

# The Washington Post

## **The Daily 202: The corrosion of support for First Amendment principles started before Trump. He's supercharged it.**

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**The Big Idea: Donald Trump celebrated Sunday that his campaign to delegitimize the free press is working.**

The president touted a Politico-Morning Consult poll published last week that found **46 percent of registered voters believe major news organizations fabricate stories about him**. Just 37 percent of Americans think the mainstream media does *not* invent stories, while the rest are undecided. More than 3 in 4 Republicans believe reporters make up stories about Trump. “It is finally sinking through,” the president tweeted.

**The first rule of propaganda is that if you repeat something enough times people will start to believe it, no matter how false.** Trump uses the bully pulpit of the presidency to dismiss any journalism he doesn't like as “fake news.” This daily drumbeat has clearly taken a toll on the Fourth Estate.

Just this month, the president called on the Senate Intelligence Committee to investigate U.S. news outlets, proposed reinstating the so-called “Fairness Doctrine” and declared that broadcast networks should have their licenses “challenged and, if appropriate, revoked” after NBC published a story that embarrassed him. “It's frankly disgusting the way the press is able to write whatever they want to write, and people should look into it,” he said in the Oval Office.

**The same Politico-Morning Consult poll that Trump tweeted about yesterday found that 28 percent of Americans think the federal government should have the power to revoke the broadcast licenses of major news organizations if it says they are fabricating news stories about the president or the administration.** Only 51 percent think the government should *not* be able to do that.

A plurality of Republicans, 46 percent, thinks the government should have the power to revoke licenses if it says stories are false. As a thought exercise, imagine how much these same people

would have freaked out if Barack Obama had called for revoking Fox News's license to broadcast.

**But it's not just Trump supporters who have warped views of what makes America great. Four other recent polls might also tempt you to pour Baileys into your cereal this morning: -- An annual survey published last month by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center found that 37 percent of Americans cannot name even one of the five rights guaranteed under the First Amendment. About half of those surveyed got freedom of speech but couldn't get any of the others.**

- **Only 26 percent of respondents could name the three branches of government, down from 38 percent in 2011.**
- **Even more worrisome, 39 percent of Americans support allowing Congress to stop the news media from reporting on any issue of national security without government approval.** There was less opposition to prior restraint (49 percent) this year than in 2016 (55 percent).

**-- A national survey conducted by the Newseum Institute in May found that 23 percent think the First Amendment "goes too far," and 74 percent do not think "fake news" should be protected by the First Amendment.**

- **On free speech, 43 percent of respondents felt that colleges should have the right to ban controversial campus speakers.**
- **Only 59 percent believe that religious freedom should apply to *all* religious groups.** Among those between the ages of 18 to 29, just 49 percent support equal protection for all religious faiths, compared to over 60 percent for every other age group.

**-- Brookings senior fellow John Villasenor conducted an online survey of 1,500 undergraduate students at U.S. four-year colleges and universities during the last two weeks of August (immediately after the violent protests in Charlottesville). Only 39 percent of respondents said that the First Amendment protects "hate speech," while 44 percent said it does not.**

- **Bizarrely, 62 percent of college students had the mistaken belief that, under the First Amendment, an on-campus organization hosting an "offensive" speaker is legally required to ensure that there is also a speaker who presents an opposing viewpoint.**
- **Most disconcerting, the Brookings survey found that 19 percent said it is acceptable for a student group to use violence to prevent a guest speaker it opposes from appearing on campus.**
- **In this same vein, a Pew Research Center study from 2015 found that 40 percent of millennials are okay with government preventing people from making unspecified statements that are "offensive to minority groups."**

**-- A poll conducted by YouGov for the libertarian Cato Institute, released two weeks ago, found that 40 percent of Americans think government should prevent people from**

**engaging in hate speech.** The Atlantic's Conor Friedersdorf explored the partisan and racial divides that characterized the results:

- **“Forty-six percent would support a law making it illegal to say offensive things about African Americans;** there is less support for banning insults against other groups (41 percent for Jews, 40 percent for immigrants and military-service members, 39 percent for Hispanics, 37 percent for Muslims, 36 percent for gays, lesbians, and transgender people, 35 percent for Christians).
- **“Fifty-one percent of Democrats would favor a law ‘requiring people to refer to a transgender person by their preferred gender pronouns and not according to their biological sex.’**
- **“Republicans were most intolerant of speech and most likely to favor authoritarian laws to punish it on the subject of burning or desecrating the American flag: Seventy-two percent of Republicans believe that should be illegal (along with 46 percent of Democrats).** Most shocking to me, 53 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of Latinos favor ‘stripping a person of their U.S. citizenship if they burn the American flag.’”

**-- Why these numbers matter: If we lose the confidence that good ideas will overtake bad ones in the marketplace of ideas, if we lose the sense that we may disagree with offensive comments our neighbors say but we'll defend to the death their right to say them and if we lose the willingness to honestly debate hard issues, then the United States will keep becoming more tribal and, eventually, less free.**

“If large numbers of people believe in freedom of speech, there will be freedom of speech even if the law forbids it,” George Orwell wrote in a 1945 essay. “But if public opinion is sluggish, inconvenient minorities will be prosecuted, even if laws exist to protect them.”

**-- These polls underscore an existential threat to our way of life. To prevent the continuing atrophy of our democracy, concerned citizens from all walks of life and both parties must speak up for the virtue and necessity of the First Amendment wherever it comes under attack. There also clearly needs to be a national recommitment to civic education.** “America’s collective ignorance of the workings of the First Amendment cannot be blamed on Mr. Trump,” the Toledo Blade’s Will Tomer wrote in a recent column. “But when you couple Mr. Trump’s public attacks on free speech and freedom of the press with this ignorance, it is a dangerous and volatile mix that has potential to do real and permanent damage to our liberties. We must not let it happen.”

**Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.), who earned his doctorate in history from Yale, gets it.** “The First Amendment is the beating heart of the American experiment, and you don’t get to separate the freedoms that are in there,” he said this summer. “You don’t have religion without assembly. You don’t have speech without press. We all need to celebrate all five of those freedoms, because that’s how the ‘e pluribus unum’ stuff works.”