

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## **The war on free speech is a bipartisan issue**

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In today's political landscape, it isn't just what someone says that comes under scrutiny, but whether they should be able to say certain things at all.

As highlighted by a newly released survey, American attitudes toward free speech and expression have become polarized, with counterproductive results for everyone.

Among the notable findings of the Cato 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey, a poll of 2,300 American adults conducted by the Cato Institute and YouGov, is that 71 percent "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.

But the survey reveals that as much as Americans recognize the problems of political correctness and not being able to express one's beliefs, Americans also endorse restricting speech they don't agree with.

On the right, 65 percent of Republicans 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, a reference to an incident earlier this year when white supremacist Richard Spencer was assaulted by a masked man, which drew applause from many on the left.

For the record: No, it shouldn't be acceptable to assault someone merely because of their political worldview, however abhorrent they might be. The idea of using force, be it physical or legislative, to punish people for forms of speech or expression one 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 clear 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. Meanwhile, colleges like Pierce College have imposed speech-stifling restrictions like "free speech zones," while others have sought to root out the often dubious concept of "microaggressions."

Americans seem to have noticed the problem. Two-thirds of those surveyed 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.”

Yet at the same time, half of those polled with college experience also believed a litany of speakers with controversial viewpoints shouldn't be allowed to speak at colleges.

With so many people trying to control the marketplace of ideas rather than engage in it, it's no wonder constructive dialogue is becoming harder. We must reject all efforts to control or legislate away freedoms of speech and expression if we are to remain a free society.