

Trends in Support for Civil Liberties

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Support for civil liberties has substantially grown in recent decades. Public opinion about certain groups “whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people” has become increasingly tolerant with more people being willing to allow group members to speak in one’s community, teach in a college or university, and have a book in the local, public library. The people asked about are “somebody who is against all churches and religion,” an “admitted Communist,” an “admitted homosexual,” “a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior,” “a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country,” and “a Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States.” (For full question wordings see the appendix.)

As Table 1 shows, the % for allowing “somebody who is against all churches and religion” to speak rose from 66% in 1972 to 76% in 2010. Approval of teaching by an anti-religionist climbed from 41% in 1972 to 60% in 2010 and support for having a book in the library grew from 61% in 1972 to 74% in 2010. Table 2 indicates that allowing an “admitted Communist” to speak went from 53% in 1972 to 64% in 2010, teaching climbed from 33% in 1972 to 61% in 2010, and having a book in the library rose from 53% in 1972 to 69% in 2010. Table 3 shows that allowing an “admitted homosexual” to speak increased from 62% in 1973 to 86% in 2010, teaching rose from 48% in 1973 to 84% in 2010, and having a library book grew from 54% in 1973 to 78% in 2010. Table 4 indicates that allowing “a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior” to speak declined from 62% in 1976 to 58% in 2010, teaching went from 41% in 1976 to 48% in 2010, and having a book in the library increased from 60% in 1976 to 65% in 2010. Table 5 shows that allowing “a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country” to speak grew from 55% in 1976 to 69% in 2010, teaching went from 37% in 1976 to 57% in 2010, and having a book in the library climbed from 57% in 1976 to 71% in 2010. Table 6 indicates that allowing a Muslim extremist to speak was favored by 41% in 2008 and 2010, teaching by 29% in 2008 and 32% in 2010, and having a library book by 49% in 2008 and 48% in 2010.

Table 7 shows the average for each of the six groups. Support for civil liberties for an anti-religionist rose +13.8 points from the first time point to 2010 and the difference between the low and high marks was +16.9 points. For a Communist the gain was +18.1 points from first to 2010 and +21.0 points from low to high. For a homosexual the shift from first to 2010 and from low to high were both +28.0 points. For an anti-Black racist the increase from first to 2010 was +3.0 points and from low to high was +6.7 points. For a militarist the gain from first to 2010 was +16.0 points and from low to high was +19.0 points. For a Muslim extremist the gain from 2008 to 2010 was +0.7 points.

The average annual rate of change from first year to 2010 was +0.36 points for anti-religionists, +0.48 for Communists, +0.76 for homosexuals, +0.09 for anti-Black racists, + 0.47 for militarists, and +0.35 for Muslim extremists.

Of the five groups that have been tracked since the 1970s (anti-religionist, Communist, homosexual, anti-Black racist, and militarist), there has been the least growth in tolerance towards anti-Black racists. There has been little gain overall and no meaningful change since 1989. Given the rising support for diversity and intergroup equality in America, it is likely that public acceptance of this group has fallen and willingness to grant civil liberties to such people has stalled in light of greater public disapproval of anti-Black racists. An example of this effect is seen in 2008 when the nomination and eventual election of Barak Obama as President probably was related to the 2.5 point drop in allowing civil liberties for anti-Black racists.

Across the four groups that have been regularly monitored since 1976 (anti-religionist, Communist, anti-Black racist, and militarist) average support for civil liberties rose 14.4 points from 1976 to 2010 or 15.9 points from the low in 1977 to the high in 2010 (Table 8). While 2010 is marginally higher than any other year, it is not meaningfully above the 2002 and 2004 levels.

Over a longer span, there are trends on anti-religionists and Communists going back to a survey in 1954 (Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963). The six items show increases in allowing these groups to speak, teach, and have books in libraries of from 26 to 29 percentage points. These represent rises of 1.44 to 1.61 percentage points per annum. When looking over the whole period of 1954 to 2010, the change in tolerance is enormous with support for allowing an anti-religionist to speak rising from 37% to 76% (+ 39 points), support for teaching up from 12% to 60% (+ 48 points), and support for having a book in the library rising from 35% to 74% (+39 points).

Similarly, allowing a Communist to speak rose from 27% to 64% (+37 points), to teach from 6% to 61% (+55 points), and to have a library book from 27% to 69% (+42 points). In each case, attitudes shifted from strong majorities against civil liberties to solid majorities backing civil liberties.

As Table 9 shows, in 2010 support for civil liberties was uniformly highest for homosexuals with an average of 83% for allowing speaking, teaching, and having a book in the library. This was followed by support for these civil liberties for anti-religionists at 70%, militarists at 66%, and Communists at 65%. Lower down was support for civil liberties for an anti-Black racist at 57% and at the bottom 40% backed civil liberties for a Muslim clergyman preaching hatred of the US. This shows that many people do not think of these civil liberties as absolute rights, but consider the groups that are exercising the rights. Support for civil liberties is lower for groups that are seen as more threatening and/or more extreme.

The data in this report are from the GSSs. The GSSs are full probability, in-person samples of adults living in households in the United States. Data has been collected by NORC at the University of Chicago. Core support for the GSS comes from the National Science Foundation. Information on the GSS and the GSS data files are available at <http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website>.

Appendix: Question Wordings

There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people. For instance, somebody who is against all churches and religion...

- a. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your (city/town/community) against churches and religion, should he be allowed to speak, or not?
- b. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?
- c. If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote against churches and religion should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Or consider a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior.

- a. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community claiming that Blacks are inferior, should he be allowed to speak, or not?
- b. Should such a person be allowed to teach in college or university, or not?
- c. If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote which said Blacks are inferior should be taken out of your public Library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Now, I should like to ask you some questions about a man who admits he is a Communist.

- a. Suppose this admitted Communist wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?
- b. Suppose he is teaching in a college. Should he be fired, or no?
- c. Suppose he wrote a book which is in your public library. Somebody in your community suggests that the book should be removed from the library. Would you favor removing it, or not?

Consider a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country.

- a. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community, should he be allowed to speak, or not?
- b. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

Appendix (continued)

- c. Suppose he wrote a book advocating doing away with elections and letting the military run the country. Somebody in your community suggests that the book be removed from the public library. Would you favor removing it, or not?

And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual.

- a. Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?
- b. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?
- c. If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Now consider a Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States.

- a. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community preaching hatred of the United States, should he be allowed to speak, or not?
- b. Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?
- c. If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote which preaches hatred of the United States should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Table 1

Allowing Anti-Religionist to Speak, Teach, and Have Book in Library

| | 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | 1976 | 1977 | 1980 | 1982 | 1984 | 1985 | |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 66.1 | 66.3 | 62.5 | 64.8 | 63.5 | 65.9 | 65.1 | 68.5 | 65.3 | |
| Teach | 41.4 | 41.8 | 42.1 | 41.7 | 39.6 | 45.8 | 46.0 | 45.5 | 46.2 | |
| Have Book | 61.1 | 61.6 | 60.5 | 59.7 | 58.6 | 62.1 | 61.4 | 64.3 | 61.5 | |
| | 1607 | 1499 | 1481 | 1498 | 1527 | 1463 | 1505 | 1469 | 1527 | |
| | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 70.0 | 70.5 | 72.4 | 73.2 | 72.8 | 71.3 | 73.1 | 73.9 | 74.9 | 75.2 |
| Teach | 47.2 | 46.2 | 52.0 | 50.8 | 51.3 | 53.3 | 52.7 | 55.7 | 57.8 | 56.7 |
| Have Book | 67.1 | 64.1 | 68.2 | 67.1 | 68.4 | 67.7 | 69.9 | 68.5 | 69.5 | 68.3 |
| | 1457 | 976 | 1034 | 905 | 993 | 1058 | 2021 | 1912 | 1885 | 1858 |
| | | | | | | | | | | |
| | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2010 | | | | | |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 76.5 | 76.4 | 77.9 | 76.0 | 76.1 | | | | | |
| Teach | 59.7 | 63.8 | 61.3 | 60.4 | 60.2 | | | | | |
| Have Book | 72.3 | 72.3 | 71.8 | 71.3 | 73.7 | | | | | |
| | 931 | 873 | 1995 | 1353 | 1273 | | | | | |

Note: The sample size often varies slightly across the three items. The lowest number that applied is reported here and in the following tables.

Table 2

Allowing Communist to Speak, Teach, and Have Book in Library

| | 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | 1976 | 1977 | 1980 | 1982 | 1984 | 1985 | |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 52.8 | 60.9 | 58.3 | 55.1 | 55.9 | 55.1 | 55.8 | 59.5 | 58.0 | |
| Teach | 33.1 | 40.1 | 41.7 | 42.2 | 38.7 | 40.9 | 43.5 | 46.2 | 45.5 | |
| Have Book | 53.4 | 59.2 | 59.1 | 56.6 | 55.6 | 57.1 | 57.2 | 60.1 | 58.1 | |
| | 1606 | 1498 | 1477 | 1495 | 1524 | 1464 | 1496 | 1466 | 1528 | |
| | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 60.1 | 61.4 | 64.7 | 65.4 | 67.7 | 70.2 | 67.4 | 64.3 | 66.6 | 65.9 |
| Teach | 46.3 | 48.6 | 51.1 | 52.6 | 54.5 | 57.5 | 54.8 | 57.6 | 57.1 | 57.5 |
| Have Book | 61.8 | 60.3 | 62.6 | 63.9 | 67.1 | 67.8 | 66.7 | 65.1 | 66.9 | 66.3 |
| | 1457 | 977 | 1031 | 905 | 991 | 1057 | 2021 | 1913 | 1884 | 1855 |
| | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2010 | | | | | |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 68.8 | 69.2 | 67.9 | 65.9 | 64.1 | | | | | |
| Teach | 59.1 | 63.4 | 60.2 | 58.8 | 60.5 | | | | | |
| Have Book | 68.9 | 69.6 | 68.5 | 67.9 | 69.0 | | | | | |
| | 932 | 873 | 1991 | 1353 | 1271 | | | | | |

Table 3

Allowing Homosexual to Speak, Teach, and Have Book in Library

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1973 | 1974 | 1976 | 1977 | 1980 | 1982 | 1984 | 1985 | | |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 61.5 | 63.2 | 63.0 | 62.0 | 66.3 | 65.4 | 68.1 | 67.1 | | |
| Teach | 48.1 | 51.5 | 52.7 | 49.8 | 55.5 | 55.4 | 58.0 | 57.8 | | |
| Have Book | 54.1 | 56.0 | 56.0 | 55.1 | 58.5 | 56.6 | 59.5 | 56.2 | | |
| | 1501 | 1478 | 1496 | 1525 | 1466 | 1501 | 1468 | 1529 | | |
| | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 68.4 | 70.2 | 77.1 | 75.5 | 76.7 | 79.4 | 79.7 | 80.8 | 81.4 | 81.1 |
| Teach | 57.1 | 56.7 | 64.1 | 64.7 | 63.2 | 69.3 | 71.0 | 74.8 | 74.7 | 76.4 |
| Have Book | 58.4 | 60.9 | 65.7 | 65.6 | 68.5 | 67.4 | 68.8 | 69.0 | 70.4 | 71.0 |
| | 1460 | 977 | 1031 | 906 | 994 | 1059 | 2020 | 1912 | 1888 | 1858 |
| | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2010 | | | | | |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 83.1 | 82.6 | 82.1 | 81.7 | 86.0 | | | | | |
| Teach | 78.4 | 78.9 | 78.0 | 78.8 | 83.8 | | | | | |
| Have Book | 74.8 | 73.1 | 74.6 | 75.9 | 77.9 | | | | | |
| | 932 | 873 | 1990 | 1353 | 1274 | | | | | |

Table 4

Allow Anti-Black Racist to Speak, Teach, and Have Book in Library

| | 1976 | 1977 | 1980 | 1982 | 1984 | 1985 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 61.5 | 59.3 | 61.5 | 59.5 | 56.8 | 56.4 | 60.4 | 60.8 | 61.5 |
| Teach | 40.6 | 40.8 | 42.4 | 42.7 | 39.5 | 41.9 | 43.2 | 41.0 | 45.8 |
| Have Book | 59.8 | 61.6 | 63.8 | 60.2 | 63.1 | 60.5 | 63.5 | 61.4 | 64.6 |
| | 1491 | 1527 | 1462 | 1503 | 1469 | 1529 | 1458 | 978 | 1029 |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 | 2002 | 2004 |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 63.8 | 61.8 | 61.7 | 62.3 | 60.9 | 62.4 | 60.4 | 62.1 | 61.7 |
| Teach | 45.6 | 41.3 | 45.3 | 42.7 | 46.1 | 45.7 | 45.6 | 52.0 | 46.0 |
| Have Book | 64.7 | 64.7 | 65.1 | 66.4 | 64.0 | 62.8 | 63.4 | 64.7 | 65.1 |
| | 905 | 992 | 1058 | 2020 | 1912 | 1884 | 1854 | 931 | 874 |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| | 2006 | 2008 | 2010 | | | | | | |
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 62.2 | 58.3 | 57.7 | | | | | | |
| Teach | 47.3 | 44.8 | 48.2 | | | | | | |
| Have Book | 64.5 | 63.5 | 65.0 | | | | | | |
| | 1994 | 1355 | 1273 | | | | | | |

Table 5

Allow Militarist to Speak, Teach, and Have Book in Library

| | 1976 | 1977 | 1980 | 1982 | 1984 | 1985 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Allow to | | | | | | | | | |
| Speak | 54.6 | 51.0 | 56.8 | 54.8 | 56.5 | 55.4 | 55.6 | 57.1 | 60.7 |
| Teach | 37.3 | 34.3 | 39.3 | 39.2 | 40.9 | 40.4 | 39.7 | 37.9 | 42.3 |
| Have Book | 56.7 | 54.2 | 57.4 | 56.5 | 59.1 | 57.1 | 59.7 | 56.6 | 60.7 |
| | 1494 | 1526 | 1464 | 1499 | 1468 | 1530 | 1458 | 974 | 1029 |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| Allow to | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 | 2002 | 2004 |
| Speak | 58.5 | 62.2 | 65.5 | 64.6 | 63.4 | 66.5 | 63.8 | 68.7 | 66.6 |
| Teach | 44.4 | 43.0 | 48.9 | 47.1 | 47.9 | 51.3 | 48.0 | 55.5 | 53.1 |
| Have Book | 61.3 | 66.1 | 68.7 | 64.5 | 64.5 | 66.7 | 64.5 | 70.3 | 68.3 |
| | 905 | 990 | 1060 | 2022 | 1913 | 1887 | 1857 | 935 | 874 |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| Allow to | 2006 | 2008 | 2010 | | | | | | |
| Speak | 65.7 | 65.3 | 68.6 | | | | | | |
| Teach | 53.2 | 51.0 | 57.0 | | | | | | |
| Have Book | 68.9 | 69.4 | 71.0 | | | | | | |
| | 1993 | 1352 | 1272 | | | | | | |

Table 6

Allow Muslim Clergyman Preaching Hatred of the US
to Speak, Teach, and Have Book in Library

| | 2008 | 2010 |
|-----------|------|------|
| Allow to | | |
| Speak | 40.9 | 40.6 |
| Teach | 28.6 | 31.7 |
| Have Book | 48.6 | 48.1 |
| | 1350 | 1273 |

Table 7
Average Support for Civil liberties by Group and Time^a

| Year | Anti-Religion | Com-munist | Homo-sexual | Anti-Black | Mili-tarist | Muslim Extremist |
|--------|---------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1972 | 56.2 | 46.4 | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- |
| 1973 | 56.6 | 53.4 | 54.6 | ---- | ---- | ---- |
| 1974 | 55.0 | 53.0 | 56.9 | ---- | ---- | ---- |
| 1976 | 55.4 | 51.3 | 57.2 | 54.0 | 49.5 | ---- |
| 1977 | 53.9 | 50.1 | 55.6 | 53.9 | 46.5 | ---- |
| 1980 | 57.9 | 51.0 | 60.1 | 55.9 | 51.2 | ---- |
| 1982 | 57.5 | 52.2 | 59.1 | 54.1 | 50.2 | ---- |
| 1984 | 59.4 | 55.3 | 61.9 | 53.1 | 52.2 | ---- |
| 1985 | 57.7 | 53.9 | 60.4 | 52.9 | 51.0 | ---- |
| 1987 | 61.4 | 56.1 | 61.3 | 55.7 | 51.7 | ---- |
| 1988 | 60.3 | 56.8 | 62.6 | 54.4 | 50.5 | ---- |
| 1989 | 64.2 | 59.5 | 69.0 | 57.3 | 54.6 | ---- |
| 1990 | 63.7 | 60.6 | 68.6 | 58.0 | 54.7 | ---- |
| 1991 | 64.2 | 63.1 | 69.5 | 55.9 | 57.1 | ---- |
| 1993 | 64.1 | 65.2 | 72.0 | 57.4 | 61.0 | ---- |
| 1994 | 65.2 | 63.0 | 73.2 | 57.1 | 58.7 | ---- |
| 1996 | 66.0 | 62.3 | 74.9 | 57.0 | 58.6 | ---- |
| 1998 | 67.4 | 63.5 | 75.5 | 57.0 | 61.5 | ---- |
| 2000 | 66.7 | 63.2 | 76.2 | 56.5 | 58.8 | ---- |
| 2002 | 69.5 | 65.6 | 78.8 | 59.6 | 64.8 | ---- |
| 2004 | 70.8 | 67.4 | 78.2 | 57.6 | 62.7 | ---- |
| 2006 | 70.3 | 65.5 | 78.2 | 58.0 | 62.6 | ---- |
| 2008 | 69.2 | 64.2 | 78.8 | 55.5 | 61.9 | 39.4 |
| 2010 | 70.0 | 64.5 | 82.6 | 57.0 | 65.5 | 40.1 |
| 2010 – | | | | | | |
| First | +13.8 | +18.1 | +28.0 | + 3.0 | +16.0 | + 0.7 |
| High- | | | | | | |
| Low | +16.9 | +21.0 | +28.0 | + 6.7 | +19.0 | + 0.7 |

^aAverage percentage saying group should be allowed to speak, teach, and have book in library.

Table 8

Average Support for Civil Liberties for
Anti-Religionist, Communist, Homosexual, Anti-Black Racist, and Militarist, 1976-2010

| | % |
|----------------|-------|
| 1976 | 53.5 |
| 1977 | 52.0 |
| 1980 | 55.2 |
| 1982 | 54.6 |
| 1984 | 56.4 |
| 1985 | 55.2 |
| 1987 | 57.2 |
| 1988 | 56.9 |
| 1989 | 60.9 |
| 1990 | 61.1 |
| 1991 | 62.0 |
| 1993 | 63.9 |
| 1994 | 63.4 |
| 1996 | 63.8 |
| 1998 | 65.0 |
| 2000 | 64.3 |
| 2002 | 67.7 |
| 2004 | 67.3 |
| 2006 | 66.9 |
| 2008 | 65.9 |
| 2010 | 67.9 |
| 2010 – 1976 | +14.4 |
| High – Low | +15.9 |

Table 9

Rank of Groups on Allowing Them to Speak, Teach, and Have Book in Library, 2010

Speak

| | |
|-------------------|-------|
| Homosexual | 86.0% |
| Anti-Religionist | 76.1% |
| Militarist | 68.6% |
| Communist | 64.1% |
| Anti-Black Racist | 57.7% |
| Muslim Hating US | 40.6% |

Teach

| | |
|-------------------|-------|
| Homosexual | 83.8% |
| Communist | 60.5% |
| Anti-Religionist | 60.2% |
| Militarist | 57.0% |
| Anti-Black Racist | 48.2% |
| Muslim Hating US | 31.7% |

Library Book

| | |
|-------------------|-------|
| Homosexual | 77.9% |
| Anti-Religionist | 73.7% |
| Militarist | 71.0% |
| Communist | 69.0% |
| Anti-Black Racist | 65.0% |
| Muslim Hating US | 48.1% |

Average of Speak, Teach, and Library Book

| | |
|-------------------|-------|
| Homosexual | 82.6% |
| Anti-Religionist | 70.0% |
| Militarist | 65.5% |
| Communist | 64.5% |
| Anti-Black Racist | 57.0% |
| Muslim Hating US | 40.1% |