

## **UCHICAGO DIVINITY SCHOOL/AP-NORC POLL: AMERICANS VALUE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BUT DISAGREE ON WHICH GROUPS' RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS UNDER THREAT**

*35% of Americans feel their own freedom of religion is being threatened. Fifty-two percent say the religious freedom of Muslims is threatened and 42% say the same for Jews.*

**CHICAGO, August 4, 2020** — A majority of Americans value freedom of religion and want to see the government protect it, according to a new study by The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and UChicago Divinity School. The survey—conducted in February 2020 before the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States—reveals widespread support for the right to practice any or no religion without government restriction. It also shows that a majority believes the government should not favor one religion over another. However, the public is far from unified in defining a violation of religious freedom, with differences in attitudes based on the religious views of the respondent.

“Though 81% of Americans say freedom of religion is at least somewhat important to them, they don’t tend to see it as threatened by government actions,” said David Nirenberg, Dean of UChicago Divinity School. “We presented respondents with six scenarios of government intervening when someone is acting based on their religious beliefs, and in just one scenario did a majority say the government was violating freedom of religion.”

Overall, Americans most often see the religious freedom of Muslims (52%) and Jews (42%) being threatened today. About a quarter say the religious freedom of Christian groups such as Evangelicals and Catholics are threatened. Atheist and agnostic respondents are more likely to see challenges to religious freedom for Muslims, Jews, and their fellow atheists, while Protestants are more likely to see the religious freedom of Evangelicals and other Christians as threatened. Similar differences emerge over perceptions of which religious groups threaten the freedoms of others by practicing their own religion.

Additional findings from the survey include:

- Sharp differences exist by education in what Americans think the government should be doing to protect freedom of religion: those with a college degree are more likely than those with a high school education or less to say federal policy should allow individuals to practice any religion without government restriction (87% vs. 69%) and that the government should not favor one religion over another (78% vs. 52%).
- Twenty percent of Americans say they have taken action to express their views on freedom of religion, such as donating money, volunteering for an organization, posting a message on social media, or participating in a demonstration.
- Thirty-five percent consider their freedom of religion threatened in the United States today, while 44% say other people's claims about their freedom of religion challenge their own general rights or freedoms.
- A majority (52%) think Muslims' freedom of religion is threatened, and 42% say the same about Jews. A quarter or fewer say other groups such as Evangelical Christians, Catholics, Mormons, and atheists face challenges to their religious freedom.
- Sixty-one percent feel it would be a violation of freedom of religion for the federal government to build a pipeline through land that Native Americans consider sacred. On the other hand, less than half say legal requirements about providing health benefits to same-sex couples (32%) or denying school enrollment to unvaccinated children (26%) violate religious freedoms.
- Overall, more Americans express negative rather than positive views about Muslims (32% vs. 23%) and atheists (26% vs. 22%). Opinions are more positive than negative about Jews (42% vs. 7%), Buddhists (36% vs. 8%), Catholics (34% vs. 18%), and other Christians (42% vs. 11%).

"This survey found as much agreement as disagreement in how Americans view freedom of religion," said Trevor Thompson, director of The AP-NORC Center. "The survey reveals widespread support for the right to practice any or no religion without government restriction and that the government should not favor one religion over another. But they sharply differ in which groups' freedom is under threat and, importantly, what constitutes a violation of religious freedom."

### **About the Study**

The nationwide poll was conducted February 13-16, 2020, using the AmeriSpeak Panel®, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted with 1,015 adults. The margin of sample error is +/- 4.2 percentage points.

This survey was conducted with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago.

### **About the University of Chicago Divinity School**

The Divinity School generates knowledge about the history, theology, beliefs, and practices of religions using a broad array of methodological and theoretical approaches. One of the world's leading institutions in the academic study of religion, the Divinity School prepares students for careers in scholarship, teaching, and public religious leadership through multiple graduate and undergraduate programs.

<https://divinity.uchicago.edu/>

### **About The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research**

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

[www.apnorc.org](http://www.apnorc.org)

The Associated Press (AP) is an independent global news organization dedicated to factual reporting. Founded in 1846, AP today remains the most trusted source of fast, accurate, unbiased news in all formats and the essential provider of the technology and services vital to the news business. More than half the world's population sees AP journalism every day.

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The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.

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