

Poll: Who's Backing NFL Protesters? The Answer May Surprise You

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On Monday we released one question from the forthcoming national Cato 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey of 2,300 Americans conducted by the Cato Institute in collaboration with YouGov.

The [national survey finds](#) that a solid majority, 61 percent, of Americans oppose firing NFL (National Football League) players who refuse to stand for the national anthem before football games in order to make a political statement.

These results stand in contrast to President Trump's [remarks](#) over the weekend and his [urging](#) NFL teams to fire players who refuse to stand for the anthem.

A little more than a third (38 percent) of Americans align with Trump and support firing these players.

Americans Oppose Firing NFL Players Who Refuse to Stand for National Anthem

Do you think an NFL (National Football League) player should or should not be fired from the team if they refuse to stand for the national anthem before football games to make a political statement?



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Note: Don't Know/Refused: 1%

Cato 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey

Conservative Republicans stand out in their support for firing NFL players who refuse to stand for the national anthem. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of Republicans say NFL players should be fired for this reason.

Only 19 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of independents agree.

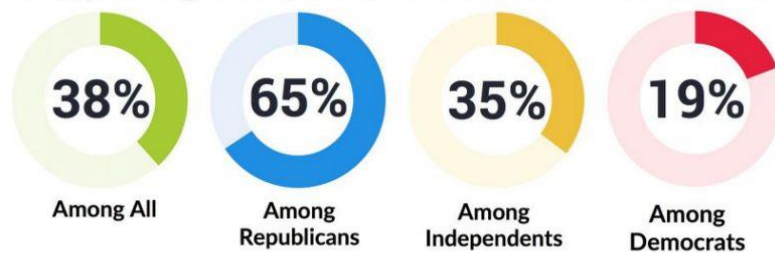
Punishing NFL players for their political speech distinguishes political Conservatives from Libertarians. Using a political typology method to identify these ideological groups, the survey finds that Conservatives (62 percent) are the only political group to support firing NFL players.

Conversely, 60 percent of Libertarians, 85 percent of Liberals, and 62 percent of Communitarians (social conservatives who support larger government) all oppose punishing players.

Republicans Support Firing NFL Players for Refusing to Stand for National Anthem, Democrats and Independents Oppose

Do you think an NFL player should or should not be fired from the team if they refuse to stand for the national anthem before football games to make a political statement?

% Support Firing NFL Players Who Refuse to Stand for National Anthem



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People who are older, with less education, and living in smaller towns and rural communities are most likely to support punishing NFL players who kneel during the national anthem in political protest.

A majority (57 percent) of Americans over 65 think such players should be fired while 71 percent of Americans under 30 think they should not. Those without college degrees (44 percent) are more likely than college graduates (32 percent) and those with postgraduate degrees (26 percent) to similarly support punishing NFL players who engage in this form of political protest.

Americans living in rural communities are divided in half over whether teams should fire NFL players who refuse to stand for the national anthem. Conversely, those living in large urban centers solidly oppose (69 percent) such firings.

Conservative GOP, Seniors, Non-College, and Rural Americans Most Likely to Support NFL Firing Players Who Refuse to Stand for Anthem

Do you think an NFL player should be fired from the team if they refuse to stand for the national anthem before football games to make a political statement?

	Should be Fired	Should Not Be Fired
All	38%	61%
Democrat	19%	80%
Independent	35%	64%
Republican	65%	34%
Ideological Typology		
Libertarian	38%	60%
Conservative	62%	37%
Liberal	15%	85%
Communitarian/Populist	36%	62%
High School or Less	44%	56%
Some College	36%	63%
College Grad	32%	64%
Post-Grad	26%	74%
18-29	28%	71%
30-44	29%	68%
45-54	39%	60%
54-64	43%	56%
65+	57%	43%
City	30%	69%
Suburb	37%	62%
Town	43%	55%
Rural	49%	49%
White	43%	55%
Black	12%	88%
Hispanic	38%	60%

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Cato 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey

Majorities across racial groups oppose firing NFL players who kneel during the national anthem before football games. However, African Americans (88 percent) are about 30 points more likely than Hispanics (60 percent) and whites (55 percent) to oppose.

Not wanting to fire NFL players because of their political speech doesn't mean that most Americans agree with the content of this speech. Surveys have long shown, as well as this one, that most oppose burning, desecrating, or disrespecting the American flag.

Thus, Americans appear to make a distinction between allowing a person to express (even controversial) political opinions and endorsing the content of their speech. The public can be tolerant of players' refusing to stand for the national anthem, even while many disagree with what the players are doing.

Terrance Smith #48, Eric Fisher #72, Demetrius Harris #84, and Cameron Erving #75 of the Kansas City Chiefs is seen taking a knee before the game against the Los Angeles Chargers at the StubHub Center on September 24, 2017 in Carson, California.

Sean M. Haffey/Getty

In sum, Americans don't want to strip people of their livelihoods and ruin their careers over refusing to stand for the national anthem.

Even if they don't agree with the content of the speech, that doesn't mean they support punishing people who do.

Emily Ekins is a research fellow and director of polling at the Cato Institute. She is the author of "Policing in America: Understanding Public Attitudes Toward the Police," which investigates the drivers of public opinion toward the police and reform. Emily's other publications include "The Libertarian Roots of the Tea Party" and "Public Attitudes toward Federalism: The Public's Preference for a Renewed Federalism."

Topline results and methodology can be found [here](#).

The Cato Institute 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey was designed and conducted by the Cato Institute in collaboration with YouGov. YouGov collected responses online August 15-23, 2017 from a national sample of 2,300 Americans 18 years of age and older. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.00 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. The full survey report is forthcoming.