



## Don't Take Too Much Comfort From Surveys Showing Widespread Opposition to "Political Correctness"

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Commentators such as Harvard political scientist Yascha Mounk and Reason's Robby Soave have hailed a recent study indicating that 80% of Americans oppose "political correctness." I'm a fan of the work of both Mounk and Soave. In this case, however, I fear they are overly optimistic. Unfortunately, other evidence suggests that for many, distaste for political correctness is entirely compatible with support for extensive censorship. Here is Mounk's summary of what he sees as a key positive finding of the survey's analysis of attitudes towards political correctness:

Among the general population, a full 80 percent believe that "political correctness is a problem in our country." Even young people are uncomfortable with it, including 74 percent ages 24 to 29, and 79 percent under age 24. On this particular issue, the woke are in a clear minority across *all* ages.

Youth isn't a good proxy for support of political correctness—and it turns out race isn't, either.

Whites are ever so slightly *less* likely than average to believe that political correctness is a problem in the country: 79 percent of them share this sentiment. Instead, it is Asians (82 percent), Hispanics (87 percent), and American Indians (88 percent) who are most likely to oppose political correctness.

It's a good thing that large majorities of Americans of different racial and ethnic groups believe that political correctness is "a problem." But it does not mean that all of these people are principled, consistent opponents of censorship. Far from it, in fact.

Other surveys also show that large numbers of people on both right and left are happy to suppress many specific types of speech they find offensive. Here are some examples from the Cato Institute's Emily Ekins' valuable work on on these issues. She too finds that a large majority (71%) decry "political correctness." But that does not prevent results like these:

53% of Republicans favor stripping U.S. citizenship from people who burn the American flag.

51% of Democrats support a law that requires Americans use transgender people's preferred gender pronouns.

58% of Democrats say employers should punish employees for offensive Facebook posts.

47% of Republicans favor bans on building new mosques.

And that's just a sampling of a much broader problem. For example, despite evidence that large majorities of young people decry "political correctness," she also finds that large numbers support banning a wide range of speech on college campuses. More generally, the 2017 Cato Free Speech and Tolerance Survey, conducted by Ekins, finds that many on both right and left advocate censorship of views that offend their respective political sensibilities. For many people (particularly conservatives denouncing the left), "political correctness" is just a pejorative term they use to denounce the types of censorship they dislike. They use more positive terms to describe their own preferred forms of repression.

And, sadly, censorious left-wing political correctness is matched by what Alex Nowrasteh calls the "patriotic correctness" of the right. Would-be censors on the right and left differ in the objects of their repressive impulses. But they are united in believing that some types of offensive or dangerous expression need to be banned, even if they disagree on which ones.

Such inconsistency between abstract opposition to "political correctness" and support for specific forms of censorship should not be surprising. Many people don't reason carefully about their political beliefs, or make much effort to root out contradictions in their thinking. This is just one of many ways in which perverse incentives lead much of the public - and even government officials - to be ignorant and biased in their approach to political issues.

Not everyone who supports censorship is strongly committed to such views, or eager to aggressively implement them. Nonetheless, it is clear that many who are happy to denounce "political correctness" also want to suppress what they see as offensive or harmful speech.

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