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Are Americans on the brink of killing free speech?

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Government allowing people to speak their minds is a recent development. For pretty much all of human history, the common folk only could say what their king, queen or petty despot allowed them to say.

That finally changed 241 years ago as the upstart American republic said that anything goes.

Speak your mind, print what you want, and worship – or don't. Your fellow citizens might disagree, but your government can't do anything about it.

Americans are second-guessing free speech

This radical system has worked pretty well for two centuries and change. But more and more Americans are having second thoughts about our liberal experiment.

The libertarian Cato Institute conducted an exhaustive survey on the state of free speech and tolerance in America. They found that 71 percent of Americans believe that political correctness has silenced important discussions that our society needs to have.

Such a large majority surely wants to promote free speech to help solve the huge social and political problems we face. Well, about that...

Despite their criticism of political correctness, the majority of Americans on the left and right want to tamp down speech even further, just in different ways.

Let's start with the left. The majority of Democrats support a law that requires Americans to use transgender people's preferred gender pronouns. Those polled didn't say, "it would be polite for people to use the preferred pronoun." Instead, they want legal repercussions for an unwelcome "him" or "her." Lock xer up!

The right has its own free-speech exceptions

And if an employee posts something "offensive" on their personal Facebook account, most Democrats say that the employer should punish them.

Now is when conservatives mock those progressive delicate snowflakes for always demanding safe spaces and emotional support animals.

Easy there, righties; you've got plenty of your own snowflakes.

In this same poll, a majority of Republicans favor stripping U.S. citizenship from people who burn the flag. Issuing a fine for lighting up Old Glory would be bad enough, but kicking them out of the country? And sending them where?

Also, if an NFL player decides to kneel during the national anthem, most GOPers want his boss to fire him.

Least tolerant among us are the young

Is political correctness out of control?

For everyone's complaints about political correctness, it appears that both sides support it for their own pet issues. It's no wonder that 58 percent of respondents said our current political climate prevents them from sharing their views.

Even more concerning is that the least tolerant among us are the young.

We've seen the often-violent campus protests against right-leaning speakers, and here's why: A majority of students believe that colleges have "an obligation to protect students from offensive speech and ideas that could create a difficult learning environment." They don't realize that the purpose of higher education is to discuss all sorts of ideas – offensive and otherwise.

As these people graduate and move into the workforce and politics, we should expect them to want businesses and the government to still protect them from scary words and ideas. While the Supreme Court has upheld the First Amendment so far, what happens when a majority of voters elect politicians who reject it?

It's crucial for leaders in academia, business and government to publicly and forcefully recommit to the free expression of ideas.

In every walk of life, we'll hear different views on controversial topics. And if we disagree with those views, we're encouraged to share our own instead of shutting down everyone else.

President Ronald Reagan said that "freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction." Unless Americans on all sides start defending the First Amendment again, our generation could be the last to enjoy it.