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Do 40 percent of young Americans think free speech is dangerous?

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“Forty percent of Americans under age 35 tell pollsters they think the First Amendment is dangerous because you might use your freedom to say something that hurts somebody else’s feelings.”

— **Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.), at a Senate hearing with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, April 10, 2018**

During a five-hour hearing with Zuckerberg, some Republican senators said they were worried Facebook might feel pressure to censor conservatives.

Sasse illustrated the point with an eye-popping statistic: 40 percent of young Americans believe the First Amendment is dangerous, he said, because somebody’s feelings might get hurt by free speech.

“We see this happening on college campuses all across the country. It’s dangerous,” he said.

“Can you imagine a world where you might decide that pro-lifers are prohibited from speaking about their abortion views on your content — on your platform?”

“I certainly would not want that to be the case,” Zuckerberg responded.

The exchange got us thinking. What ever happened to grit and toughness? Does 40 percent of America’s youth really think the First Amendment is dangerous because it protects offensive speech? We dug into several polls to see how Sasse’s claim held up, with help from Washington Post polling director Scott Clement and polling analyst Emily Guskin.

The Facts

Sasse’s claim is based on a Pew Research Center poll from 2015, according to his spokesman.

The survey found that 40 percent of American millennials, or people from ages 18 to 34 at the time, said “the government should be able to prevent people from saying offensive statements about minority groups” in some circumstances. A millennial majority, 58 percent, said people should be free to offend minorities in public.

Older generations of Americans were much less inclined to have the government censor speech that offends minorities, Pew found. When combining all age groups, 28 percent of Americans said the government should ban this type of speech, while 67 percent said people should be able to offend minorities in public. “Two-thirds of Americans say this, compared with a median of 35 percent among the 38 nations we polled,” wrote Jacob Poushter, a senior researcher at Pew.

The bottom line is that there’s a gulf between what Sasse described and what the Pew poll actually shows.

As any pollster will tell you, the specific wording of survey questions can greatly influence the results. So in crafting poll questions and in describing the answers people gave, precision is key.

According to Sasse, 40 percent of Americans under age 35 said the First Amendment was “dangerous.” But Pew didn’t even mention the First Amendment or the word “dangerous.” Had it mentioned either, the poll results might have turned out differently.

Instead, Pew asked about “statements that are offensive to minority groups” and the specific question was, “Do you think people should be able to say these types of things publicly OR the government should be able to prevent people from saying these things in some circumstances.”

“The ‘in some circumstances’ phrase really softens it,” said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute. “We have limits on First Amendment rights ‘in some circumstances’ for quite a few situations. So it’s hard to see how this is a danger.”

Another point: Sasse says the risk at hand is that people *in general* might experience hurt feelings because of what they hear. But the Pew poll asked about statements that offend *minority groups*. (Murray said he wouldn’t be too bothered by this flub.)

Each senator was allotted five minutes or so to question Zuckerberg. A spokesman for Sasse, James Wegmann, said the senator was trying to convey his point quickly.

“I think that the obvious implication of the poll is that 40 percent of Americans under the age of 35 say that the First Amendment right to say offensive things is dangerous enough to curtail it,” Wegmann said. “The senator’s point was to quickly cut to the chase that (a) some folks talk a lot about the psychological categories around speech, (b) this is messy (as free speech issues often are and as admitted by Zuckerberg when he said it was hard to define ‘hate speech’), and (c) this isn’t a conversation that’s just happening in Facebook but in a broader cultural context.”

But poll results are sensitive to the specific way questions are phrased — and a lot was lost in translation because Sasse “quickly cut to the chase.”

Here’s a good example of what we mean: Gallup asked a similar question about free speech in a 2016 survey for the Knight Foundation and Newseum Institute, but its question was more verbose and less pointed than Pew’s.

“If you had to choose, do you think it is more important for colleges to [ROTATED: create a positive learning environment for all students by prohibiting certain speech or expression of viewpoints that are offensive or biased against certain groups of people, (or to) create an open

learning environment where students are exposed to all types of speech and viewpoints, even if it means allowing speech that is offensive or biased against certain groups of people]?” Gallup asked.

When the question was asked this way, 22 percent of college students supported the idea of “prohibiting certain speech or expression of viewpoints that are offensive or biased against certain groups of people.”

That’s a far cry from the 40 percent of millennials in the Pew poll who essentially said the same thing. But it’s important to note that Pew asked about the government banning speech; Gallup asked whether colleges should.

Interestingly, the age gap in the Gallup poll was opposite the Pew survey, with students 12 points more supportive of a learning environment that allowed offensive or biased speech than U.S. adults overall (78 percent vs. 66 percent).

Sasse spoke about “40 percent of Americans under age 35,” but note that the Pew poll was limited to *adults* under 35. Moreover, some pollsters have found that the idea of banning offensive speech appeals just as widely to the general population.

“Most Americans (59%) say people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions in public, even those that are deeply offensive to other people,” a 2017 survey by the Cato Institute found. “A substantial minority (40%), however, say government should prevent people from engaging in hate speech against certain groups in public.”

Wegmann said “no argument here that a whole lot of Americans outside the under-35 group also have a bad understanding of the First Amendment” and added that Sasse has “often said that we haven’t done civics well in this country for decades.”

Sasse does have a point about young Americans and free speech — broadly speaking. Mark Bauerlein, an English professor at Emory University and the author of “The Dumbest Generation,” said more than half of 12th-graders fail to get passing grades in U.S. history, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress, and in 2010, only 24 percent reached proficiency in civics.

Less than half of college students (46 percent) recognized that the First Amendment protected hate speech, according to a 2017 poll commissioned by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and conducted by YouGov. More than one-third of students (35 percent) said hate speech should be protected by the First Amendment.

But this debate about the bounds of free speech also seems to be influenced by political ideology. Many colleges are seen as liberal havens, so Republicans may feel they have more at stake in this debate. Looked at another way, Democrats may feel they have more at stake since they tend to get the greatest share of the minority vote. In the polls we reviewed, the percentage of Democrats favoring bans on hate speech or statements that offend minority groups was larger than the percentage of Republicans or independents.

The Pinocchio Test

Sasse mangled the findings of a Pew poll, but his larger argument — that many American youths and college students are leery of free speech — seems to be on target.

To what extent is difficult to say. The three polls of young Americans that we looked at (from Pew in 2015, Gallup in 2016 and YouGov in 2017) all worded their questions differently and found varying levels of support for the idea of censoring hate speech or statements that offend minorities. At the low end, Gallup found 22 percent support among college students. At the high end, Pew landed on 40 percent among 18- to 34-year-olds.

Asked about the differences between Pew's narrow question and Sasse's liberal reinterpretation, a spokesman said the senator was trying to make his point quickly. But sort-of hitting the target doesn't work when describing polls, which are intricate by nature. No one asked the Pew poll respondents about the First Amendment. No one asked whether it was dangerous. And no one should buy Sasse's 40 percent statistic about the "dangerous" First Amendment, for which we award Two Pinocchios.