

Editorial, Nov. 17, 2017: Divisions widen in battle over free speech rights

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Free speech remains almost as divisive as our politics.

A new survey confirms that for many Americans, the right to freedom of expression is either under assault or questioned.

According to the Cato 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey, a poll of 2,300 American adults conducted by the Cato Institute and YouGov, 71 percent of respondents “believe that political correctness has silenced important discussions our society needs to have,” with 58 percent of Americans believing the current political environment prevents them from expressing their own beliefs.

The survey also shows that even though most Americans recognize how political correctness has thrown a blanket of suppression on free speech, they also believe in restricting speech they don’t agree with.

For example: On the right, 65 percent of Republicans according to the survey believe NFL players should be fired for refusing to stand for the national anthem, 53 percent support stripping citizenship from protestors who burn the American flag and 47 percent support bans on building mosques.

On the left, 58 percent of Democrats said employers should punish employees who post offensive content on Facebook and 51 percent would support a law requiring people to use a transgender person’s preferred pronouns.

Among self-identified “strong liberals,” a majority believe it is morally justified to punch Nazis. The idea of using force, or the threat of violence, to stop people’s speech or expressions that some person or group doesn’t agree with is a disturbingly authoritarian impulse that has infected many across the political spectrum.

In the past few years, colleges have been showcases of conflicting attitudes toward free speech. Speakers have been shut down, met with violence or disrupted by protestors who don’t want

certain ideas expressed. Students, often supported or inspired by faculty, have demanded they be kept safe from “microaggressions.”

A retired UC Santa Cruz professor wrote this week in the conservative editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal that a primary reason free speech is endangered in higher education is because American campuses over the past decades have essentially banished centrist or right-leaning voices.

John M. Ellis, a professor emeritus of German literature at UCSC and chairman of the California Association of Scholars, noted that studies show that left-of-center faculty outnumber center-right faculty by a 10-1 margin, with the number rising.

“Even these figures understate the matter. The overall campus figures include professional schools and science, technology, business and mathematics departments. In most humanities and social-science departments — especially those central to a liberal education, such as history, English and political science — the share of left-of-center faculty already approaches 100 percent,” wrote Ellis.

Ellis said the lack of balance leads to an “incoherent and irrational” majority that creates campus radicals who “have lost the ability to engage with arguments and resort instead to the lazy alternative of name-calling: Opponents are all ‘fascists,’ ‘racists’ or ‘white supremacists.’”

The lack of support for free speech in higher education apparently goes higher. An investigation ordered by the University of California regents found that top advisers to UC President Janet Napolitano improperly interfered in a state audit to tone down critical comments from campus administrators about the president’s office. UCSC was one such campus told not to “air dirty laundry” to the state auditor. The advisers resigned this week.

Americans seem to have noticed the problem. Two-thirds of those surveyed by Cato and YouGov agreed that colleges “aren’t doing enough to teach the value of free speech,” and a similar proportion expressed support for the view that colleges should “expose students to all types of viewpoints, even if they are offensive or biased against certain groups.”

The solution? Ellis said public universities are subject to governing boards and the political process and that a campus radical, anti-free speech monopoly should endanger accreditation, along with state and federal funding.