bigoted Speech | | | | | |
| A racial insult or slur | 85% | 83% | 79% | 75% | 65% |
| A racist or bigoted idea | 80% | 76% | 70% | 69% | 60% |
| 3. Offensive Speech | | | | | |
| Something rude or impolite to someone else | 51% | 45% | 39% | 36% | 31% |
| Political views that are offensive to some | 45% | 35% | 29% | 29% | 26% |

The Knight Foundation documented racial and partisan divides in ideas about the government’s role in prohibiting free speech. In their work, 26% of all Americans support the idea that “the government should prevent a person from sharing political views that are offensive to some.” However, 53% of Blacks support this statement compared to 15% of Whites, and 36% of Democrats support it compared to 16% of Republicans.

Our data address this gray area of offensive speech. Because Millennials and Gen Zs have been described as less empathetic to ideological diversity and more likely to think that offensive ideas are personally threatening, are they supportive of “offensive speech,” whether rude, impolite, or political in nature? Figure 6 shows data we collected on offensive speech. About three in five Millennials and Gen Zs think “I should be able to say what I like on social media, even if others find it offensive, as long as I do not threaten anyone with physical harm.” Among those who agree, the difference between Gen Zs and Millennials is slightly significant. By race and ethnicity, Blacks and Whites agreed the most and Asians the least. The largest difference is in self-reported ideology. Most Liberals agree, but Conservatives are 27 percentage points more likely than liberals to agree and 21 percentage points more likely to disagree. Moderates and liberals are also less opinionated.

| Figure 6. I should be able to say what I like on social media, even if others find it offensive, as long as I do not threaten anyone with physical harm. | | | |
|--|-------|---------|----------|
| Age Group | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
| Older Gen Zs (18-25) | 58% | 23% | 20% |
| Younger Millennials (26-32) | 64% | 21% | 14% |
| Older Millennials (33-41) | 63% | 18% | 19% |
| Race/ Ethnicity | | | |
| White | 63% | 18% | 18% |
| Black | 67% | 21% | 13% |
| Hispanic | 59% | 26% | 16% |
| Asian | 46% | 27% | 27% |
| Two or more races | 53% | 25% | 23% |
| Self-reported Ideology | | | |
| Very liberal / Liberal | 52% | 19% | 29% |
| Moderate | 65% | 22% | 14% |
| Conservative / Very conservative | 79% | 12% | 8% |

In this outcome, Millennials are closer to the views of all adults in surveys from 2012 and 2008. In a 2012 Associated Press survey, 71% agreed with the statement “People should have the right to say what they believe even if they take positions that seem deeply offensive to most people.”⁸ A 2008 survey by the same organization found 67% of adults agreed with the same statement. Gen Zs are less supportive of generally offensive speech.⁹

Younger Americans are less likely than older generations to think media needs to be politically balanced. On this topic, there is more consistency in attitude by race, ethnicity, and ideology. Only a slight majority of Blacks think media should be balanced. This is about a 10-point difference from attitudes in late 1970s. In a 1978-79 survey about 59% of the general public agreed with the statement “A radio or television station that always speaks for one political party and against others should be required by law to present a more balanced view.”¹⁰ In another survey executed about the same time, 23% agreed, 67% disagreed and 10% were not sure about the statement, “A newspaper has a right to support only Democratic party or Republican party candidates on its editorial page even if it doesn't offer space to those with opposing views”.

⁸ **Associated Press** (2012). Associated Press Poll: August 2012, Question 65 [USAP.091512G.R06]. Gfk Roper Public Affairs & Corporate Communications. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

⁹ **Associated Press/National Constitution Center** (2008). Associated Press/National Constitution Center Poll: August 2008, Question 19 [USAP.091508.R13]. Abt SRBI. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

¹⁰ McCloskey, Herbert and John Zaller (1984). *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

When phrased like this, however, “A newspaper has a right to support only Democratic party or Republican party candidates on its editorial page as long as it offers space to those with opposing views,” 64% agreed, 27% disagreed, and 9% were not sure.¹¹

Figure 7. A radio or television station that always speaks for one political party and against others should be required by law to present a more balanced view.

| Age Group | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
|-------------------------------|-------|---------|----------|
| Older Gen Zs (18-25) | 44% | 29% | 27% |
| Younger Millennials (26-32) | 46% | 29% | 25% |
| Older Millennials (33-41) | 45% | 26% | 29% |
| Race / Ethnicity | | | |
| White | 43% | 26% | 31% |
| Black | 51% | 32% | 17% |
| Hispanic | 45% | 30% | 25% |
| Asian | 42% | 34% | 24% |
| 2 or more races | 42% | 33% | 25% |
| Self-reported Ideology | | | |
| Very liberal | 46% | 24% | 31% |
| Liberal | 44% | 26% | 30% |
| Moderate | 47% | 29% | 23% |
| Conservative | 46% | 20% | 34% |
| Very conservative | 48% | 19% | 33% |

Free Speech, Social Norms, and Economics

Voting, a free press, and the ability to liberally air one’s views are important elements of a free society. Most members of these generations do not think offensive speech, whether rude impolite, or ideological should be prohibited. That said, social norms also dictate what’s appropriate in any given context. This is one driver behind the data in Figure 5 showing about half of Americans support private employers regulating offensive speech and only about a quarter support the government regulating offensive speech. It is easier to construct social norms in a business than in a country of 332 million citizens. Private employers have more leeway to mandate standards. Democracies must decide them through voting and the development and

¹¹ **Public Agenda** Foundation (1979). Public Agenda Foundation Poll: December 1979, Question 49 [USPAF.80SP.R049]. Public Agenda Foundation. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

diffusion of shared ideals. Currently, most Millennials and Gen Zs don't trust the government, and they don't think it's competent to curb offensive speech. They dismiss media as unreliable.

A key thesis regarding Millennials and Gen Zs is that their social norms are different from those of older generations, and those views are changing ideas about free speech. As described by generations researcher Jean M. Twenge, both cohorts demonstrate heightened individualism and more tolerant attitudes toward race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. These cohorts are demographically diverse. America looks even more diverse since 2000 when it's been possible to claim two or more races on most national survey forms.

As young adults, Millennials appeared more dismissive of tradition and social rules. Besides reinforcing distrust in intuitions and a declining ethos of community, this made them less interested in civic engagement. They possessed a self-esteem-driven individualism that emphasized reliance on feelings at the expense of facts and reduced empathy for others. Gen Zs exhibit an "each to their own" philosophy of individualism, meaning they are less likely to be interested in shared goals or act through in-person and collaborative efforts to achieve them. They have grown up slowly and coveted the physical and emotional safety of childhood.

In the past, Americans have become more economically conservative as they age, gain work experience, have families, and accrue financial assets. Millennials are entering middle age. Our data and that of others show they are voting more and becoming financially stable. Generally, Millennials support diversity and inclusion. However, most Millennials also support ideas about "equity" which may be controversial to strong Liberals. Here are a few examples:

1. *No matter how fairly we treat everyone, some people will turn out better than others.* Overall, 72% of Millennials agree. Blacks, Whites, and Moderates are at this average, and Hispanics agree more. The key difference is that 69% of Liberals agree compared to 77% of Conservatives. In the late 1970s, about 70% of the public agreed with the same statement.
2. *Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard.* Overall, 60% of Millennials agree. Again, Blacks, Whites, and Moderates are close to this average. Hispanics are above the average. The key difference is by ideology: 44% of Liberals agree compared to 77% of Conservatives. In the late 1970s, about 70% of the public agreed with the statement "Getting ahead in the world is mostly a matter of ability and hard work."

These underlying ideological differences, along with the distrust that media and the government are reliable arbiters of speech, will continue to shape the conflict between DEI and free speech rights.

Survey Methodology

YouGov interviewed 2,135 18-41-year-old respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 2,000 respondents equally divided into 3 age groups (18:25, 26:32, 33:41) to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 and 2020 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (3-categories), race (4-categories), and education (4-categories), to produce the final weight.