



HOW FREE AMERICANS FEEL?

Self-Censorship in the United States

2023–2026

A Sociological and Policy Dossier

Prepared by Amnesty Freedom

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Prologue

Human rights violations often announce themselves through recognizable symptoms: the suppression of expression, the dismantling of culture, and the quiet removal of protective norms wherever they occur. Amnesty Freedom was founded on the conviction that these symptoms must be documented before they are normalized, and that the documentation must be honest enough to survive contact with people who disagree with us.

This dossier turns that method inward. The organization's field work has historically concentrated on societies where the state is the primary author of silence. The United States is not such a society. Its formal legal protections for expression remain among the most robust in the world, and this report does not suggest otherwise. What the evidence assembled here describes is a different and subtler phenomenon: a population that retains the right to speak and, in its majority, routinely declines to exercise it.

That distinction is very important. A right that goes unused does not disappear from the statute book; it disappears from the culture. When a majority of a country's citizens report watching what they say in ordinary conversation, when more than a third of its professors report toning down their published work, and when its youngest adults report the highest levels of fear of any generation, the machinery of self-government is affected whether or not a single prosecution is ever brought.

We publish this analysis in the same spirit in which we publish our overseas reporting: without partisan allegiance, without the assumption that one political faction is the sole victim or the sole author of the problem, and with a preference for statistical evidence over anecdote. The findings below will not comfort any single constituency. We regard that as a sign that the measurement is working.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This dossier presents a synthesis of national polling, academic research, and institutional survey data on how Americans perceive their freedom of speech and how frequently they decline to use it. It draws on the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) National Speech Index, the Knight Foundation–SSRS Perspectives on Free Expression Survey, the Pew Research Center, Gallup, AP-NORC, the Cato Institute, and the Freedom Forum, with an emphasis on data fielded between 2023 and mid-2026.

The central finding is that self-censorship in the United States is a majority behavior, not a fringe one, and that the fears driving it are principally social, relational, and physical rather than governmental or economic. Loss of an important personal relationship and fear of physical harm both rank above loss of employment among the consequences Americans say most influence their silence. A second finding, less widely appreciated, is that the distribution of silence is not linear across the ideological spectrum. The most ideologically committed Americans at both poles report the greatest comfort speaking; the moderate majority reports the least. The public conversation is therefore voiced disproportionately by its tails.

Headline Findings

- **Sixty-eight percent of Americans say free expression is heading in the wrong direction.** This is FIRE’s National Speech Index reading for the wave fielded July 7–20, 2026. The figure reached a record 74 percent in the wave fielded October 20–28, 2025, weeks after the assassination of Charlie Kirk, and has recovered only modestly since.
- **Only 18 percent of Americans say the right to free speech is “very” or “completely” secure,** against 44 percent who say it is not very or not at all secure. This measure has not recovered from its October 2025 low of 15 percent and remains below the 24 percent recorded in October 2024.
- **Fifty-five percent of Americans censored themselves at least occasionally in the past month, and 23 percent did so at least a couple of times a week.** Across eight quarterly waves since October 2024 this measure has drifted modestly downward rather than upward, from 62 percent to 55 percent, with no wave falling below 52 percent. Self-censorship is entrenched at majority level; it is not, on this evidence, currently worsening.
- **Americans believe their expressive freedom is in long-run decline.** In the Knight Foundation–SSRS survey of 25,873 adults fielded May 4–26, 2026, 72 percent said they had felt very or mostly free to express political views ten years ago, 54 percent said so of today, and only 42 percent expected to feel free ten years from now.
- **American faculty now report self-censoring at roughly four times the McCarthy-era rate.** Asked a question worded identically to one posed in 1955, 35 percent of faculty in FIRE’s 2024 survey said they had recently toned down their writing for fear of controversy, against 9 percent of social scientists in the Lazarsfeld and Thielens study of that year.
- **The sharpest recent movement is in private life, not public life.** The share of Americans who have stopped talking to someone about political news because of something that person

said rose from 45 percent in 2024 to 56 percent in December 2025, an eleven-point jump after six years of stability.

- **Nearly half of Americans fear the consequences of dissenting from their own side.** In Gallup’s May 2026 survey, 44 percent were somewhat or very concerned about negative consequences from publicly disagreeing with their own party, faith community, profession, or friends, and 46 percent said doing so requires a lot of courage or an extraordinary amount of it.
- **Economic fear is not the binding constraint.** Among Americans who fear consequences for dissent, the deterrent ranked most influential is losing an important personal relationship (23 percent), followed by physical harm or threats (21 percent). Losing a job or source of income ranks third, at 17 percent of that group.

Structure of the Analysis

The dossier is organized into four domains of life in which expression is negotiated, followed by four analytical sections. The domains are sequenced from the most institutionally regulated to the least:

- **Domain 01: The Workplace.** Where the feared sanction is economic and the governing authority is a private employer.
- **Domain 02: Education.** Where the feared sanction is both professional and reputational, and where the measured chill is most severe.
- **Domain 03: Private Life.** Where the feared sanction is relational, and where the trend line has moved fastest.
- **Domain 04: The Public and Digital Sphere.** Where the feared sanction is exposure, and where government pressure on private intermediaries is the dominant structural concern.

These are followed by an examination of the psychological mechanisms that convert private disagreement into public silence, an analysis of which Americans are most reticent, a historical benchmark against the McCarthy era, and an assessment of where the indicators point.

Table 1. Summary of Principal Indicators, 2024–2026

Indicator	Latest Reading	Comparison Point	Source and Field Date
Free expression heading in wrong direction	68%	74% (Oct 2025 record)	FIRE National Speech Index, Jul 7–20, 2026
Free speech “very” or “completely” secure	18%	24% (Oct 2024)	FIRE National Speech Index, Jul 7–20, 2026
Self-censored at least occasionally in past month	55%	62% (Oct 2024)	FIRE National Speech Index, Jul 7–20, 2026
Feel very or mostly free to express political views	54%	72% (2026 recall of ten years prior)	Knight–SSRS, May 4–26, 2026 (n = 25,873)
Stopped discussing political news with someone	56%	45% (2024)	Pew Research Center, Dec 8–14, 2025 (n = 3,560)

Faculty who toned down their writing	35%	9% (1955)	FIRE, Mar–May 2024 (n = 6,269); Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1955 (n = 2,451)
Undergraduates self-censoring in class, occasionally or more	62%	65% (2025 fielding)	FIRE–College Pulse, Jan–Jun 2026 (n = 62,997)
Fear consequences of dissenting from own side	44%	not previously asked	Gallup / With Honor, May 12–22, 2026

Two cautions apply to the table above and to the dossier generally. The instruments cited differ in population, mode, and question wording, and small differences between them should not be read as trends; where this dossier reports movement over time, it does so within a single instrument asking a consistent question. And the comparison points in the right-hand column are not a common baseline, each is the most informative prior reading available for that measure, and one of them, the Knight figure, is a retrospective self-report collected in 2026 rather than a measurement taken in 2016.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

Precision about terms is necessary because the public debate on this subject routinely conflates distinct phenomena. A person who declines to speak because a law forbids it, a person who declines because an employer may retaliate, and a person who declines because a friend may take offense are all “silenced” in ordinary speech, but they are experiencing three different mechanisms with three different remedies. The following lexicon is used consistently throughout this dossier.

1. Forms of Restraint

Self-censorship. The operational definition used by FIRE in its faculty and student instruments, and adopted here: refraining from sharing certain views because one fears social consequences (such as exclusion from social events), professional consequences (such as losing a job or a promotion), legal consequences (such as prosecution or a fine), or violent consequences (such as assault). The definition is deliberately agnostic as to whether the fear is warranted.

Chilling effect. The deterrence of lawful expression by the anticipated application of a sanction, whether or not that sanction is ever applied. The distinguishing feature is that the deterrence operates in advance and leaves no record; a chilled statement generates no case file, no complaint, and no data point except in survey research.

Preference falsification. Timur Kuran’s term, introduced in 1987 and developed in *Private Truths, Public Lies* (1995), for the public expression of a preference that differs from the one privately held. Kuran’s central claim is that falsification is not merely a private accommodation but a public harm, because it corrupts the information on which a society bases its collective decisions.

Pluralistic ignorance. The condition in which most members of a group privately reject a norm but incorrectly assume that most other members accept it. It is the informational consequence of widespread preference falsification and the reason silence tends to be self-reinforcing.

2. Mechanisms of Enforcement

Social sanction. Punishment administered by peers rather than by institutions: criticism, exclusion from a group, or the loss of a personal relationship. The evidence assembled in this dossier identifies social sanction as the dominant driver of American self-censorship, ahead of both economic and governmental sanction.

Reputational sanction. Punishment administered through the durable public record: the circulation of a statement, often decontextualized, to audiences for whom it was not intended. Its distinguishing feature is persistence; unlike a social sanction, it does not decay with time and is not confined to the speaker’s own community.

Doxxing. The deliberate publication of a person’s identifying information, home address, employer, family members, in order to expose them to sanction by third parties. Doxxing converts a reputational sanction into a potential physical one. It is frequently invoked in public debate as a driver of silence,

but no national polling on its incidence or on fear of it could be located for the 2024-2026 period, and this dossier therefore makes no quantitative claim about it.

The heckler’s veto. The suppression of a speaker by the disruptive conduct of an audience, with or without institutional acquiescence. In the campus context it is measured through the reported acceptability of shouting down a speaker, blocking entry to an event, or using violence to stop a speech.

3. State Action at One Remove

Jawboning. Informal government pressure on a private intermediary, a social media platform, a broadcaster, a bank, an artificial intelligence developer, to restrict expression that the government could not restrict directly. The constitutional status of jawboning remains unresolved: in *Murthy v. Missouri* (2024) the Supreme Court disposed of the leading challenge on standing grounds and did not reach the First Amendment merits.

Administrative pressure. The use of licensing, procurement, accreditation, investigation, or regulatory review to influence the editorial or expressive conduct of a regulated entity. Unlike jawboning, it operates through formal instruments, but its speech effects are similarly indirect and similarly difficult to litigate.

Algorithmic and platform moderation. The private curation of expression at scale. It is not state action, but it is perceived as politically directional by a large majority of Americans: in Pew’s February 2024 survey, 83 percent thought it at least somewhat likely that social media companies intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable.

4. A Note on What This Dossier Does Not Claim

Survey research measures perception and reported behavior. It does not, on its own, establish that the perceived risk is accurate. This distinction recurs throughout the analysis and is most visible in the workplace domain, where the share of employees who report fearing mistreatment for their political views substantially exceeds the share who report actually experiencing it. Both figures are real; they measure different things. Where the gap between perceived and experienced risk is large, this dossier says so.

Equally, this dossier does not treat self-censorship as uniformly pathological. Discretion, tact, and the decision not to litigate every disagreement are ordinary features of social life, and a survey item asking whether a respondent “watched what they said” in the past month will capture a great deal of simple courtesy alongside genuine fear. The analytically significant measures are therefore those that specify a feared consequence, those that ask about frequency at the weekly or daily level, and those that track movement over time within a fixed instrument.

DOMAIN 01: THE WORKPLACE

Economic Fear, Measured Against Economic Experience

The workplace is the domain in which American anxiety about speech is most frequently discussed and least well supported by longitudinal data. The canonical statistic, the Cato Institute's finding that 62 percent of Americans say the political climate prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive, is now six years old, having been fielded July 1–6, 2020 among 2,000 adults. No subsequent wave of that instrument could be located. It is cited here as a benchmark, not as a current reading.

Where current data exists, it tells a more qualified story than the discourse suggests. The most important structural finding of this section is that fear of workplace retaliation for speech is real, widely reported, and essentially flat, and that it substantially exceeds the reported incidence of actual retaliation.

The Prevalence of Career Fear

Cato's July 2020 survey found that **32 percent of employed Americans** were worried about missing out on career opportunities or losing their job if their political opinions became known. The distribution was notable for being close to symmetric by ideology, liberals 31 percent, moderates 30 percent, conservatives 34 percent, while diverging sharply by party (Democrats 28 percent, independents 31 percent, Republicans 38 percent) and, most sharply of all, by education.

The education gradient is the least intuitive finding in the series and deserves emphasis. Career fear rose steadily from 25 percent among Americans with a high school education to **44 percent among those holding a post-graduate degree**. Cato attributed the gap principally to Republicans, among whom post-graduate degree holders reached 60 percent. The pattern is inconsistent with a model in which speech risk falls primarily on the economically vulnerable; it is consistent with one in which risk rises with the professional visibility and reputational exposure of the job.

FIRE's National Speech Index has since made this measurable on a current basis. Asked how worried they are about losing their job because someone complains about something they have said, **37 percent of Americans were at least slightly worried** in the wave fielded July 7–20, 2026, with 20 percent somewhat or very worried. The comparable figures in the April 2026 wave were 35 percent and 20 percent. Cato's 32 percent from 2020 falls within the same range. That resemblance is a cross-instrument inference rather than a measured trend, since the two organizations asked differently worded questions; what can be said within a single instrument is narrower and holds, which is that the measure has not moved across the three FIRE waves from October 2025 to July 2026.

Reported Experience Versus Reported Fear

The largest employee-level instrument on this subject is Gallup's study of 9,894 U.S. employees fielded February 6–16, 2024. It asked about experience rather than apprehension, and the results are markedly less alarming than the fear measures:

- **45 percent** had discussed political issues with a coworker in the past year; 38 percent had overheard coworkers doing so.
- **12 percent** had felt uncomfortable because of political discussions among coworkers.
- **3 percent** reported being treated unfairly because of their political views.
- **14 percent** reported feeling included because of political discussions, and **11 percent** reported growing closer to a coworker because of their political views, that is, more employees reported a positive social outcome from workplace political talk than a negative one.

The contrast with the fear measures is the analytically important result. Roughly a third of employed Americans anticipate professional harm from their political views; roughly three percent report having experienced unfair treatment on that basis in the past year. These are not contradictory findings. A chilling effect operates precisely by preventing the conduct that would trigger the sanction, so a low incidence rate is partly an artifact of successful deterrence. But the gap is wide enough that it cannot be attributed to deterrence alone, and it suggests that the perceived probability of workplace retaliation exceeds its actual frequency.

Gallup's parallel survey of 46,933 U.S. adults, fielded May 1–15, 2024, found that **57 percent** said they had at times avoided sharing their political views because of fear of harassment or poor treatment, and **31 percent** said they had been treated poorly or harassed in the past year because of their political views. These figures cover all settings and all adults rather than the workplace and employees, so they are not a like-for-like comparison with the 3 percent above. What they establish is that mistreatment over political views is a common experience in American life generally and a comparatively rare one at work.

Mode of work is a significant moderator. On-site employees were far more likely than remote employees to have discussed politics at work (54 percent versus 28 percent) or to have overheard such discussion (47 percent versus 16 percent). The growth of remote work has therefore reduced exposure to workplace political speech in both directions, reducing the occasion for conflict and, equally, the occasion for the cross-cutting contact that moderates it.

The Retreat From, and Return to, Corporate Speech

Employer conduct has moved on its own trajectory. The Bentley University–Gallup Business in Society survey found the share of Americans saying businesses should take a public stance on current events falling from 48 percent in 2022 to 41 percent in 2023 and 38 percent in 2024, then rebounding to **51 percent** in the wave fielded May 5–12, 2025 among 3,007 adults. Support rose across every issue tested; on free speech specifically it moved from 48 percent to 58 percent. Any account of American corporate life as engaged in a monotonic retreat from public expression is not supported by the most recent data.

Employees themselves, however, remain the more reticent constituency, and their answers contain an instructive tension. Asked in general terms whether their own employer should communicate a stance to them on current events, **60 percent of employed Americans said they would prefer it did not**. Asked instead about twelve specific policy topics, majorities wanted their employer to speak on four

of them: mental health (62 percent), healthcare (62 percent), diversity, equity and inclusion (54 percent), and free speech itself (52 percent). The two items are not reconcilable as simple subsets of one another, and Gallup does not reconcile them; the most defensible reading is that employees reject corporate stance-taking as a general practice while endorsing it on the specific matters closest to hiring, workplace policy, and benefits.

Table 2. Workplace Speech Indicators

Indicator	Finding	Population and Field Date	Source
Political climate prevents saying what one believes	62%	2,000 adults; Jul 1–6, 2020	Cato Institute / YouGov
Employed Americans fearing career harm from political views	32%	Employed subsample; Jul 2020	Cato Institute / YouGov
— among post-graduate degree holders	44%	Employed subsample; Jul 2020	Cato Institute / YouGov
At least slightly worried about losing job over a complaint	37%	1,000 adults; Jul 7–20, 2026	FIRE National Speech Index
Somewhat or very worried about the same	20%	1,000 adults; Jul 7–20, 2026	FIRE National Speech Index
Discussed politics with a coworker in past year	45%	9,894 employees; Feb 6–16, 2024	Gallup
Felt uncomfortable due to coworkers' political discussion	12%	9,894 employees; Feb 6–16, 2024	Gallup
Treated unfairly because of political views	3%	9,894 employees; Feb 6–16, 2024	Gallup
Avoided sharing political views for fear of poor treatment	57%	46,933 adults; May 1–15, 2024	Gallup
Prefer employer take no public stance on current events	60%	3,007 adults; May 5–12, 2025	Bentley–Gallup

Assessment

The workplace produces the most widely cited statistics on American self-censorship and the weakest evidence of deterioration. Career fear is substantial, concentrated among the highly educated rather than the economically precarious, and stable across the six years for which comparable measurement exists. It is also, on the available evidence, considerably larger than the reported incidence of workplace retaliation. The workplace should be understood as a domain of durable, moderate, and largely anticipatory anxiety, not as the epicenter of the phenomenon. As the psychological analysis below demonstrates, Americans themselves rank job loss only third among the consequences that actually deter them from speaking.

DOMAIN 02: EDUCATION

The Most Severely Chilled Environment in American Life

Education is the domain in which self-censorship is most thoroughly measured and most severe. It is also the domain in which the historical comparison is cleanest, because a question asked of American faculty in 1955 has been asked again, verbatim, in 2024. The campus is therefore both the sharpest contemporary reading and the only reliable bridge to the McCarthy-era baseline.

Two instruments carry most of the evidentiary weight. FIRE's College Free Speech Rankings, produced with College Pulse, is the largest survey of undergraduate expression in the world; its 2027 edition, published September 9, 2026, drew on **62,997 undergraduates at 262 institutions**, 261 of which met the threshold to be ranked, fielded January 2 to June 3, 2026. FIRE's faculty survey, Silence in the Classroom, drew on **6,269 faculty at 55 institutions**, fielded March 4 to May 13, 2024.

Students

Prevalence of Self-Censorship

Undergraduate self-censorship is the majority condition in every relational context measured. In the 2027 rankings data, the share reporting that they refrain from sharing views at least occasionally was 62 percent in classroom discussions, 60 percent in conversations with professors, and 57 percent each with other students and with administrators. Between 24 and 27 percent reported doing so fairly often or very often, that is, at least several times a week. Only 8 to 13 percent said they never self-censor.

Discomfort is similarly distributed. Fifty-seven percent of undergraduates said they would be uncomfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial topic, 48 percent expressing views on a controversial political topic during an in-class discussion, and **62 percent posting an unpopular opinion on social media**, the highest figure of any context tested, and a finding that recurs across every domain in this dossier.

The Acceptability of Disruption

FIRE measures student tolerance for three forms of suppressive conduct. In the 2027 data, 35 percent of undergraduates said shouting down a speaker is at least sometimes acceptable, 20 percent said the same of blocking entry to an event, and **15 percent said using violence to stop a speech is at least sometimes acceptable**. The first two eased slightly from the record highs recorded in the prior edition (36 and 22 percent), which had themselves risen from 2024 levels; tolerance for violence was unchanged at 15 percent. The direction is marginally encouraging; the levels are not. Roughly one undergraduate in seven regards political violence against speech as sometimes legitimate, and that figure has not moved.

The 2027 edition also recorded a first: **majorities of students opposed allowing every one of the six hypothetical speakers tested**, three drawn from the political right and three from the left. This is the second consecutive year of that pattern and marks the collapse of a distinction that had previously organized campus speech debates, that objection was directional. It is no longer.

Which Topics Are Undiscussable

Knight’s parallel survey of 1,678 students, fielded March 7–28, 2024, put the question institutionally rather than personally: asked whether self-censorship limits educationally valuable conversations on their campus, **66 percent said it does so often or sometimes**. The same survey found 44 percent of students reporting discomfort because of something said about their identity, against 25 percent in 2017.

Sixty-eight percent of undergraduates reported that at least one of twenty-two tested topics is difficult to discuss openly on campus. The ranking is instructive: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (50 percent), Donald Trump (46 percent), **Charlie Kirk (44 percent)**, abortion (43 percent), transgender rights (38 percent), and immigration (38 percent). At 61 of the 261 ranked institutions, a majority of students named Kirk as difficult to discuss, a topic that did not exist as a survey item before September 2025.

Institutional Performance

The aggregate picture is poor and improving. The average institutional score in the 2027 rankings was **61.36, a D-minus**, which FIRE reports as the highest in seven years of measurement. Because the scoring methodology changed between the 2025 and 2026 editions, that seven-year comparison spans a break and should be treated as FIRE’s characterization rather than a like-for-like series. What is directly comparable is the one-year movement, from 58.63 to 61.36, and it is an improvement on a failing base. **One hundred twenty-one of 261 ranked institutions received an F**; only 24 earned a C or better. The University of Chicago (81.42) ranked first, followed by Claremont McKenna (80.13) and Georgia Tech (78.98); New York University (44.97) ranked last, behind the University of Washington and Texas State. Only 40 percent of students said it is extremely or very clear that their administration protects free speech.

Table 3. Undergraduate Expression Indicators, 2024–2027 Editions

Indicator	2027 ed.	2026 ed.	2025 ed.	2024 ed.
Respondents	62,997	68,510	58,807	55,102
Institutions surveyed	262	257	257	254
Fielding window	Jan–Jun 2026	Jan–Jun 2025	Jan–Jun 2024	Jan–Jun 2023
Self-censor in class, occasionally or more	62%	65%	—	—
Self-censor with peers, occasionally or more	57%	59%	—	—
Shouting down a speaker acceptable (rarely or more)	69%	71%	68%	63%
Blocking entry acceptable (rarely or more)	50%	54%	52%	45%
Violence to stop a speech acceptable (rarely or more)	31%	34%	32%	27%
Average institutional score	61.36 (D–)	58.63	—	—

Note: FIRE has reported disruption items at two thresholds across editions. The table uses the “rarely acceptable or more” threshold, which is the only one available for all four editions. At the stricter “sometimes or always acceptable” threshold, the 2027 figures

are 35, 20, and 15 percent respectively. Scoring methodology changed between the 2025 and 2026 editions; absolute scores are not comparable across that break.

Faculty

The Identical-Question Benchmark

In 1955, Paul Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens surveyed 2,451 American social scientists during April and May, at the close of the McCarthy period, and asked: “Have you toned down anything you have written lately because you were worried that it might cause too much controversy?” Nine percent said yes. In 2024, FIRE asked American faculty the same question in the same words. **Thirty-five percent said yes**, close to four times the rate recorded at the height of the Cold War loyalty investigations.

This is the single most important statistic in this dossier, and it requires careful handling. It does not establish that American academics face conditions comparable to those of 1955; the sanctions of that era included congressional subpoena, criminal referral, and coordinated state action, and the 1955 study documented 990 accusation incidents of which 104 ended in a firing or forced resignation. What the comparison establishes is narrower and still significant: that the felt pressure to moderate one’s published work is now reported at several times the rate it was reported when that pressure was overtly governmental. The mechanism has changed; the reported experience has intensified.

The Broader Faculty Picture

- **Twenty-seven percent of faculty** say they often feel unable to express their opinions because of how administrators, colleagues, or students might respond; 64 percent say so at least occasionally.
- **Forty-two percent** report being likely to self-censor in classroom discussion or lectures, with at least 20 percent doing so in each of academic writing, research topic selection, conference presentations, and email.
- **Twenty-three percent** worry about losing their job because someone misunderstands something they have said or done; **40 percent** worry about damaging their reputation on the same basis.
- **Fourteen percent** have faced discipline or the threat of discipline over their teaching, research, talks, or off-campus speech.
- Only **27 percent** believe academic freedom is secure on their own campus.
- The ideological asymmetry is stark: **55 percent of conservative faculty report hiding their political views to keep their job, against 17 percent of liberal faculty**. Only 20 percent of faculty say a conservative would fit well in their department, against roughly 75 percent for a liberal.
- Job security moderates everything: **non-tenure-track faculty report higher self-censorship than tenured faculty across every professional context measured**.

The topics faculty find difficult to discuss openly on campus track the student list closely: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (70 percent), racial inequality (51 percent), transgender rights (49 percent), affirmative action (47 percent), and the presidential election (41 percent).

Sanction as a Measurable Event

FIRE’s Scholars Under Fire database records public attempts to sanction scholars for constitutionally protected expression. As of October 2025 it documented **almost 1,700 scholars targeted since 2000, of which more than 300 cases ended in termination or forced resignation**. Attempts rose from 87 in 2019 to 151 in 2020 and a peak of 213 in 2021; annual counts for 2023 onward have not been published. In the associated survey of 209 targeted scholars fielded January–April 2025, 94 percent described the experience as negative, 65 percent reported emotional distress, 27 percent sought psychological counseling, and 20 percent lost their jobs. Seventy-one percent were pessimistic about academic freedom at their institution, against 36 percent of faculty nationally.

The September 2025 Discontinuity

The assassination of Charlie Kirk at Utah Valley University on September 10, 2025 produced the sharpest short-term movement recorded in any of these instruments. In a FIRE–College Pulse survey of 2,028 undergraduates fielded October 3–31, 2025, roughly half reported becoming less comfortable in the aftermath: 50 percent regarding attending or hosting controversial campus events, **48 percent regarding expressing controversial opinions on social media**, 45 percent regarding in-class discussion, and 43 percent in common campus spaces. At Utah Valley University itself, classroom self-censorship at least a couple of times a week rose from 24 percent before the killing to 33 percent after, and 84 percent of its students said the country is headed in the wrong direction on free expression, against 73 percent elsewhere.

The same survey recorded the willingness to impose sanction. Asked whether a professor should be fired for particular social media posts, 43 percent of undergraduates said yes for “These fascist Bible-thumpers want to drag us back to the Dark Ages,” 38 percent for “Our colleges and universities are progressive indoctrination centers,” 31 percent for “It’s O.K. to punch a Nazi,” and 30 percent for “We are going to make America great again.” Among the general public, polled by FIRE in the same period, the corresponding figure for the punch-a-Nazi post was 45 percent. Roughly nine in ten undergraduates agreed that words can be violence.

Table 4. Faculty Expression Indicators, 1955 and 2024

Indicator	1955	2024	Instrument
Toned down recent writing to avoid controversy	9%	35%	Lazarsfeld & Thielens (n = 2,451); FIRE (n = 6,269)
Wondered how a political opinion might affect career	27%	—	Lazarsfeld & Thielens, Apr–May 1955
Concerned students would distort their views to administrators	40%	—	Lazarsfeld & Thielens, Apr–May 1955
Often unable to express opinions on campus	—	27%	FIRE Faculty Survey, Mar–May 2024
Worry about losing job over a misunderstanding	—	23%	FIRE Faculty Survey, Mar–May 2024
Worry about reputational damage over a misunderstanding	—	40%	FIRE Faculty Survey, Mar–May 2024

Hide political views to keep their job, conservative faculty	—	55%	FIRE Faculty Survey, Mar–May 2024
Hide political views to keep their job, liberal faculty	—	17%	FIRE Faculty Survey, Mar–May 2024
Believe academic freedom is secure on their campus	—	27%	FIRE Faculty Survey, Mar–May 2024
Documented sanction attempts	990 incidents, 104 dismissals	~1,700 since 2000, 300+ dismissals	Lazarsfeld & Thielens; FIRE Scholars Under Fire

Assessment

Education is where the chill is deepest, best documented, and most clearly worsening on a multi-decade horizon. It is the only domain in which a verbatim historical comparison is available, and that comparison is unfavorable. It is also the domain in which the sanction is most asymmetric by ideology: conservative faculty report concealing their views at more than three times the rate of liberal faculty. The marginal improvement in the 2027 student data, the highest average score in seven years, slight declines in tolerance for disruption, is genuine, and should not be mistaken for recovery from a low base.

DOMAIN 03: PRIVATE LIFE

Home, Family, and the Fastest-Moving Indicator

The domestic sphere receives the least policy attention and has produced the most dramatic recent movement of any domain in this dossier. It is also the domain in which the self-censorship in question is least susceptible to institutional remedy: no statute, employment policy, or platform rule governs what a person says at their own dinner table.

The headline measure comes from the Pew Research Center’s survey of 3,560 U.S. adults fielded December 8–14, 2025. Asked whether they had ever stopped talking to someone about political or election news because of something that person said, **56 percent said yes**. The trend line makes the finding: 45 percent in 2019, 42 percent in 2020, 45 percent in 2024, and then an eleven-point jump in a single year. After six years of stability, the private conversational sphere contracted sharply.

Who Withdraws

The demographic distribution of this withdrawal inverts the pattern seen in the workplace domain, and is one of the most important asymmetries in this report:

- **Liberal Democrats, 77 percent**, by a wide margin the most withdrawn group. Conservative and moderate Democrats reported 55 percent, conservative Republicans 53 percent, and moderate or liberal Republicans 46 percent.
- **College graduates, 65 percent**, against 58 percent with some college and 46 percent with a high school education or less.
- **Adults 65 and older, 62 percent**, against 51 percent of adults under 30.

The age finding requires interpretation, because the reasons diverge by generation. Among adults under 30, the barriers to discussing news are principally informational, 65 percent cite not knowing enough and 64 percent cite a lack of interest. Among adults 65 and older, those figures fall to 50 and 41 percent, and discomfort dominates. Younger avoidance is largely disengagement; older avoidance is largely conflict-aversion. Both register identically in the topline and mean very different things.

The Deterioration of Cross-Cutting Conversation

The withdrawal follows a measurable decline in the experience of disagreement itself. In Pew’s survey of 8,480 adults fielded July 10–16, 2023, **61 percent described conversations with people who disagree with them politically as “stressful and frustrating,”** against **36 percent who found them “interesting and informative.”** In May 2019 the split had been 50 to 48. An eleven-point deterioration in four years preceded the eleven-point withdrawal that followed.

The same survey found 65 percent of Americans reporting that politics always or often makes them feel exhausted and 55 percent angry, against 10 percent hopeful and 4 percent excited. Notably, the most politically engaged Americans reported the highest exhaustion (72 percent) and anger (69 percent), the burden falls most heavily on those who participate most. Cross-cutting conversation was found most stressful by White respondents (67 percent), adults over 50 (64 percent), and college

graduates (66 percent). It was found least stressful by Black respondents, at 47 percent, half of whom still described such conversations as interesting, the only group approaching parity between the two. There was no meaningful difference between Republicans and Democrats.

Dissent Within One's Own Circle

The most analytically useful private-life instrument located for this dossier is Gallup's survey of 3,199 U.S. adults fielded May 12–22, 2026, conducted with With Honor, because it measures fear of disagreeing with one's own side rather than the other. **Forty-four percent of Americans were somewhat or very concerned about negative consequences from publicly disagreeing with their own political party, religious community, profession, or friends, and 46 percent said that doing so requires a lot of courage or an extraordinary amount of it.**

This is the empirical signature of preference falsification operating inside political coalitions rather than across them. If nearly half of Americans treat internal dissent as an act of courage, then the apparent unanimity of any political grouping is systematically overstated, and each member's estimate of what their own side believes is systematically distorted. The consequences are examined in the following section.

Counter-Evidence

Two findings cut against a simple narrative of retreat, and are reported here for balance.

- **Holiday-table dread has fallen, not risen.** Marist polling in November 2017 found 58 percent of Americans who celebrate Thanksgiving dreading political conversation at the table. In the 2022 wave, fielded November 14–16 among 1,292 such adults, **47 percent said they were eager to talk politics against 42 percent who dreaded it**, a reversal. No subsequent wave of this instrument could be located, so the comparison ends in 2022 and predates the sharp 2025 movement in the Pew series.
- **Political sorting in intimate life is real but concentrated.** Analysis published by the Survey Center on American Life in February 2025 found 52 percent of single women less likely to date a Trump supporter, rising to 73 percent among college-educated single women, and roughly 40 percent of single men less likely to date a woman who identifies as a feminist. That commentary aggregates multiple underlying instruments and does not publish sample sizes or fielding dates for most figures; it is cited here as indicative rather than definitive.

Table 5. Private-Life Expression Indicators

Indicator	Finding	Population and Field Date	Source
Stopped discussing political news with someone	56%	3,560 adults; Dec 8–14, 2025	Pew Research Center
— same measure, 2024 / 2020 / 2019	45% / 42% / 45%	Pew American Trends Panel	Pew Research Center
— among liberal Democrats	77%	3,560 adults; Dec 8–14, 2025	Pew Research Center

Cross-cutting conversation “stressful and frustrating”	61%	8,480 adults; Jul 10–16, 2023	Pew Research Center
— same measure, May 2019	50%	Pew American Trends Panel	Pew Research Center
Politics always or often makes them feel exhausted	65%	8,480 adults; Jul 10–16, 2023	Pew Research Center
Fear consequences of disagreeing with their own side	44%	3,199 adults; May 12–22, 2026	Gallup / With Honor
Say dissenting from one’s own side takes real courage	46%	3,199 adults; May 12–22, 2026	Gallup / With Honor
Eager rather than dreading political talk at Thanksgiving	47% vs. 42%	1,292 adults; Nov 14–16, 2022	Marist Poll

Assessment

Private life is where the trend line has moved fastest and where remedy is least available. The eleven-point single-year rise in conversational withdrawal is the largest discrete movement documented in this dossier, and it is concentrated among the most educated, the oldest, and, on the Democratic side of the electorate, the most ideologically committed. Liberal Democrats withdraw at 77 percent, but conservative Republicans at 53 percent sit below moderate Democrats, so the pattern is partisan and asymmetric rather than a simple function of ideological intensity. It nonetheless falls on precisely the Americans most likely to participate in public life. A polity in which the politically engaged withdraw from cross-cutting conversation while continuing to vote is a polity in which deliberation and participation come apart.

DOMAIN 04: THE PUBLIC AND DIGITAL SPHERE

Exposure, Intermediaries, and the State at One Remove

The public and digital sphere differs structurally from the three preceding domains. In the workplace, the classroom, and the home, the audience for a statement is bounded and known. Online it is neither. The distinguishing feature of digital expression is that a statement is durable, searchable, severable from its context, and addressable to audiences the speaker never contemplated. This is why, across every instrument reviewed for this dossier, social media consistently registers as the single most self-censored venue in American life.

The scale of the evidence here is also different. The Knight Foundation-SSRS Perspectives on Free Expression Survey, fielded May 4-26, 2026 among **25,873 U.S. adults** with a margin of error of ± 0.8 points, is by a wide margin the largest instrument cited in this report. It should be read alongside FIRE's National Speech Index, which in the same period found **44 percent of Americans describing the right to free speech as not very or not at all secure** against 18 percent calling it very or completely secure.

How Free Americans Feel

Knight's central measure asked how free respondents feel to express their political views without government interference or punishment, at three points in time. The resulting arc is the most citable single finding in the 2026 data: **72 percent said they had felt very or mostly free ten years ago; 54 percent said so of today; and only 42 percent expect to feel free ten years from now**, with 29 percent expecting to feel not very or not at all free. Americans do not merely perceive decline. They extrapolate it.

Across specific expressive activities, roughly half of Americans feel very or mostly free: to create controversial art (52 percent), to report news or on current events (50 percent), to express political views on social media (48 percent), and to protest peacefully (48 percent).

The demographic spread is wide and does not track a simple partisan story. The groups least likely to feel free were **Black Americans (38 percent)**, adults aged 18 to 24 (40 percent), current students (40 percent), Hispanic Americans (41 percent), and LGBTQ Americans (41 percent). The most confident were consumers of conservative media (80 percent), Republicans (74 percent), adults 65 and older (66 percent), and White Americans (63 percent). Knight also found that Americans who vote, volunteer, or talk with their neighbors consistently report greater freedom of expression, a correlation between civic embeddedness and expressive confidence that recurs in the literature.

Government Pressure on Private Intermediaries

Concern about jawboning is now widespread and substantially bipartisan. Roughly half of Americans are very or extremely concerned about specific federal conduct, and roughly three-quarters are concerned at the looser "at least somewhat" threshold. FIRE's National Speech Index wave fielded October 20–28, 2025 measured the share of Americans very or extremely concerned about specific federal conduct:

Table 6. Concern About Federal Pressure on Private Intermediaries

Federal conduct (verbatim item)	Very or extremely concerned	Not at all concerned
Pressuring social media companies to suppress the posting of certain viewpoints	53%	10%
Pressuring private broadcast companies to remove certain viewpoints from the airwaves	52%	11%
Pressuring video platforms to remove content because of the viewpoints expressed	50%	11%
Pressuring banks to disaffiliate from groups or individuals because of their viewpoints	46%	13%
Pressuring tech companies to remove misinformation from internet search results	35%	27%

Source: FIRE National Speech Index, fielded October 20–28, 2025 (n = 1,000; ±3.0 points), conducted with the Dartmouth Polarization Research Lab. The April 2026 wave recorded comparable figures at the “at least somewhat concerned” threshold: 77 percent on surveillance access, 75 percent on viewpoint suppression, 74 percent on video removal, and 72 percent on pressuring media organizations to report favorably on foreign affairs.

The legal position remains unsettled. In **Murthy v. Missouri**, decided June 26, 2024 by a vote of 6 to 3, the Supreme Court reversed the Fifth Circuit and held that neither the individual nor the state plaintiffs had Article III standing to seek an injunction against federal officials who had communicated with social media platforms about COVID-19 and election content. The Court did not reach the First Amendment merits. The practical effect is that jawboning claims remain very difficult to litigate, because the plaintiff must trace a specific restriction to a specific communication through an intermediary that was independently moderating similar content. Any characterization of *Murthy* as having settled the constitutionality of government-platform contact, in either direction, is inaccurate.

The 2025–2026 period has supplied a steady supply of test cases at the boundary between persuasion and coercion, including executive action on federal online censorship in January 2025, Federal Communications Commission statements regarding broadcasters in September 2025 during the suspension of a late-night program, an early review of a network’s broadcast licenses in April 2026, and an equal-time investigation opened in July 2026. This dossier records these as documented events bearing on the regulatory climate; it does not adjudicate their lawfulness.

Platform Moderation and the Partisan Inversion

Americans overwhelmingly believe platforms moderate politically. In Pew’s survey of 10,133 adults fielded February 7–11, 2024, **83 percent thought it very or somewhat likely that social media companies intentionally censor political viewpoints they find objectionable**, up from 77 percent in 2022 and 73 percent in 2020, including 93 percent of Republicans and 74 percent of Democrats. The growth has been driven by Democrats; Republicans were already near ceiling. No subsequent wave of this item could be located, so the 2024 reading stands as current.

What has changed is not the belief that moderation is political but the identity of those alarmed by it. Pew’s survey of X users, fielded February 24 to March 2, 2025, recorded a complete inversion in four

years: **the share of Republicans concerned about users being banned fell from 61 percent in 2021 to 18 percent in 2025, while the share of Democrats so concerned rose from 6 percent to 33 percent.** Assessments of whether the platform is good for democracy inverted in parallel.

Support for restricting online content has moved in the same direction. In Pew’s survey of 5,123 adults fielded February 24 to March 2, 2025, support for the U.S. government restricting false information online fell from 55 percent in 2023 to 51 percent, and support for tech companies doing so fell from 65 to 60 percent. The movement was almost entirely Democratic: Democratic support for government restriction fell from 70 to 58 percent while Republican support edged up from 39 to 43 percent. On restricting violent content, Democratic support for tech-company restriction fell 18 points, from 83 to 65 percent.

The finding is uncomfortable for both coalitions and is central to this dossier’s outlook. American views on speech restriction are not stable commitments held by ideological groups; they are substantially a function of which coalition currently controls the relevant institutions. Neither party can be treated as a durable guarantor of expressive freedom on the basis of its stated position at any given moment.

Artificial Intelligence as the Emerging Frontier

Artificial intelligence became a first-order speech issue during the period covered by this dossier, and American opinion on it is unusually consolidated. In FIRE’s wave fielded July 7–20, 2026, **93 percent of Americans said it is at least somewhat important for governments to protect free speech when regulating the use of artificial intelligence to express ideas**, with 64 percent saying very or extremely important. Seventy percent were at least somewhat concerned that laws restricting AI-generated content could be used by officials to suppress criticism of elected officials; 79 percent were concerned about government pressure on AI developers; and 76 percent were concerned about AI use being tracked or incorporated into government databases.

Trust in the systems themselves is low. In Gallup’s survey of 3,128 adults fielded April 25 to May 5, 2025 with the Special Competitive Studies Project, **only 2 percent of Americans said they fully trust artificial intelligence to make fair, unbiased decisions**, against 60 percent who distrust it. Pew found 55 percent of both the general public and AI experts highly concerned about bias in AI systems. The combination, near-universal demand that speech be protected in AI regulation, near-universal distrust of both the technology and the regulator, describes a policy environment with no trusted actor.

Harassment, Exposure, and Press Freedom

The most recent national measurement of online harassment remains Pew’s survey of 10,093 adults fielded September 8–13, 2020, which found 41 percent of Americans had experienced online harassment and **25 percent had experienced its more severe forms**, stalking, physical threats, sustained harassment, or sexual harassment, up from 15 percent in 2014. Twenty percent of all adults had been harassed specifically because of their political views, meaning politics accounted for roughly half of all harassment targets. Exposure was heavily concentrated among the young (64 percent of

adults under 30) and LGBTQ+ adults (approximately 70 percent). No comparable national instrument has been fielded since, and **no national polling on doxxing incidence or fear of doxxing for the 2024–2026 period could be located**, a significant evidentiary gap given how frequently doxxing is invoked as a driver of silence.

External assessments of American press freedom declined across the period. Reporters Without Borders ranked the United States **55th of 180 countries in 2024, 57th in 2025, and 64th in 2026**, with its overall index score falling from 66.59 in 2024 to 65.49 in 2025 and 62.61 in 2026. Gallup’s World Poll recorded the share of Americans saying their country’s media have a lot of freedom falling from 86 percent in 2022 to **75 percent in 2025**, placing the United States level with the OECD median rather than above it for the first time. Domestically, Pew found roughly 70 percent of Americans at least somewhat concerned about restrictions on press freedom in early 2025, a stable topline concealing a complete partisan inversion, with Democrats moving from 38 to 60 percent highly concerned and Republicans from 47 to 28 percent.

Table 7. Public and Digital Sphere Indicators

Indicator	Finding	Population and Field Date	Source
Feel very or mostly free to express political views today	54%	25,873 adults; May 4–26, 2026	Knight Foundation / SSRS
— recalled, ten years ago / expected, ten years hence	72% / 42%	25,873 adults; May 4–26, 2026	Knight Foundation / SSRS
Feel free to express political views on social media	48%	25,873 adults; May 4–26, 2026	Knight Foundation / SSRS
Very or extremely concerned about federal pressure on platforms	53%	1,000 adults; Oct 20–28, 2025	FIRE National Speech Index
Believe platforms intentionally censor political viewpoints	83%	10,133 adults; Feb 7–11, 2024	Pew Research Center
Republicans / Democrats concerned about users being banned	18% / 33%	5,123 adults; Feb 24–Mar 2, 2025	Pew Research Center
— same measure in 2021	61% / 6%	Pew American Trends Panel	Pew Research Center
Want free speech protected in AI regulation	93%	1,000 adults; Jul 7–20, 2026	FIRE National Speech Index
Fully trust AI to make fair, unbiased decisions	2%	3,128 adults; Apr 25–May 5, 2025	Gallup / SCSP
Experienced severe online harassment	25%	10,093 adults; Sep 8–13, 2020	Pew Research Center
U.S. press freedom world ranking, 2024 / 2025 / 2026	55th / 57th / 64th	Of 180 countries	Reporters Without Borders
Say U.S. media have a lot of freedom	75%	~1,000 adults; fielded 2025	Gallup World Poll

Assessment

The digital sphere is where Americans feel least free, where concern about government conduct is most bipartisan, and where partisan positions are least stable. Roughly half of Americans feel free to post political views online; roughly half are acutely concerned about federal pressure on the intermediaries that host them; and a large majority believe those intermediaries moderate politically regardless. The

addition of artificial intelligence to this environment has produced near-consensus that speech must be protected in AI regulation alongside near-universal distrust of everyone positioned to do the protecting.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-CENSORSHIP

Why Americans Stay Quiet

The domain analysis establishes that self-censorship is a majority behavior. It does not explain why. This section sets out the mechanisms that the survey evidence supports, in descending order of empirical support, and identifies which popular explanations the data does not support.

1. The Hierarchy of Feared Consequences

The most direct evidence comes from Gallup’s survey of 3,199 adults fielded May 12–22, 2026, which asked Americans who feared consequences for dissent what specifically they feared, and then which consequence most influenced their decision to stay silent. The two questions produce different rankings, and the difference is the finding.

Table 8. Feared Consequences Versus Operative Deterrents

Consequence	Share who fear it	Share for whom it is the most influential deterrent
Being criticized or insulted	69%	—
Being targeted online or on social media	58%	—
Being excluded or pushed out of a group	58%	—
Losing an important personal relationship	50%	23%
Being physically harmed or threatened	—	21%
Losing a job or source of income	—	17%

Source: Gallup / With Honor, fielded May 12–22, 2026 (n = 3,199; ±2.1 points). The left column reports what respondents fear; the right column reports which single consequence they identify as most influential. Dashes indicate items not reported at that threshold.

Three conclusions follow. First, **the most commonly feared consequence is the mildest one**: simple criticism, reported by more than two-thirds. Second, **the deterrent that actually governs behavior is relational**, the loss of a specific important relationship, not diffuse social disapproval. Third, **economic fear ranks third**. Among those who fear consequences, 17 percent identify job or income loss as the consequence most influencing their silence, behind relational loss at 23 percent and physical harm at 21 percent. Since that group is itself 44 percent of adults, the figure corresponds to roughly one American in thirteen. This is the single most consequential finding in this dossier for policy design, because the overwhelming majority of proposed remedies, employment protections, campus speech codes, platform reform, address the category that ranks third.

2. The Spiral of Silence

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence, formulated in 1974 from observation of the 1965 and 1972 West German federal elections, holds that individuals continuously and largely unconsciously assess the distribution of opinion around them, what she termed the quasi-statistical sense, and that those who perceive themselves in the minority progressively withhold their views for fear of isolation. The withholding is self-reinforcing: as minority voices fall silent, the majority view appears more

dominant than it is, silence is read as assent, and the remaining dissenters face a steeper perceived gradient.

The cleanest American test remains Pew's study of 1,801 adults fielded August 7 to September 16, 2013, using the Snowden surveillance disclosures as its case. Its findings were unambiguous:

- **86 percent of Americans were willing to discuss the story in person; only 42 percent of Facebook and Twitter users were willing to post about it.**
- **Of the 14 percent unwilling to discuss the story in person, only 0.3 percent were willing to post about it online.** Social media did not function as an alternative outlet for those silenced offline; it functioned as an additional venue for silence.
- Perceived agreement was the dominant predictor of willingness to speak: respondents were 2.92 times more likely to voice an opinion at work, and 1.90 times more likely at a family dinner, when they believed their audience agreed with them.
- Social media use predicted **less** in-person willingness to speak. Facebook users were roughly half as likely to voice opinions among friends at a restaurant; Twitter users roughly a quarter as likely to share opinions at work.

The last of these findings deserves emphasis because it inverts the intuition that online expression compensates for offline reticence. In the only rigorous American test available, the relationship ran the other way.

3. Preference Falsification and Pluralistic Ignorance

Timur Kuran's account, developed in *Private Truths, Public Lies* (1995), supplies the mechanism by which individual discretion becomes a collective distortion. Each person holds a political threshold, the point at which the psychological cost of misrepresenting themselves exceeds the reputational cost of honesty. Below that threshold they falsify. Because falsification is invisible, no one can observe how many others are doing it, and each falsifier concludes that their private reservations are more unusual than they are.

Kuran identifies three consequences, each visible in the American data. The first is **collective conservatism**: positions that would not survive a secret ballot persist because no one can see the coalition that opposes them. The second is **knowledge falsification**, the corruption not merely of expressed preference but of the shared stock of information, so that successive generations inherit conclusions rather than arguments. The third is **unanticipated discontinuity**: because the distribution of private opinion is unobservable, shifts appear sudden and inexplicable when a triggering event mobilizes those just above the threshold and produces a cascade.

The Gallup 2026 finding that 44 percent of Americans fear consequences for dissenting from their own side is direct evidence of falsification operating within coalitions. So is FIRE's July 2026 ideological finding, examined in the next section, that the moderate majority reports far less comfort discussing controversial topics than the committed minority at either pole. If the audible conversation is disproportionately voiced by the tails, then every American's quasi-statistical estimate of the opinion

climate is systematically distorted toward the extremes, which is precisely the condition under which the spiral accelerates.

4. The Expansion of What Counts as Harm

A conceptual shift underlies the behavioral one. FIRE’s National Speech Index found that roughly **four in five Americans agree at least slightly that “words can be violence,”** and its October 2025 wave found 34 percent saying the statement describes their thinking mostly or completely. Among undergraduates the figure is higher still: roughly nine in ten, measured after the killing of Charlie Kirk. Knight’s 2024 student survey found 70 percent agreeing that speech can be as damaging as physical violence.

This is not a claim about whether the proposition is true. It is an observation about the incentive structure it creates. Where speech is widely understood as a form of injury, the social license to sanction speech expands, the speaker’s estimate of the risk rises, and self-censorship becomes the rational individual response. The same survey period recorded 45 percent of American adults saying a professor should probably or definitely be fired for posting that it is acceptable to punch a Nazi, and 43 percent of undergraduates saying the same of a post disparaging “fascist Bible-thumpers.” Willingness to impose sanction and fear of receiving it are measured separately here, and this dossier does not claim to have established the link between them at the individual level. But they are plainly features of the same environment, and a population in which four in ten would dismiss a colleague over a social media post is one in which caution about posting is well founded.

5. What the Evidence Does Not Support

- **That fear of the state is the primary driver.** It is not. Concern about government conduct is high and rising, but when Americans are asked what actually deters them, governmental sanction does not appear among the leading answers. The operative fears are relational, social, and physical.
- **That self-censorship is principally an economic phenomenon.** Job loss ranks third among operative deterrents, career fear has not risen across the period for which measurement exists, and the highest career fear is reported by the most educated and credentialed rather than the most economically precarious.
- **That one political side is silenced and the other is not.** Conservative faculty conceal their views at more than three times the rate of liberal faculty, which is a genuine and large asymmetry. But liberal Democrats withdraw from political conversation at 77 percent against 53 percent of conservative Republicans, and the sharpest recent movements in press and platform concern have been Democratic. The asymmetries are real, domain-specific, and run in opposite directions in different domains.
- **That young Americans are uniformly the most censorious.** Gen Z reports the highest fear of speaking of any generation (82 percent against 58 percent of Boomers) while simultaneously being the least likely to prioritize preventing hate speech over protecting free speech (19 percent against 38 percent of Boomers). Both findings come from the same instrument.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND PARTISAN DIVIDES

Who Is Most Afraid to Speak

The distribution of American self-censorship does not follow the lines that the political debate assumes. This section sets out the divisions the data supports, beginning with the most counterintuitive.

1. The Ideological U-Curve

The relationship between ideological commitment and expressive comfort is not linear. It is U-shaped. FIRE’s National Speech Index wave fielded July 7–20, 2026 found that Americans at both ideological poles report substantially greater comfort discussing controversial topics than those in the middle:

Table 9. Share “Very Comfortable” Discussing Each Topic, by Ideology

Topic	Very liberal	Liberal, moderate, or conservative	Very conservative
Abortion rights	55%	~25%	52%
Race in America	46%	20–25%	48%
The war in Iran	42%	22–28%	54%

Source: FIRE National Speech Index, fielded July 7–20, 2026 (n = 1,000). The middle column aggregates the three moderate categories as reported by FIRE; ranges reflect variation among them. Across the full sample, only 23 percent felt very comfortable discussing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, 26 percent transgender treatment for minors, and 28 percent immigration enforcement operations.

The implication is structural. The Americans most willing to speak publicly about contested questions are, by a factor of roughly two, those holding the most committed positions. The moderate majority, which is to say most of the country, is the most silent constituency in American political life. If reported comfort translates into actual speech, which this instrument measures only indirectly, then anyone forming an impression of public opinion from public discourse is sampling disproportionately from the tails of the distribution and will overestimate polarization. That is the mechanism of pluralistic ignorance operating at national scale, and the comfort data is consistent with it.

2. Party and Ideology

The Cato Institute’s July 2020 survey established the ideological gradient on general self-censorship that remains the most cited in the field: **strong liberals 42 percent, liberals 52 percent, moderates 64 percent, conservatives 77 percent, strong conservatives 77 percent**. Strong liberals were the only group in which a majority said they felt free to say what they believe. By party the split was Democrats 52 percent, independents 59 percent, Republicans 77 percent.

That gradient and the U-curve above are not in conflict, but the relationship between them needs stating. Cato asked whether the political climate prevents a respondent from saying things they believe, a question about the perceived hostility of the environment, on which conservatives in 2020 scored far higher than liberals. FIRE asked how comfortable a respondent feels discussing particular topics, a question about personal confidence, on which both poles score higher than the middle. A committed conservative can simultaneously believe the climate is hostile to their views and feel confident voicing

them. The two findings describe the environment and the individual respectively, and only the second is current.

The Cato gradient is now six years old, and the intervening period has produced a systematic inversion on adjacent measures. Between 2024 and 2025, Democratic concern about press freedom restrictions rose from 38 to 60 percent while Republican concern fell from 47 to 28 percent. Democratic concern about platform bans rose from 6 to 33 percent between 2021 and 2025 while Republican concern fell from 61 to 18 percent. Democratic support for government restriction of false information fell from 70 to 58 percent between 2023 and 2025 while Republican support edged up from 39 to 43 percent.

The correct reading is that a substantial share of what is measured as principled commitment to free expression is in fact a function of institutional position. Concern rises among the party out of power and falls among the party in power, on roughly a one-for-one basis, within a single electoral cycle.

3. Generation

The generational pattern is genuinely contradictory and must be reported as such. The Freedom Forum’s survey of 813 respondents fielded August 1–8, 2025 found **82 percent of Gen Z afraid to speak freely against 58 percent of Baby Boomers**, with Gen Z reporting more than double the Boomer rate of fear of job loss (44 against 21 percent) and of being perceived negatively (49 against 25 percent). Gen Z was also more likely to say the First Amendment goes too far (17 percent, and 19 percent of Millennials, against 9 percent of both Gen X and Boomers).

Yet on the question of whether preventing hate speech matters more than protecting free speech, a position taken by 32 percent of Americans nationally, the same survey found the pattern **inverted**: 38 percent of Boomers against 19 percent of Gen Z. The younger cohort is simultaneously the most fearful and the least supportive of restriction, a combination that is coherent if one reads Gen Z as experiencing the speech environment as dangerous without believing that formal restriction would improve it.

One further figure from this instrument belongs in the record, because it runs against the direction of this dossier. The Freedom Forum’s national topline, **the share of Americans saying they are afraid to speak freely, fell from 71 percent in 2024 to 65 percent in 2025**, and the share saying nothing prevents them from speaking rose from 29 to 35 percent. The 32 percent prioritizing prevention of hate speech over free speech was the lowest reading since the series began in 2020. On this instrument, the environment improved year on year even as the generational gap within it remained wide.

4. Race

Race produces the largest single demographic gap in the largest available instrument. In the Knight–SSRS survey of 25,873 adults fielded May 2026, **38 percent of Black Americans felt very or mostly free to express their political views, against 63 percent of White Americans**, the lowest reading of any group measured, alongside Hispanic Americans at 41 percent and LGBTQ Americans at 41 percent. The Freedom Forum found 23 percent of Black respondents saying the First Amendment goes too far, against 13 percent nationally.

This does not translate uniformly into self-reported silence. Cato’s 2020 survey found Black Americans the least likely group to say the political climate prevents them from speaking (49 percent, against 64 percent of White and 65 percent of Hispanic Americans), and Pew’s 2023 data found Black respondents the least likely to find cross-cutting conversation stressful (47 percent, the only group approaching parity between stressful and interesting). The two sets of findings are reconcilable: they measure confidence in institutional protection and willingness to engage in interpersonal disagreement respectively, and those need not move together.

5. Education, Religion, and Gender

- **Education.** The gradient runs opposite to intuition in every instrument. Career fear rises from 25 percent (high school) to 44 percent (post-graduate). Conversational withdrawal rises from 46 percent (high school or less) to 65 percent (college graduate). Finding cross-cutting conversation stressful rises to 66 percent among those holding a bachelor’s degree or above. Education is simultaneously the strongest single predictor of abstract tolerance in the General Social Survey and a positive predictor of personal reticence.
- **Religion.** Cato’s 2020 survey recorded one of its largest gaps: **71 percent of religious Americans said the political climate prevents them from speaking, against 56 percent of the non-religious.**
- **Gender.** Differences are modest and inconsistent in direction. Cato found men marginally more likely to report self-censoring (65 against 59 percent); Pew found women more likely to regard offensive speech as a major problem (54 against 40 percent) and men more likely to prioritize information freedom over restriction. Long-run General Social Survey analysis found gender differences in political tolerance to be negligible.

Table 10. Summary of Demographic Divides

Cleavage	Most reticent	Least reticent	Instrument
Ideology (comfort discussing controversy)	Liberals, moderates, conservatives (~25%)	Very liberal and very conservative (42–55%)	FIRE NSI, Jul 2026
Party (general self-censorship, 2020)	Republicans (77%)	Democrats (52%)	Cato / YouGov, Jul 2020
Party (withdrawal from political talk, 2025)	Liberal Democrats (77%)	Moderate/liberal Republicans (46%)	Pew, Dec 2025
Generation (fear of speaking freely)	Gen Z (82%)	Baby Boomers (58%)	Freedom Forum, Aug 2025
Generation (prioritize preventing hate speech)	Baby Boomers (38%)	Gen Z (19%)	Freedom Forum, Aug 2025
Race (feel free to express political views)	Black Americans (38%)	White Americans (63%)	Knight–SSRS, May 2026
Education (career fear)	Post-graduate (44%)	High school (25%)	Cato / YouGov, Jul 2020
Religion (general self-censorship)	Religious (71%)	Non-religious (56%)	Cato / YouGov, Jul 2020
Academic rank	Non-tenure-track faculty	Tenured faculty	FIRE Faculty Survey, 2024

HISTORICAL BENCHMARK: THE MCCARTHY COMPARISON

Claims that American self-censorship now exceeds its Cold War level are made frequently and supported rarely. One such comparison is rigorous, because the same question was asked twice, sixty-nine years apart, in identical words. This section sets out what that comparison establishes and, equally importantly, what it does not.

The 1955 Baseline

Paul Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens surveyed **2,451 American social scientists during April and May 1955**, at the close of the McCarthy period, publishing the results as *The Academic Mind: Social Scientists in a Time of Crisis* (1958). Their instrument documented 990 incidents in which an accusation was made against at least one professor; almost half produced some form of sanction, and 104 ended in a faculty member being fired or forced to resign for political or religious reasons. Three attitudinal findings are relevant here:

- **9 percent** had toned down something they had written lately because they were worried it might cause too much controversy.
- **27 percent** had wondered how a political opinion they had expressed might affect their career.
- **40 percent** were concerned that students might report a distorted version of their political views to administrators.

In parallel, Samuel Stouffer’s *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties* (1955), drawn from a 1954 national cross-section of approximately 4,933 adults, established the tolerance baseline of the same period. It is bleak. Averaged across six items, whether an atheist or a Communist should be permitted to speak, to teach in a college, or to have a book retained in a public library, **only 25.2 percent of Americans gave the tolerant answer**. Just 6.4 percent would permit a Communist to teach; 12.4 percent would permit an atheist to do so.

The 2024 Comparison

FIRE’s Silence in the Classroom survey, fielded March 4 to May 13, 2024 among 6,269 faculty at 55 institutions, put Lazarsfeld and Thielens’s writing question to American faculty in its original wording. **Thirty-five percent answered yes**, against 9 percent in 1955, a ratio of close to four to one. On the adjacent measures the modern figures are also higher: 40 percent of faculty now worry about reputational damage from a misunderstanding, against the 27 percent who in 1955 had wondered about career effects.

Table 11. The McCarthy Benchmark

Measure	1955 / 1954	2024 / 2026	Direction
Faculty who toned down recent writing to avoid controversy	9%	35%	Sharply worse
Faculty concerned about career or reputational consequences	27% (career)	40% (reputation)	Worse
Documented sanction attempts against scholars	990 incidents (1955 study)	~1,700 since 2000	Not directly comparable

Dismissals or forced resignations	104 (1955 study)	300+ since 2000	Not directly comparable
Public tolerance: would let a Communist speak	28.2%	64% (2010; later waves not retrieved)	Far better
Public tolerance: would let a Communist teach	6.4%	61% (2010; later waves not retrieved)	Far better
Average tolerance across six Stouffer items	25.2%	55.4% (1972–73)	Far better

The Paradox, and Its Resolution

These two movements run in opposite directions, and the tension between them is the most important analytical point in this dossier. Between 1954 and 2010, American tolerance for unpopular speakers rose dramatically and almost without interruption. On the six Stouffer items, the tolerant share roughly doubled from 25.2 percent in 1954 to 55.4 percent by 1972–73, and continued rising thereafter: by 2010 the shares willing to let an anti-religionist speak had reached 76 percent, a Communist 64 percent, and a homosexual 86 percent. The gains were largest among the groups that had started least tolerant, the less educated, the rural, the older, and Southerners, producing genuine convergence.

Yet over the same long arc, reported self-censorship rose. The resolution is that these measures capture different things. **Tolerance measures what one would permit others to say. Self-censorship measures what one expects to suffer for saying it.** A society can become markedly more willing to let a Communist speak while becoming markedly less willing to say anything controversial itself, provided the locus of sanction has moved.

That is what the evidence suggests occurred. In 1955 the feared sanction was governmental, formal, and rare: a subpoena, a loyalty board, a criminal referral. It was also, precisely because it was formal, visible, contestable, and bounded. The contemporary sanction is social, informal, and common: criticism, exclusion, the durable circulation of a decontextualized statement. It carries no procedure, no standard of proof, no appeal, and no statute of limitations. The 1955 professor faced a low probability of a catastrophic and legally contestable event. The 2024 professor faces what is plausibly a higher probability of a milder and uncontestable reputational one. Neither base rate is directly measurable, the roughly 1,700 scholars targeted since 2000 represent a small fraction of American faculty, so this is offered as the most parsimonious explanation of the divergence rather than a demonstrated one.

Two important caveats attach. First, the two exercises measured different populations: Lazarsfeld and Thielens surveyed social scientists specifically, FIRE surveyed faculty across disciplines. Second, and more fundamentally, nothing in the contemporary data is equivalent to the coercive apparatus of the early 1950s. No modern American faculty member faces congressional subpoena for their scholarship. The comparison establishes that the felt pressure to moderate one's published work is now reported at roughly four times the McCarthy-era rate. It does not establish that conditions are four times worse, and this dossier does not assert that they are.

A final observation from the long-run literature deserves recording. In 2006, reviewing thirty-four years of General Social Survey data on rising tolerance, James Davis cautioned that “despite the steady

across the board increase during the GSS years the future may well show a halt or even reversal of the trends,” because the convergence he documented was catch-up growth, educational expansion was plateauing, and cohort gains had stalled after the 1952–53 birth cohort. Subsequent analysis found the long rise stalling among cohorts born after roughly 1966, and tolerance for racist speech drawing active opposition among Americans born after 1970. Whether the reversal Davis contemplated has actually arrived cannot be settled here: the verified item-level series ends in 2010, and current General Social Survey readings were not available for this edition. The conditions he identified are present; the confirming data is not yet in hand.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Where Americans Think Free Speech Is Heading

Americans are pessimistic, and their pessimism is specific rather than diffuse. Asked to place themselves on a ten-year horizon in the Knight–SSRS survey of 25,873 adults fielded May 2026, respondents described a continuous decline: **72 percent felt very or mostly free to express political views ten years ago, 54 percent do today, and 42 percent expect to in ten years**, with 29 percent expecting to feel not very or not at all free. This is not nostalgia; it is extrapolation, and it is the clearest statement of expectation in the available evidence.

What the Trend Lines Currently Show

- **Modest recovery from an acute low.** FIRE’s wrong-direction measure peaked at 74 percent in October 2025, weeks after the Kirk assassination, and has eased to 73, 69, and 68 percent across the three subsequent quarters. The acute shock is dissipating.
- **No recovery in perceived security.** The share saying free speech is very or completely secure ran 24 percent in October 2024, fell to 15 percent in October 2025, and has recovered only to 18 percent. The structural assessment has not followed the mood.
- **No deterioration in reported behavior.** Self-censorship has run between 52 and 62 percent across eight quarterly waves, and its movement within that range has been gently downward rather than upward, from 62 percent in October 2024 to 55 percent in July 2026. Whatever is worsening, it is not the reported behavior.
- **Marginal improvement on campus.** The 2027 College Free Speech Rankings recorded a one-year rise in the average score, from 58.63 to 61.36, and slight easing in tolerance for shouting down speakers and blocking entry, though not for violence. The base remains a D-minus, with 121 of 261 ranked institutions receiving an F.
- **Continued deterioration in external press-freedom assessments.** The United States fell from 55th to 64th of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders index between 2024 and 2026.

Four Drivers to Watch

1. The Instability of Partisan Commitment

The inversions documented in this dossier, Republican concern about platform bans falling from 61 to 18 percent while Democratic concern rose from 6 to 33 percent; Democratic concern about press freedom rising 22 points while Republican concern fell 19, indicate that a substantial share of expressed commitment to free expression is positional rather than principled. The practical consequence is that no durable political coalition for speech protection currently exists. Each coalition becomes a civil-libertarian on losing power and a regulator on gaining it, and the cycle is short enough to observe within a single term.

2. Artificial Intelligence as the Next Regulatory Frontier

AI is the one area in which American opinion is consolidated: **93 percent want free speech protected when governments regulate AI expression**, and 70 percent fear that AI content restrictions could be used to suppress criticism of officials. But only 2 percent fully trust AI systems to be unbiased (Gallup, April–May 2025); 67 percent lack confidence in the federal government to regulate AI effectively, up from 62 percent in 2024 (Pew, February 2026); and 59 percent lack confidence in companies to develop it responsibly. Consensus on the principle combined with distrust of every available implementer is a recipe for regulation drafted under time pressure without a constituency to police its speech implications.

3. The Unresolved Status of Jawboning

Murthy v. Missouri disposed of the leading challenge on standing without reaching the merits, leaving the constitutional line between government persuasion and government coercion undrawn. Concern about the practice is one of the few genuinely bipartisan positions in this dossier, at roughly half of Americans very or extremely concerned. Absent either a merits ruling or transparency legislation, the volume of contested conduct at this boundary is likely to continue growing while remaining effectively unlitigable.

4. The Campus Pipeline

The cohort now in American universities reports the highest fear of speaking of any generation, the greatest tolerance for disruptive conduct on record until this year, and majority opposition to permitting speakers across the entire ideological range tested. Whatever norms this cohort carries into workplaces, newsrooms, courts, and legislatures will shape the environment for the following two decades. The slight improvement in the most recent data is the first encouraging signal in seven years of measurement and is far too recent to be called a turn.

Concluding Assessment

The United States is not experiencing a collapse of legal protection for expression. It is experiencing something harder to legislate against: the widespread, voluntary, and largely rational decision not to use a right that remains fully intact. A majority of Americans watch what they say. More than a third of faculty moderate what they publish. A majority have at some point stopped talking to someone about political news because of something that person said. Nearly half regard disagreement with their own side as an act of courage. And the constituency that reports the greatest comfort speaking is the one holding the most committed views at either pole, which guarantees that the public conversation misrepresents the private distribution of opinion.

The remedies most frequently proposed, employment protections, campus speech codes, platform regulation, address the third-ranked deterrent. The first two, relational loss and the fear of physical harm, are not amenable to policy in any straightforward way. That is not an argument against the policy remedies, which have independent merit. It is an argument for accurate expectations about what they

can accomplish, and for taking seriously the finding that the dominant mechanism of American silence operates between individuals rather than between the citizen and the state.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE AND LIMITATIONS

This dossier synthesizes existing survey research; it reports no original fieldwork. Readers weighing its conclusions should note the following limitations, each of which is also flagged at the point of use in the text above.

- **Instruments are not interchangeable.** The surveys cited differ in population, sampling frame, mode, and question wording. Differences of a few points between instruments carry no meaning. Where movement over time is reported, it is movement within a single instrument asking a consistent question.
- **Several key series are stale.** The Cato self-censorship series, which supplies the widely cited 62 percent figure and the ideological gradient, was last fielded in July 2020; no subsequent wave could be located. Pew’s online harassment benchmark dates from September 2020. Pew’s platform-censorship item was last fielded in February 2024.
- **One requested measure does not exist.** No national polling on the incidence of, or fear of, doxxing for the 2024–2026 period could be located, despite its frequent invocation as a driver of silence. This is a material evidentiary gap.
- **Perception is not incidence.** Survey research measures what respondents report believing and doing. Where the gap between reported fear and reported experience is large, most visibly in the workplace domain, this dossier reports both figures and does not resolve them in favor of either.
- **Self-censorship is not uniformly pathological.** Broad items asking whether a respondent “watched what they said” capture ordinary social discretion alongside genuine fear. Greater weight should be given to items specifying a feared consequence and to high-frequency measures.
- **Item-level General Social Survey tolerance data for 2022 and 2024 could not be retrieved** for this edition. The verified item-level series in Section “Historical Benchmark” ends at 2010, with cohort-level analysis extending to 2018.
- **Some sample sizes are cited from methodology documentation rather than the report page.** The sample sizes given for the Freedom Forum 2025 survey ($n = 813$), the Knight-Ipsos 2024 student survey ($n = 1,678$), and Pew’s July 2023 survey ($n = 8,480$) are drawn from the publishers’ methodology statements; the headline figures themselves were verified against the report pages cited.
- **Subgroup estimates carry wider error than the headline figures.** Where this dossier reports ideological or generational subgroups from surveys of roughly 800 to 1,000 respondents, notably the ideological comfort table and the Freedom Forum generational splits, the effective margin of error for those cells is substantially larger than the whole-sample figure quoted, and small differences between subgroups should not be treated as established.

DISCLAIMER OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

This dossier was compiled through secondary aggregation of published survey research from national polling organizations, academic institutions, and civil liberties monitors. To ensure the highest standard of accuracy in data processing and synthesis, generative artificial intelligence tools were used to assist in the retrieval, structuring, and cross-referencing of the underlying statistical material. Every headline statistic reported here was verified against the publishing organization's own topline documentation or report page. Figures that could not be so verified are identified as such in the text, as are requested measures for which no data was found. The analysis, interpretation, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of Amnesty Freedom.

Given the pace at which several of these series are updated, the National Speech Index quarterly, the College Free Speech Rankings annually each September, this document should be understood as a snapshot current to September 2026 and as the foundation for a fuller treatment to follow.

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This dossier was prepared by Amnesty Freedom. The data analysis and conclusions contained herein represent the collective assessment of the organization's research team.

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