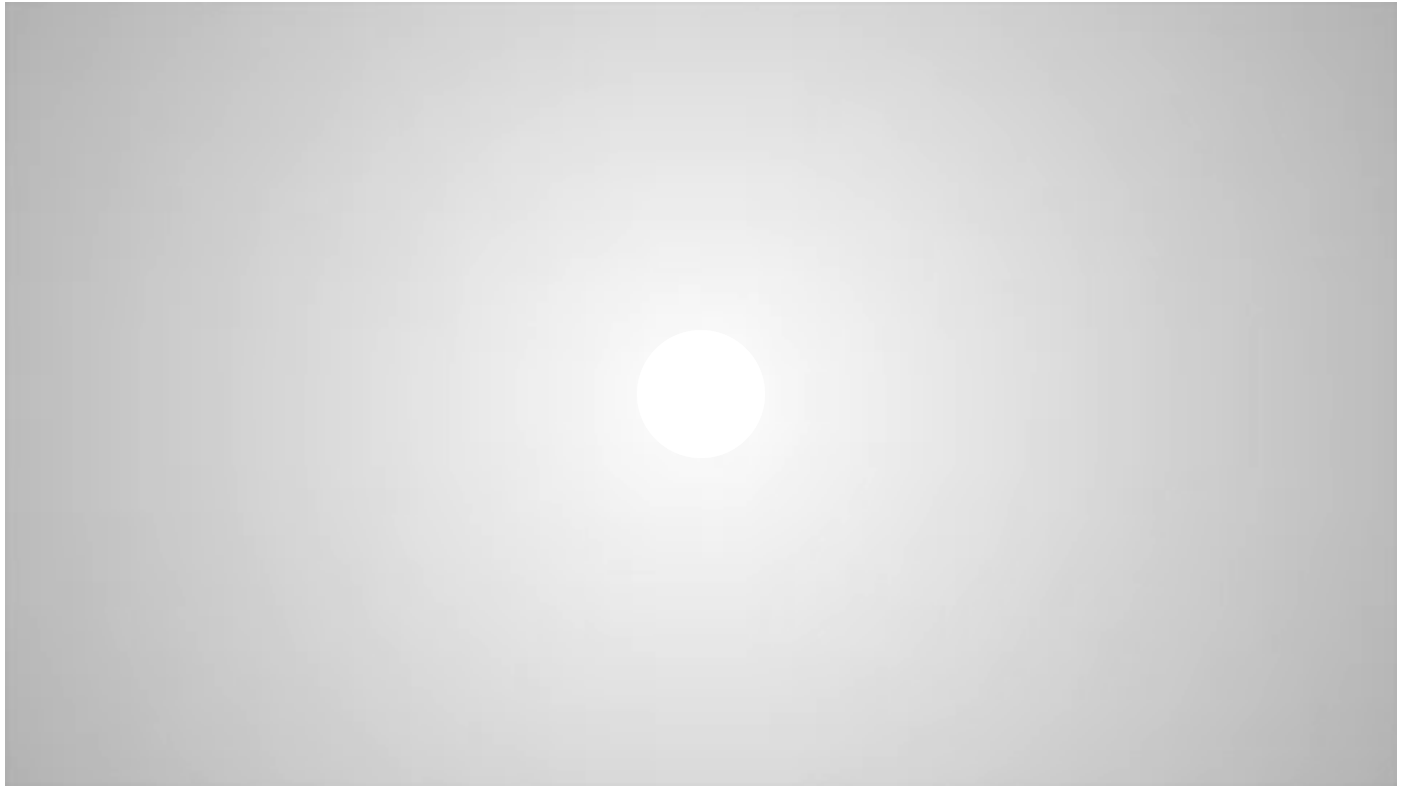


Ending nation's polarization begins with understanding First Amendment



A key reason for the nation's polarization can be found in the newly released [Knight Foundation study on free expression](#). It is clear that too many Americans fail to understand the importance of free expression and the functional interdependence required to implement that basic human right. Basically, citizens get to express themselves in exchange for allowing other citizens the same freedom. Further, the Constitution's First Amendment prohibits the government from restricting the citizens' broad expression rights. The Knight study shows too many Americans are oblivious to these notions that are essential in a free society.

A healthy democracy requires a healthy First Amendment atmosphere. When corners of the society get comfortable with squelching the expression

of alternate views, oppression and authoritarianism necessarily follow. That sort of community censorship is bad enough, but when some citizens want to greenlight the government to crack down on nonconformist or unapproved perspectives, a nation is on the road to despotism. Evidence of such warning signs is found in the Knight report, which surveyed over 4,000 American adults across the nation.

A disappointing 26 percent of respondents believe "government should prohibit a person from sharing political views that are offensive to some." Granted, the survey statement lacks context and is hypothetical, but this statement should be easy for any red-blooded American to handle. Just as scary, 32 percent of those surveyed are okay with the government having "the ability to block or censor" online news providers. The constitutional framers would be shocked to see even a fraction of Americans willing to allow such government regulation of expression, regardless of content.

The Knight study also indicates Americans are confused about the importance of allowing a wide-ranging and lively marketplace of ideas.

Some citizens apparently think they have a corner on reasonable ideas and see no need for anybody else to think otherwise. Only 77 percent of Americans agree with the statement, "Having different points of view, including those that are 'bad' or offensive to some, promotes healthy debate in society." The other 23 percent are obviously confident their own ideas are not bad or offensive.

Only 90 percent of respondents agree that "People should be allowed to express unpopular opinions." In the United States, that percentage should be 100. Throughout American history, "unpopular" opinions engaged the rhetorical sphere, survived, and with the help of debate and reason, emerged into acceptance, new policy and altered attitudes. Respondents

who don't agree with letting unpopular opinions circulate themselves likely have opinions that their fellow citizens might perceive to be unpopular. The First Amendment was formulated exactly to let offbeat or unpopular opinions enter the discussion. Otherwise, the mob of community censorship extinguishes societal debate.

Not surprisingly, the Knight report shows a partisan divide regarding perceptions of free expression. Democrats, for example, are much more concerned than Republicans are about the spread of misinformation in society. There is also partisan disagreement over content regulation on social media platforms and what constitutes legitimate public protest. It appears how one views free expression rights is affected by the lens of party affiliation.

It is difficult to assess why Americans have such incomplete understanding and appreciation for the free expression principle. The nation's education system must shoulder part of the responsibility, beginning from elementary school up through college. Insufficient education about civics, American history and the Constitution leaves students clueless as to why the framers created a First Amendment and how, despite some bumps in the road, it has functioned to keep the nation free for all these years.

A more discouraging explanation for this national lack of commitment to free expression is that a large swath of the citizenry simply doesn't support the concept. Perhaps they fear their views can't withstand scrutiny in the marketplace and thus are comfortable with allowing suppression from the cancel mobs or even government. The raw power of censorship serves authoritarian impulses. That might seem attractive to certain people who want to shut other voices out of the dialogue, but that sounds good only until it is your opinion that gets disfavored.

Restricting the flow of expression is bound to cause societal division, as is being witnessed in America today. Suppression ultimately doesn't work in free societies.

- [Powell pledges Fed will prevent inflation from becoming 'entrenched'](#)
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A first step in reducing polarization is to gain recognition that fellow citizens are allowed to have and express their views — and that such occasionally raucous freedom is preferable to forced conformity of thought.

Until Americans more fully understand the principle of free expression, coaxing civil dialogue into the nation's deliberations will be difficult, and polarization will continue to reign.

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