

The Washington Post

Older people and Republicans, threatening free speech

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Free speech surveys are suddenly en vogue.

Back in September, I wrote about a survey by a UCLA/Brookings scholar John Villasenor on college speech issues. Since then, at least five (!) additional surveys have been released on related subjects, including from:

- the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonpartisan civil liberties organization (survey of college students)
- McLaughlin & Associates, a Republican polling and political consulting firm (also of college students)
- the Economist/YouGov (national sample of Americans)
- a different YouGov poll (national sample, on book-banning specifically)
- the libertarian Cato Institute (*also* conducted by YouGov, national survey that included an oversample of college/grad students)

There are some interesting stats in all of them, with relatively little overlap in questions. This is actually unfortunate if you want to know how well a particular finding stands up. (Replication is important!)

That said, I will point out at least one theme: As troubling as many survey stats and anecdotes about college kiddos are, lefty undergrads hold no monopoly on illiberalism. Threats to freedom of expression and other democratic values extend far beyond college campuses, up to and including the White House.

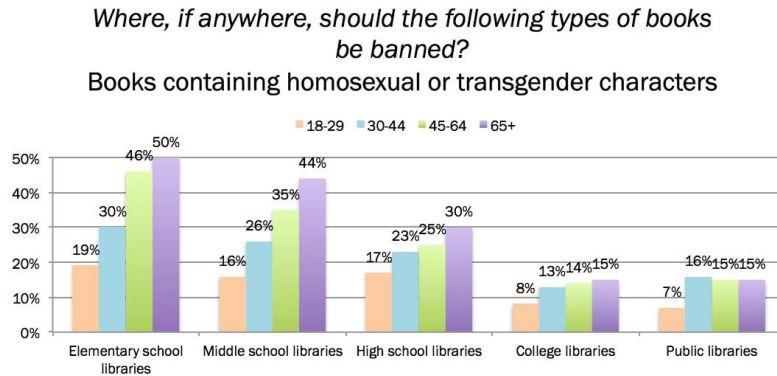
In fact, on many pet issues, older people and Republicans actually exhibit *less* tolerance for free expression than young lefties.

I (like lots of others) have made this point before. But judging from the emails readers send me and curmudgeonly commentary other pundits continue to produce, it bears repeating. Let's go through a few examples from recent speech surveys that drew upon samples of the broader U.S. population.

Take YouGov's October poll about what kinds of books ought to be banned from various libraries. On nearly every type of potentially controversial book YouGov asked about, and for

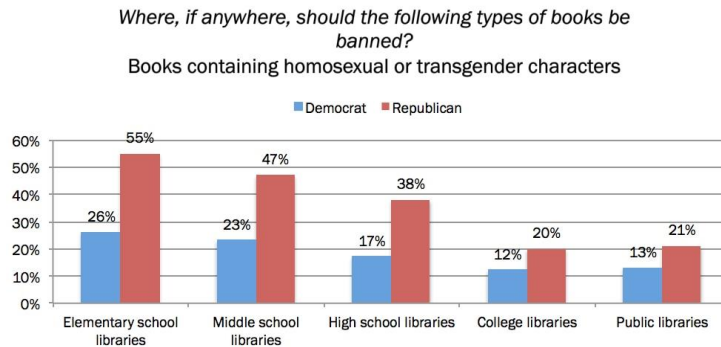
nearly every type of library, older and Republican respondents were more likely to support censorship.

Here, for example, are responses by age to a question about whether books containing “homosexual or transgender characters” should be banned from libraries.



Source: YouGov, survey conducted Oct. 16-17.

Half of respondents age 65 or older thought such books should be banned from elementary school libraries. Here are the responses by political affiliation:



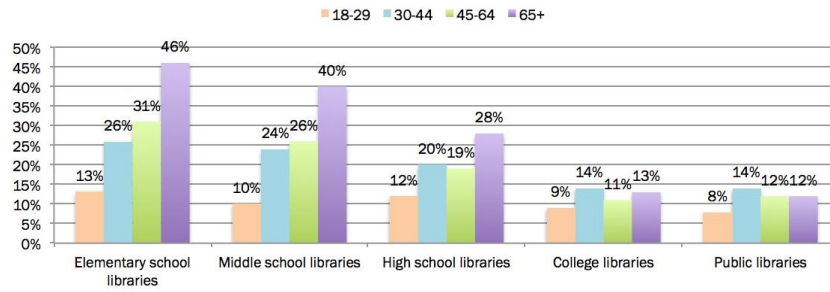
Source: YouGov, survey conducted Oct. 16-17.

About half of Republicans say such books should be banned from both elementary and middle school libraries.

To be fair, younger people and Democrats may simply be more supportive of literary materials featuring lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) characters, given these respondents’ social views. For similar reasons, it’s probably unsurprising that older people are more eager to ban books with “witchcraft, wizardry and magic” than are the young, who grew up with Harry Potter. Nearly half of people older than 65 think such books should be banned from elementary schools.

Where, if anywhere, should the following types of books be banned?

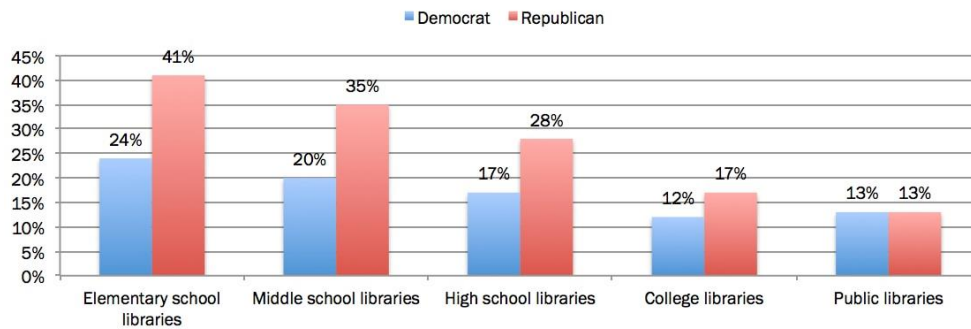
Themes related to witchcraft, wizardry, and magic



Source: YouGov, conducted Oct. 16-17.

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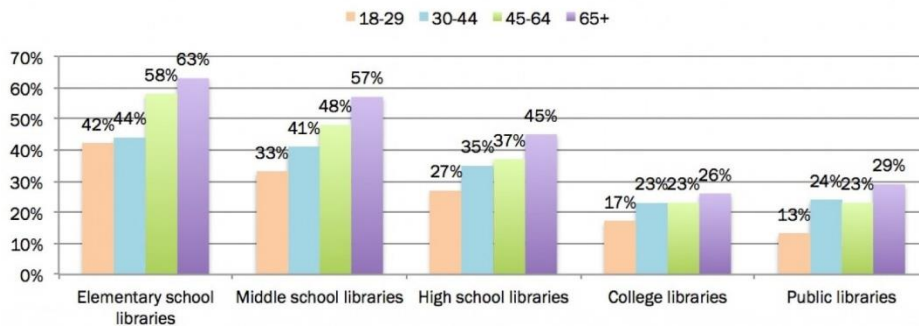


Source: YouGov, conducted Oct. 16-17.

What about books containing explicit racism, which one might assume millennials and Democrats are more sensitive to shielding children from, given “trigger warnings” and whatnot? In K-12 libraries, seniors and Republicans are *still* more open to censorship. Responses by age:

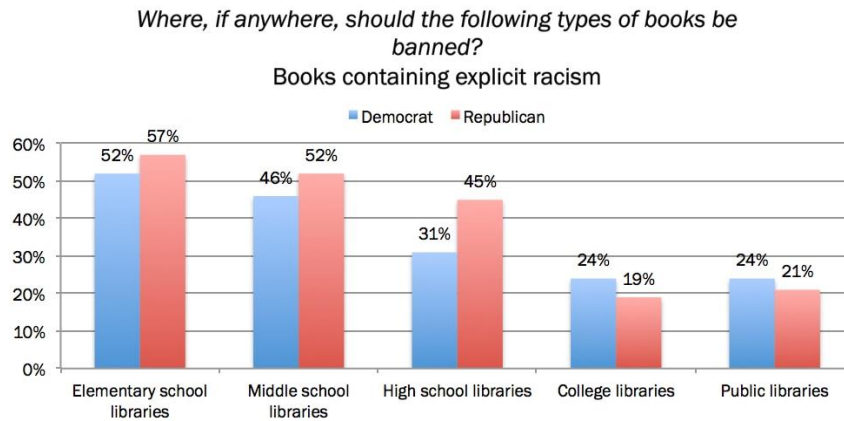
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Books containing explicit racism



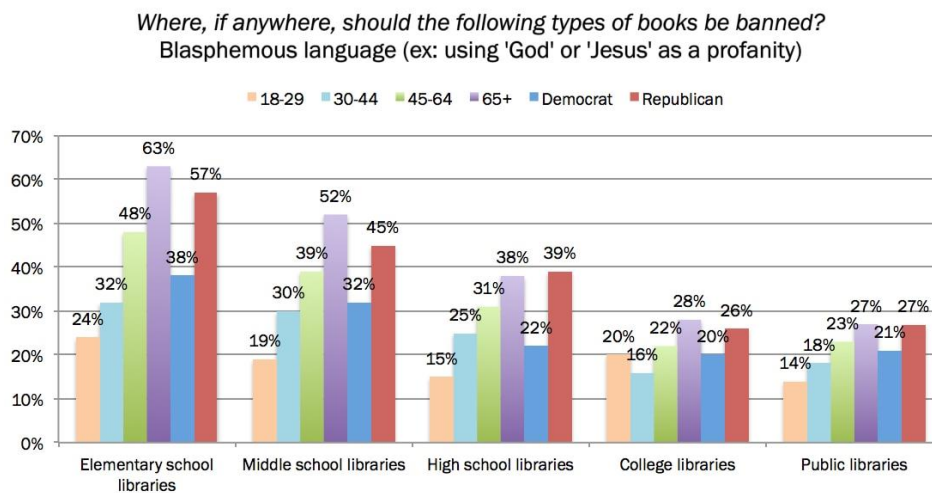
Source: YouGov, conducted Oct. 16-17.

And by party:



Source: YouGov, survey conducted Oct. 16-17.

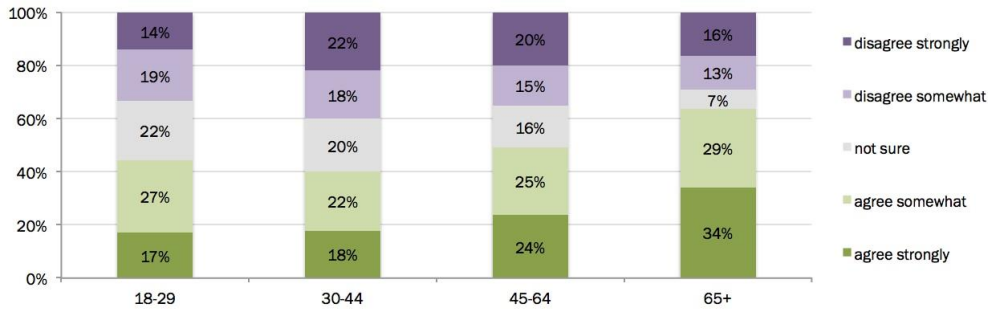
Results are similar results for banning books that contain blasphemy:



Source: YouGov, survey conducted Oct. 16-17.

Now consider findings from the [Economist/YouGov poll](#) (which asked some of the same questions contained in Villasenor's survey, though not of college students specifically). This poll asked a national sample of Americans whether U.S. colleges and universities should be a place where people refrain from using language that is hurtful and offensive. Democrats were more likely than Republicans to say they agreed strongly or somewhat (60 percent vs. 45 percent, respectively). But older people were more likely than younger people to say colleges should be a place where people avoid hurtful or offensive language:

Do you agree or disagree that American colleges and universities should be a place where people do not use language that is hurtful and offensive?



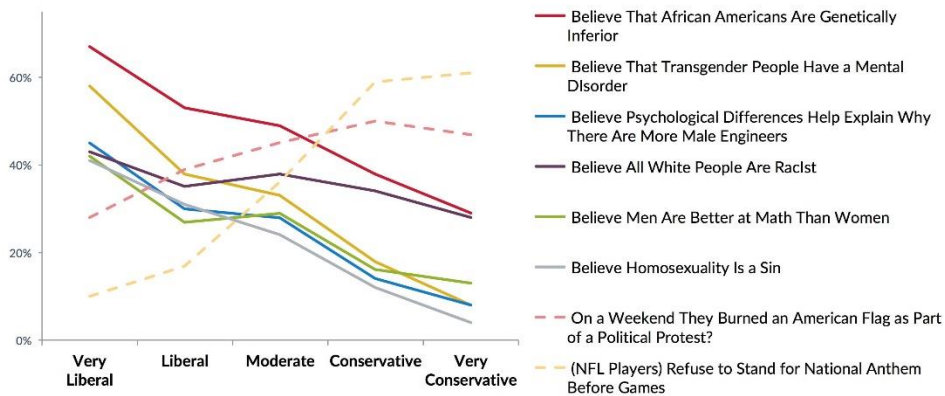
Source: The Economist/YouGov, survey conducted Sep. 24-26.

Another poll question, which asked about whether colleges should be able to restrict “slurs and other language on campus that is intentionally offensive to certain groups,” had a similar age gradation.

The Cato Institute survey includes some results that make college students, liberals and Democrats look intolerant and illiberal. But it likewise includes other results suggesting that Republicans, conservatives and older people are plenty intolerant and illiberal as well. For example, a series of questions asked about whether executives and employees should be fired for holding various beliefs or participating in various kinds of political dissent. Liberals were more likely to support firing for racist beliefs and so on; but conservatives were more likely to support firing for political dissent such as flag-burning.

Support for Firing Employees across Ideological Groups

Do you think a business executive should be fired from their job if they believe any of the following? If they...



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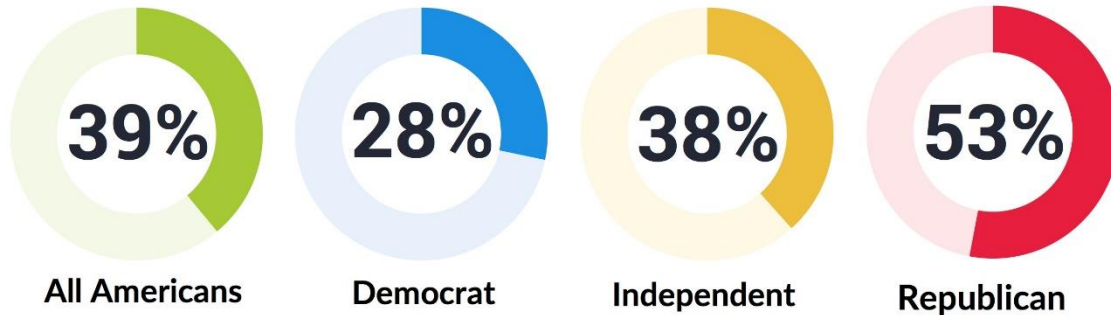
These questions were of course about *private-sector* consequences. What about *government* actions restricting or punishing political speech? That’s what the First Amendment actually deals with, after all.

Echoing our president, a majority of Republicans says that Americans who burn the American flag — a constitutionally protected act — should have their citizenship revoked.

Republicans Say Flag Burners Should Have Their U.S. Citizenship Revoked

Would you favor or oppose stripping a person of their U.S. citizenship if they burn the American flag?

% Favor Revoking Flag Burners' Citizenship



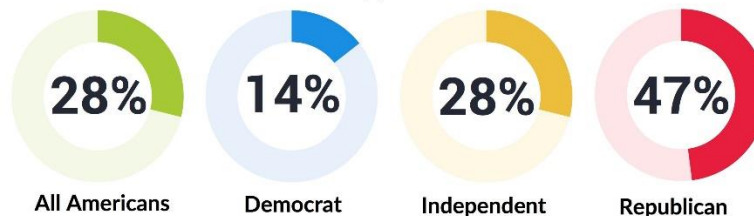
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Speaking of flagrant violations of the First Amendment, nearly half of Republicans would favor a law banning the building of mosques in their community.

Nearly Half of Republicans Support Ban on Building Mosques

Do you favor or oppose a law that would ban the building of mosques in your community?

% Support Ban



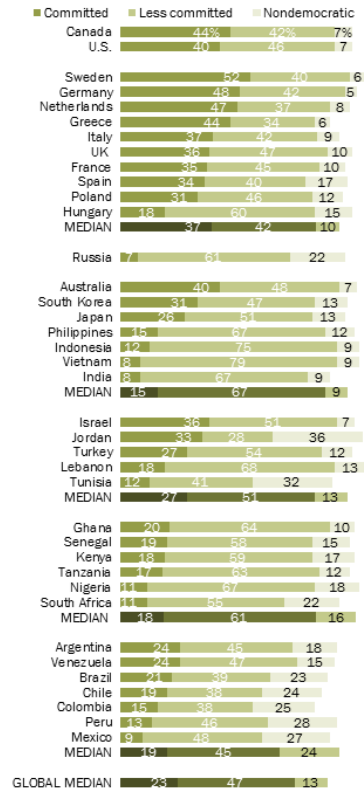
CATO INSTITUTE 2017 FREE SPEECH AND TOLERANCE SURVEY

All of which is to reiterate that democratic values are under threat from many more sources than just socialist 19-year-olds.

Relatedly, in fact, a recent Pew Research Center global survey found that a majority of Americans were supportive of nondemocratic forms of government, such as rule by the military or by a “a strong leader who can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts.”

Substantial percentages willing to consider nondemocratic options

Commitment to representative democracy index



Note: Only respondents saying at least one political system included in the index would be a good way to govern their country are shown. Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q29b-e.

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At my request, Pew broke down the responses by age group (18 to 29 years old, 30 to 49 years old, and 50-plus years old). In its index of support for democracy, it found no statistically significant differences by age in the United States.

There's plenty more that college administrators could do to encourage free speech and other democratic values on their campuses. What's our solution for addressing the threats to free speech and democratic values everywhere else in our country?