

# EXAMINING AMERICANS' VIEWS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND ITS LIMITS

While a majority of Americans value freedom of religion and want to see the government protecting it, the public as a whole has mixed views about what constitutes a violation of religious freedom, 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 and that the government should not favor one religion over another. But, majorities often do not see government action as a violation of religious freedom when presented with different scenarios where government policy conflicts with the religious beliefs of individuals. The public is far from unified in what they see as violations of freedom of religion, with differences in attitudes based on the religious views of the respondent.

The survey also finds that Americans think some groups—particularly Muslims and Jews—face threats to their freedom of religion in the United States today. And Americans express more positive than negative views of religious groups like Buddhists, Jews, Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and other Christians, while they express more negative views about Muslims and atheists. These attitudes vary based on the religious views of the respondent. Additionally, a survey-based experiment reveals that actions taken in the name of religious freedom are judged differently depending on the religion of the actor.



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## Three Things You Should Know

About the UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Religious Freedom Poll  
Among Americans Age 18 and Older:

- 1) While 61% know that the United States has federal laws protecting freedom of religion, 25% aren't sure and 13% say it does not.
- 2) 35% feel their freedom of religion is being threatened in the United States today.
- 3) 52% say the religious freedom of Muslims is threatened and 42% say the same for Jews. Just 23% say the same about Evangelical Christians and 22% about Catholics.

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.

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, like 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 their own general rights or freedoms are challenged by other people's claims about their freedom of religion.
- A majority (52%) think Muslims' freedom of religion is threatened, and 42% say the same about Jews. A quarter or fewer say other groups like 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 than positive views about Muslims (32% vs. 23%) and atheists (26% vs. 22%). Opinions about Jews (42% vs. 7%), Buddhists (36% vs. 8%), Catholics (34% vs. 18%), and other Christians (42% vs. 11%) are more positive than negative.

## **MANY ARE UNCLEAR WHETHER FEDERAL LAWS PROTECT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.**

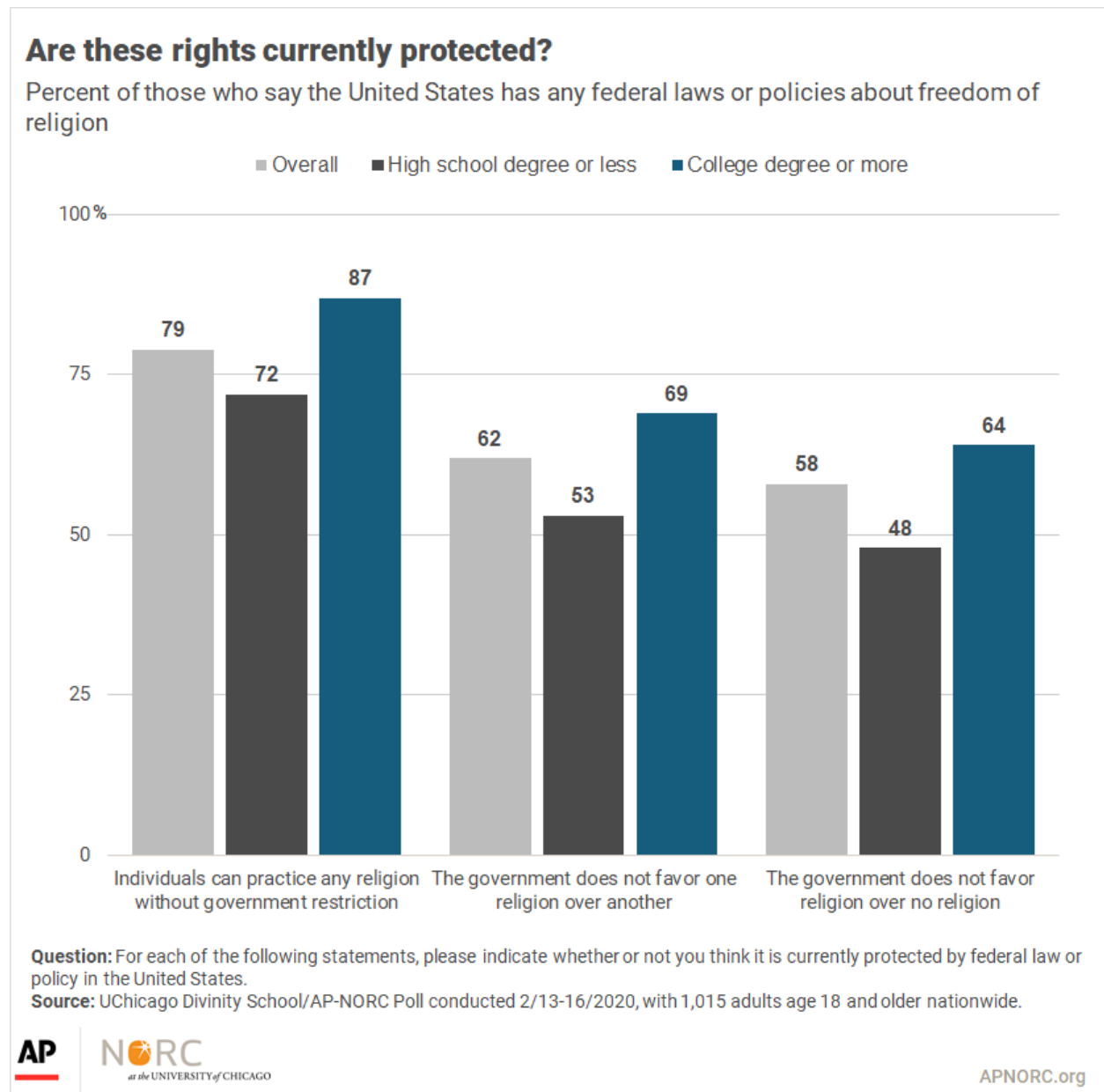
Not all Americans know there are federal laws or policies protecting freedom of religion—61% say there are, but 13% don't think there are and 25% are not sure.

Some groups are more aware of these laws than others. Both liberals<sup>1</sup> (69%) and conservatives (65%) are more likely than moderates (46%) to know that the country has laws and policies protecting freedom of religion. College graduates (80%) are also more likely than those with a high school degree or less (45%) to say the country protects freedom of religion through its laws and policies.

Among those who know that the United States has federal laws and policies protecting freedom of religion, many are able to identify specific protections granted by the First Amendment. Recognition that individuals can practice any religion without government restriction is the most widespread.

<sup>1</sup> Political ideology is self-reported based on responses to the questions, "Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a liberal, moderate or conservative?" / "Do you consider yourself closer to liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, or closer to conservative?"

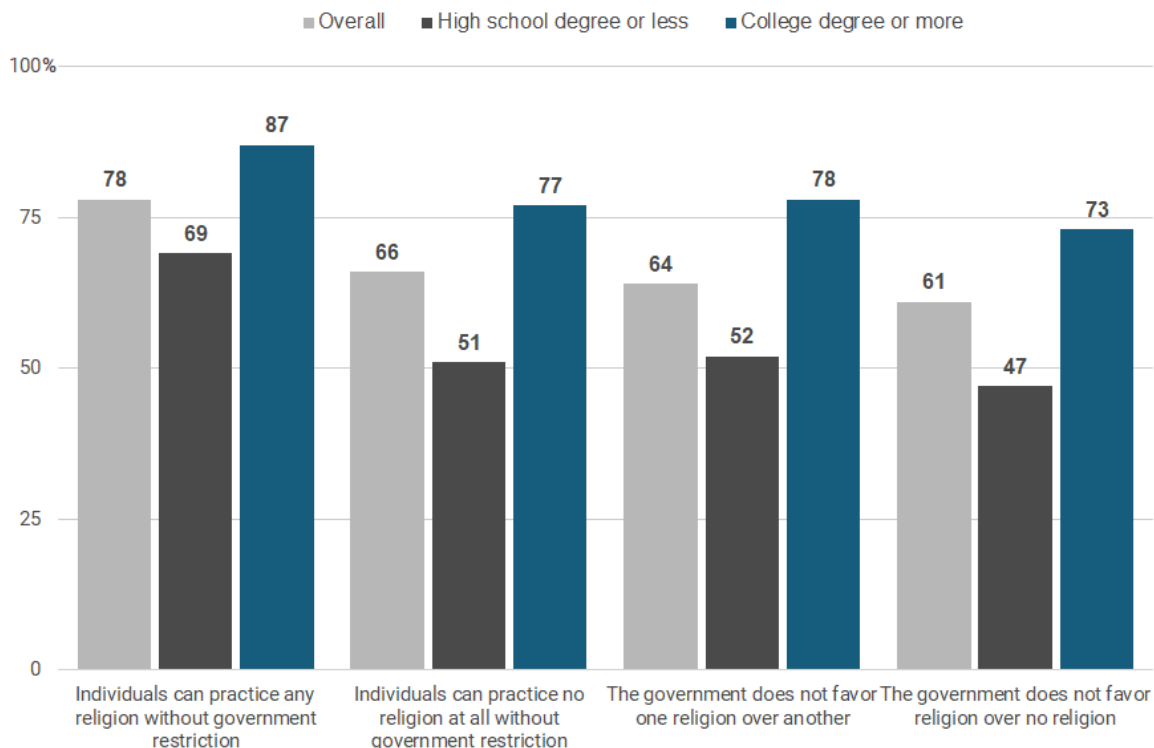
Those with a college degree are more likely than those with a high school degree or less to identify several of these rights as protected. Some differences are also observed by gender, age, and income.



Overall, a majority of Americans agree with the protections guaranteed by the First Amendment. Seventy-eight percent say Americans should be able to practice any religion without government restriction, while more than 6 in 10 say individuals can practice no religion if they so choose and that the government does not favor one religion over another or over no religion at all. Again, there are sharp differences by education, with college educated Americans more likely to believe all these rights should be protected.

### Should each of the following be federal law or policy in the United States?

Percent of adults who say each should be federal law or policy in the United States



**Question:** For each of the following statements, please indicate whether or not you think it should be federal law or policy in the United States.  
**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



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## FOR A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS, FREEDOM OF RELIGION IS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE AND ONE THAT FEELS UNDER THREAT.

A majority of Americans hold issues related to freedom of religion to be personally important—55% say it is very or extremely important to them, while 26% say they are somewhat important. Just 19% say freedom of religion issues are not personally important.

Religious Americans are more likely to view these issues as personally important. Sixty-seven percent of Protestants<sup>2</sup> and 55% of Catholics consider religious freedom an issue very or extremely important to them. Fewer, but still one-third of atheists and agnostics view them as very or extremely important. Forty-two percent of those with other religions agree.

Overall, 20% of Americans have taken action to express their views regarding freedom of religion. These actions could include donating money, volunteering for an organization, posting a message on social media, or participating in a demonstration. Somewhat more (28%) have taken these actions on other issues.

<sup>2</sup> In this report, Protestants are those who say they are Protestant or “Just Christian” in response to the question, “What is your present religion, if any?”

### Have you taken action to express your views about...

Percent of American adults



**Question:** Over the past year, have you taken any action to express your views about [freedom of religion/issues other than freedom of religion], such as donating money or volunteering for an organization or group, posting a message on social media, or participating in a protest, march, or demonstration, or haven't you done any of these things in the past year to express your views about [freedom of religion/issues other than freedom of religion]?

**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



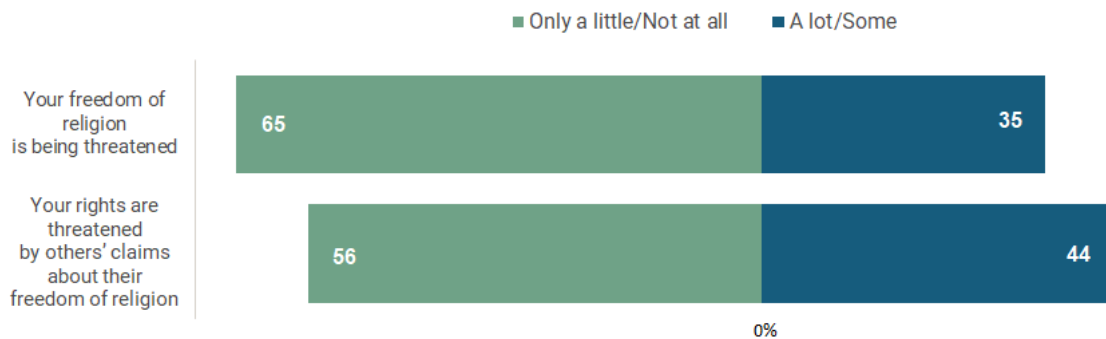
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Religiosity has a strong relationship with engagement on the issue. People who are affiliated with a religion are more likely to mobilize around issues related to freedom of religion than those who are unaffiliated (24% vs. 9%), but similarly likely to mobilize around other issues (29% vs. 26%). Catholics (24%) and Protestants (23%) are more likely to say they have been mobilized around issues of freedom of religion than atheists and agnostics (10%).

More Americans feel their rights are threatened by other people's claims of religious freedom than feel their own religious freedom is being challenged. Thirty-five percent of Americans feel their personal freedom of religion is threatened. But 44% feel that claims of religious freedom by others clash with their own rights—including but not limited to religious rights.

### A third of Americans consider their freedom of religion threatened, but more say they are threatened by others' claims of religious freedom.

Percent of American adults



**Question:** To what extent do you feel in the United States today that...?

**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

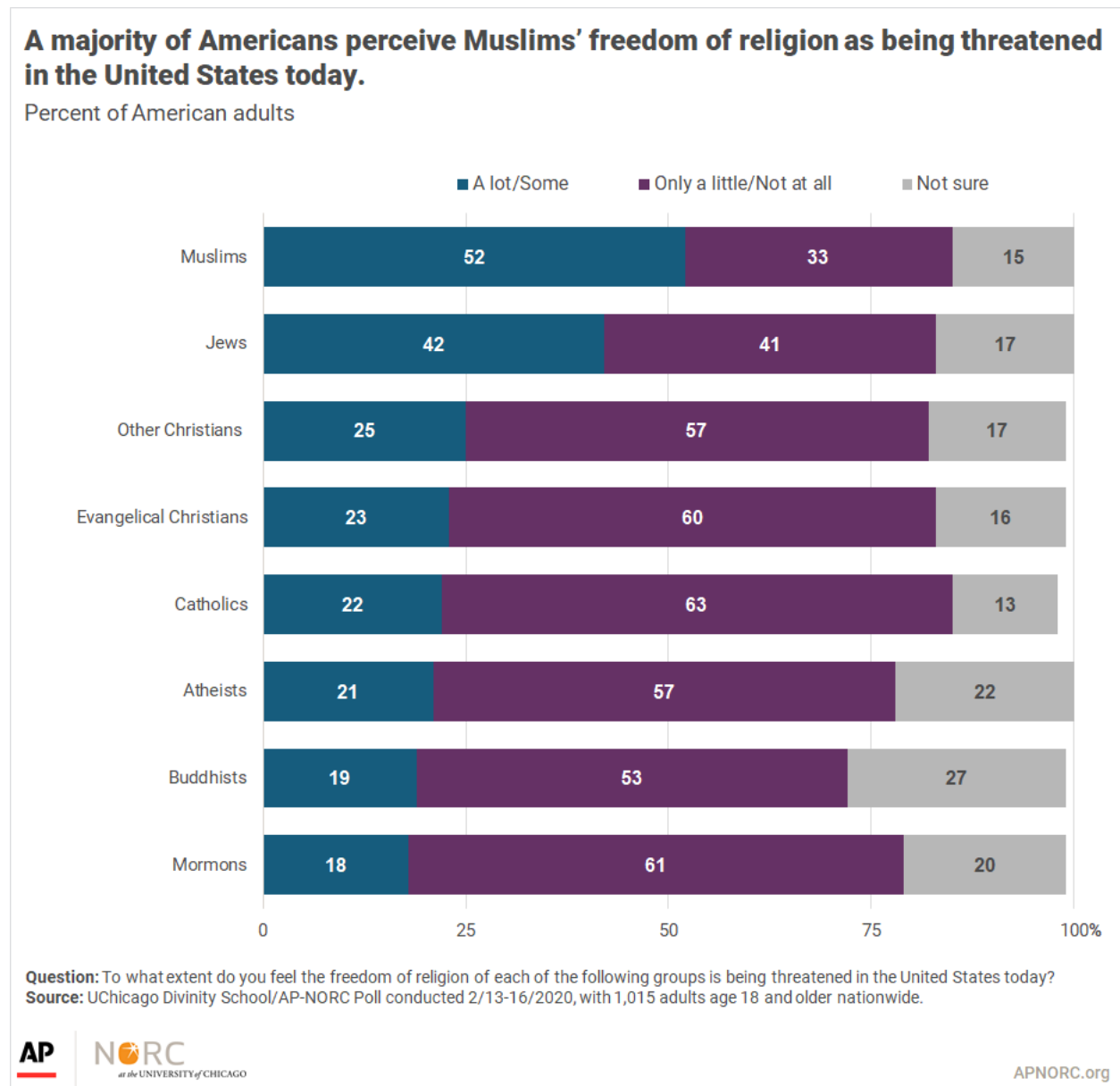


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Those who say their religion is very or extremely important to them are more likely than those who say religion is unimportant to them to feel their freedom of religion is being threatened (45% vs. 27%).

## AMERICANS PERCEIVE SOME RELIGIOUS GROUPS AS MORE UNDER THREAT THAN OTHERS, WHILE ALSO SEEING SOME GROUPS AS MORE THREATENING.

Many Americans perceive threats to others' religious freedom in the United States, as well. A majority (52%) think Muslims' freedom of religion is threatened, and 42% say the same about Jews. A quarter or fewer say other groups face challenges to their religious freedom.

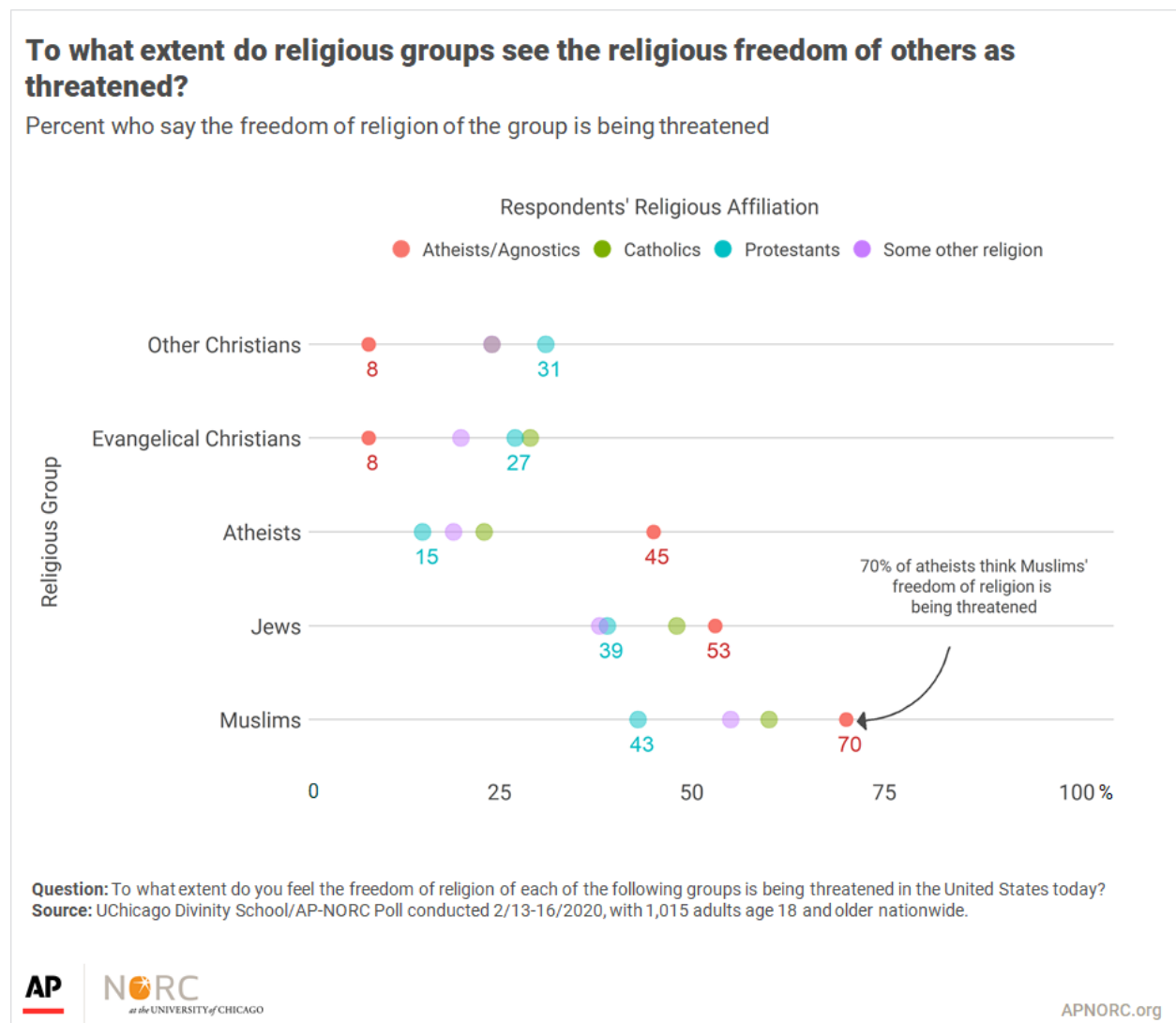


Perceptions of which groups' freedom of religion is being threatened vary considerably based on ideology and the personal importance of religion. Liberals are more likely than moderates and

conservatives to say the freedom of religion of Muslims (78% vs. 50% and 36%), Jews (55% vs. 33% and 39%), and atheists (34% vs. 19% and 12%) is being challenged.

Those who say their religion is very or extremely important are more likely than those who say their religion is not very important to identify the freedoms of Evangelical Christians (33% vs. 14%) and other Christians (36% vs. 13%) as being challenged. Further, those who say their religion is not very important are more likely to perceive threats against the freedom of religion of Muslims (63% vs. 49%) and atheists (29% vs. 17%).

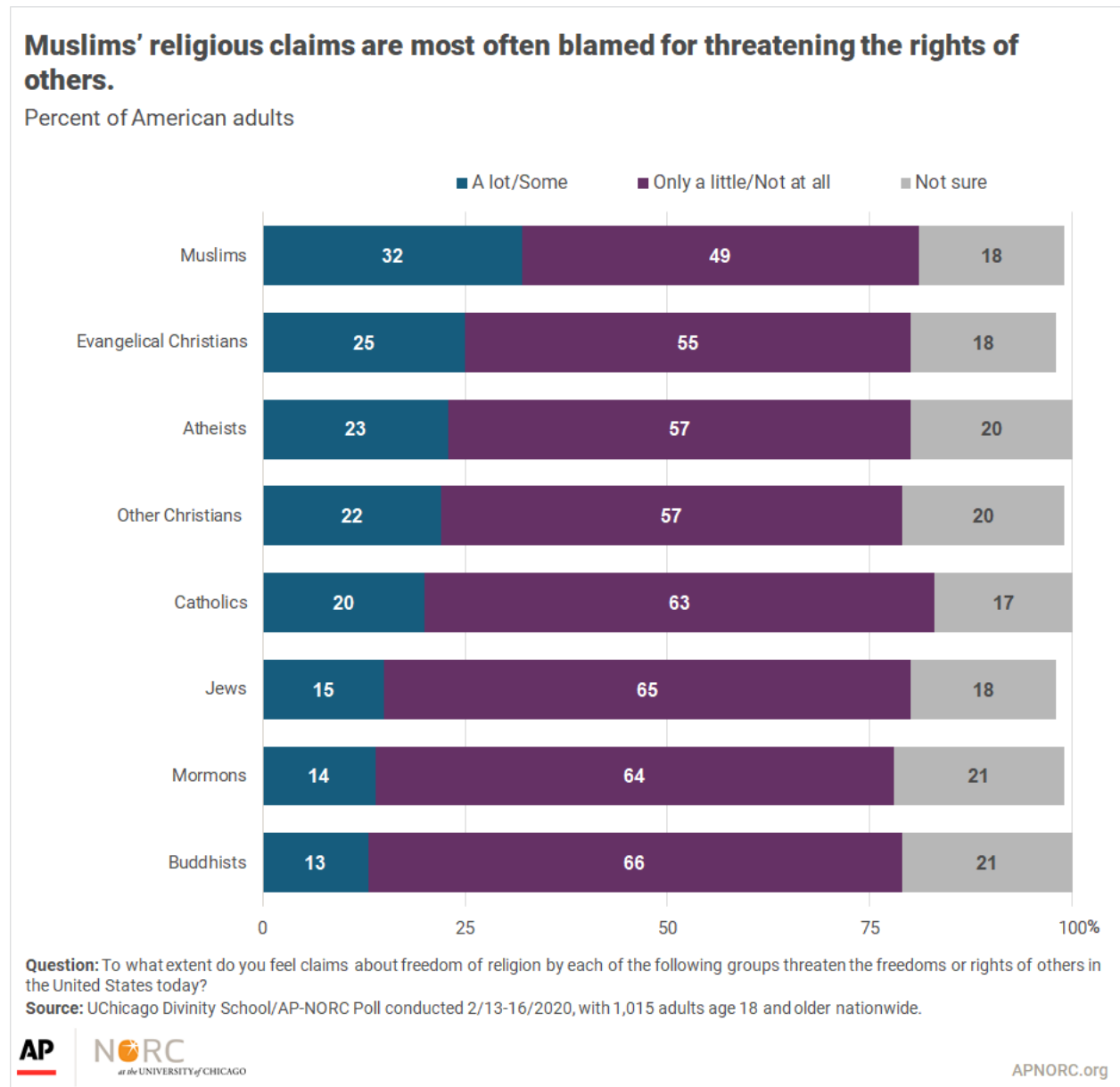
Differences also arise across religious affiliations. Atheist and agnostic respondents are more likely to see Muslims' (70%), Jews' (53%), and their fellow atheists' (45%) freedom of religion being challenged, but are less likely to see Evangelical Christians' (8%) and other Christians' (8%) freedom of religion threatened. Protestants are also most likely to see Muslims' and Jews' freedom threatened, but they are more likely to see the freedom of Evangelicals and other Christians threatened compared to atheists and agnostics.



White Evangelical Christians are less likely than all other Americans to say the freedom of religion of Muslims (31% vs. 55%) is being threatened.



While a majority of Americans feel that Muslims' freedom of religion is being threatened in the United States, some perceive the claims of religious freedom by Muslims as threatening the rights of others. Thirty-two percent say the claims of religious freedom by Muslims threaten the rights of others, while fewer claim other religious groups are a threat.



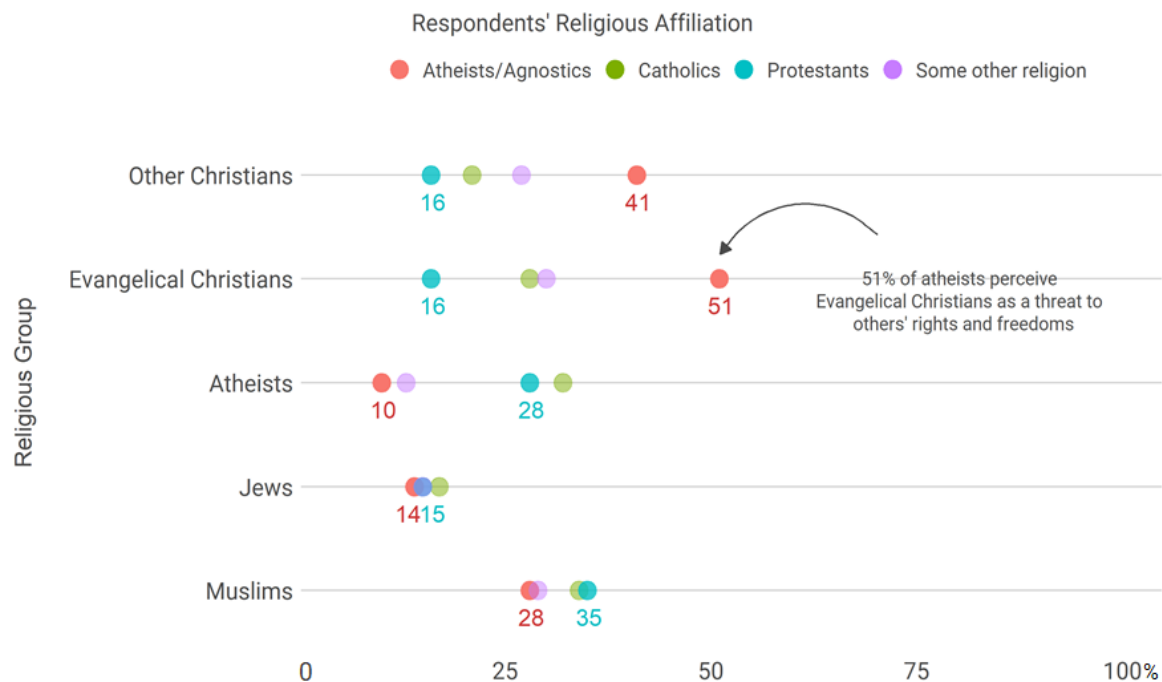
Those who say their religion is extremely or very important are more than three times as likely to say atheists' claims to freedom of religion threaten others' rights compared to those who do not view their religion as important (32% vs. 10%). On the other hand, those who say their religion is important are less likely than others to say Evangelicals' (21% vs. 35%) and other Christians' (21% vs. 29%) claims of freedom of religion threaten others' rights.

Differences in perceived threat also vary by religious affiliation. Atheists and agnostics are more likely to say the claims of Evangelical Christians and Catholics threaten the rights of others, while Catholics and Protestants are more likely to say the same about atheists.



## To what extent do different religious groups see other groups as threatening to rights and freedoms?

Percent who say the freedom of religion of the group threatens others' freedoms



**Question:** To what extent do you feel claims about freedom of religion by each of the following groups threaten the freedoms or rights of others in the United States today?

**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



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White Evangelical Christians are less likely than other Americans to say the claims of Catholics (8% vs. 21%) and other Christians' (12% vs. 24%) threaten others' rights. They are also less likely to say their own (15% vs. 27%) claims threaten the rights of others.

## AMERICANS' VIEWS ON THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DEPEND ON THE SITUATION.

While a majority say issues related to freedom of religion are important to them, Americans have mixed views when it comes to the legitimacy of claims of religious freedom violations.

Respondents were asked about six specific scenarios in which someone acts based on their religious beliefs and then faces consequences. In five of the six scenarios, respondents do not see the consequences as a violation of religious freedom.

## Americans have mixed views on the legitimacy of certain claims to religious freedom.

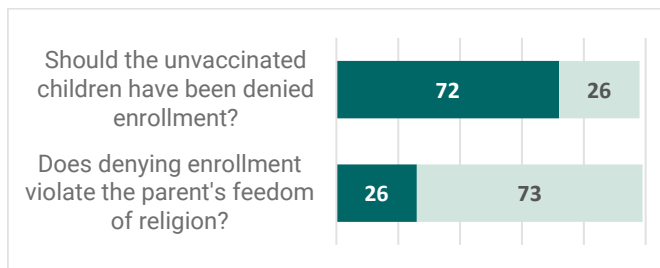
Percent of American adults

■ Yes ■ No

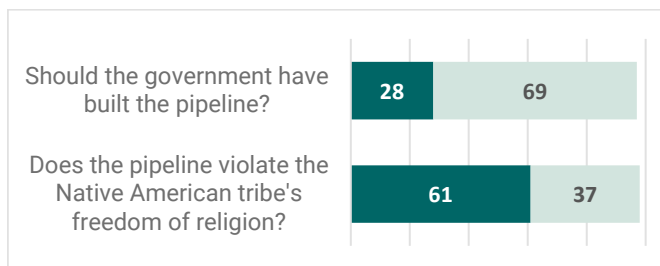
Because of religious beliefs to help others, an American citizen provides humanitarian assistance to undocumented immigrants in the U.S. desert. As a result, the American citizen is arrested by border patrol agents who consider this assistance to be against the law.



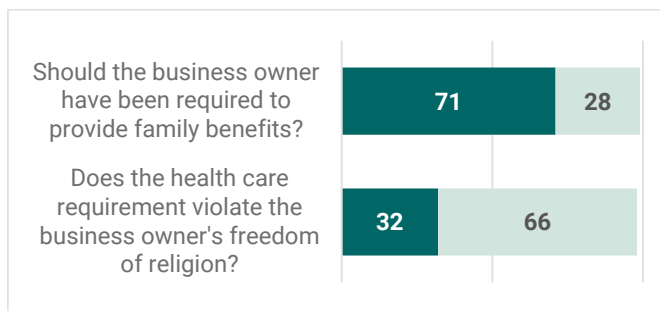
A parent does not vaccinate their children because of religious beliefs against this practice and the children are denied enrollment in public school because of its policy that all students must be vaccinated.



The federal government builds a natural gas pipeline through land despite a Native American tribe's objections because they consider the land to be sacred.



A business owner is legally required to provide family health care benefits to a same-sex couple despite the owner's religious beliefs that marriage is only between a man and a woman.



An Immigration and Custom Enforcement, also known as ICE, agent refuses to separate undocumented parents and children because of religious beliefs about family unity and the government fires the agent for not following protocol.



An employee at a government-run public benefit program is fired for accepting applicants for financial assistance who do not meet eligibility requirements because of religious beliefs to help everyone.



**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



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Notably, a majority of Americans do not feel that required vaccinations or legal requirements to provide benefits to same-sex couples violate religious freedoms. The one scenario that a majority of Americans feel would be a violation of freedom of religion described the federal government building a pipeline through land that Native Americans consider sacred.

In three of these scenarios, respondents who say their religion is very or extremely important are more likely to say the particular consequence violates the individual's religious freedom. Thirty-eight percent of those who say their religion is important say that requiring a business owner to provide family health care benefits to a same-sex couple violates the business owners' freedom of religion, compared to 20% of those who say their religion is not very important. Similarly, more say the firing of an ICE agent for refusing to separate families (43%) and the firing of a government employee for accepting ineligible applicants (35%) violate freedom of religion compared to those who say their religion is less important (32% and 15%, respectively).

## **MOST AMERICANS OPPOSE THE DECISION TO DENY A SERVICE TO OTHERS BASED ON CLAIMS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.**

To see how Americans might feel differently about issues of freedom of religion based on the religion of the people involved, we asked them a series of questions about a hypothetical scenario where a caterer refuses to make food for a wedding because of the religious beliefs of the couple getting married. The religions of both the caterer and the couple were varied across respondents. The text of the scenario reads:

*In a city in the United States, a caterer refuses to make food for a [insert couple's religion] couple's wedding because the caterer only believes in celebrating [insert caterer's religion] marriages.*

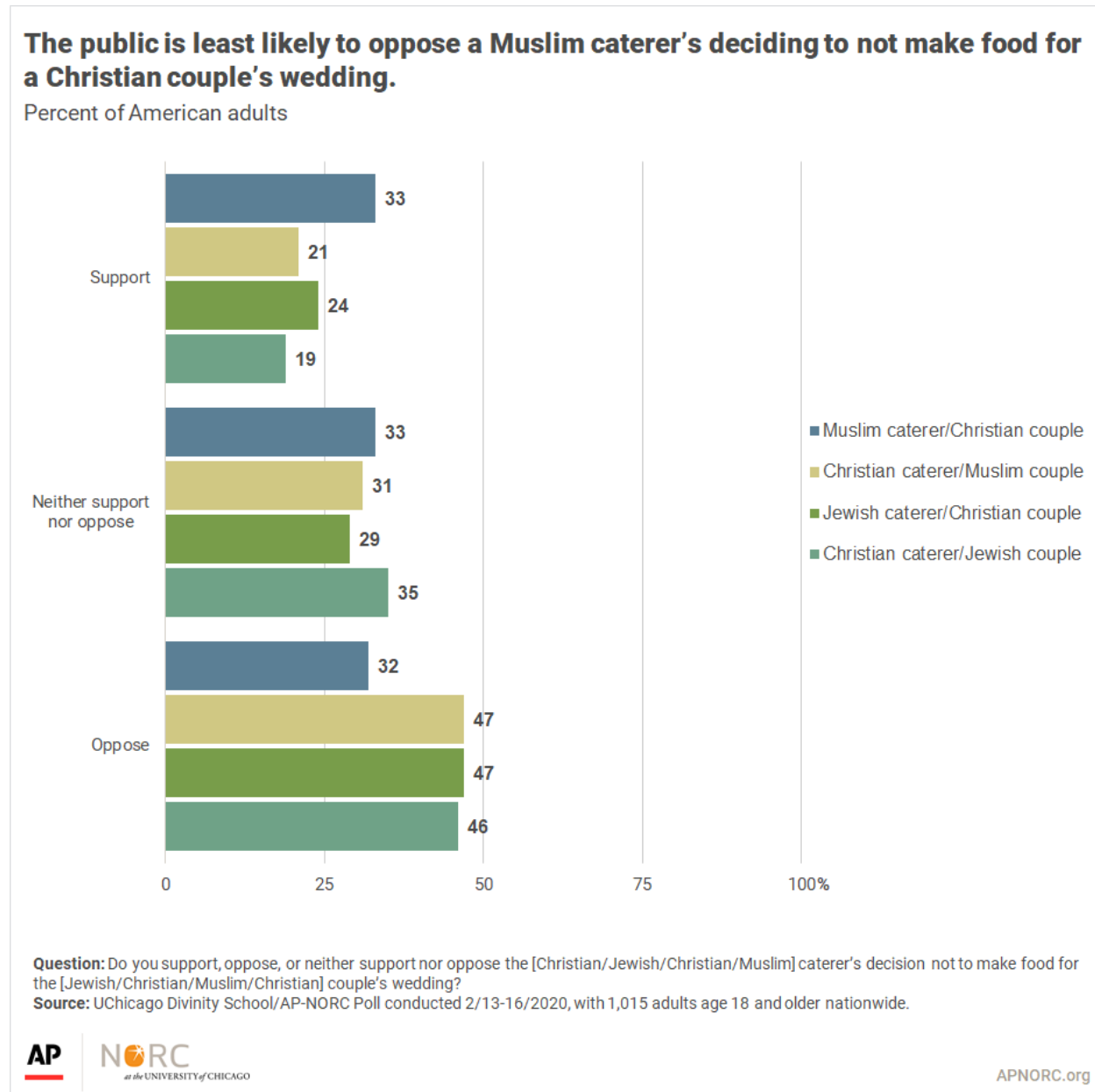
Respondents were then asked if they support or oppose the caterer's decision not to make food for the couple's wedding.

The respondents were randomly divided into four groups, and each group saw one version of the scenario with the following religion combinations:

- Group 1 saw the scenario with a Christian caterer and a Jewish couple.
- Group 2 saw it with a Jewish caterer and a Christian couple.

- Group 3 saw it with a Christian caterer and a Muslim couple.
- Group 4 saw it with a Muslim caterer and a Christian couple.

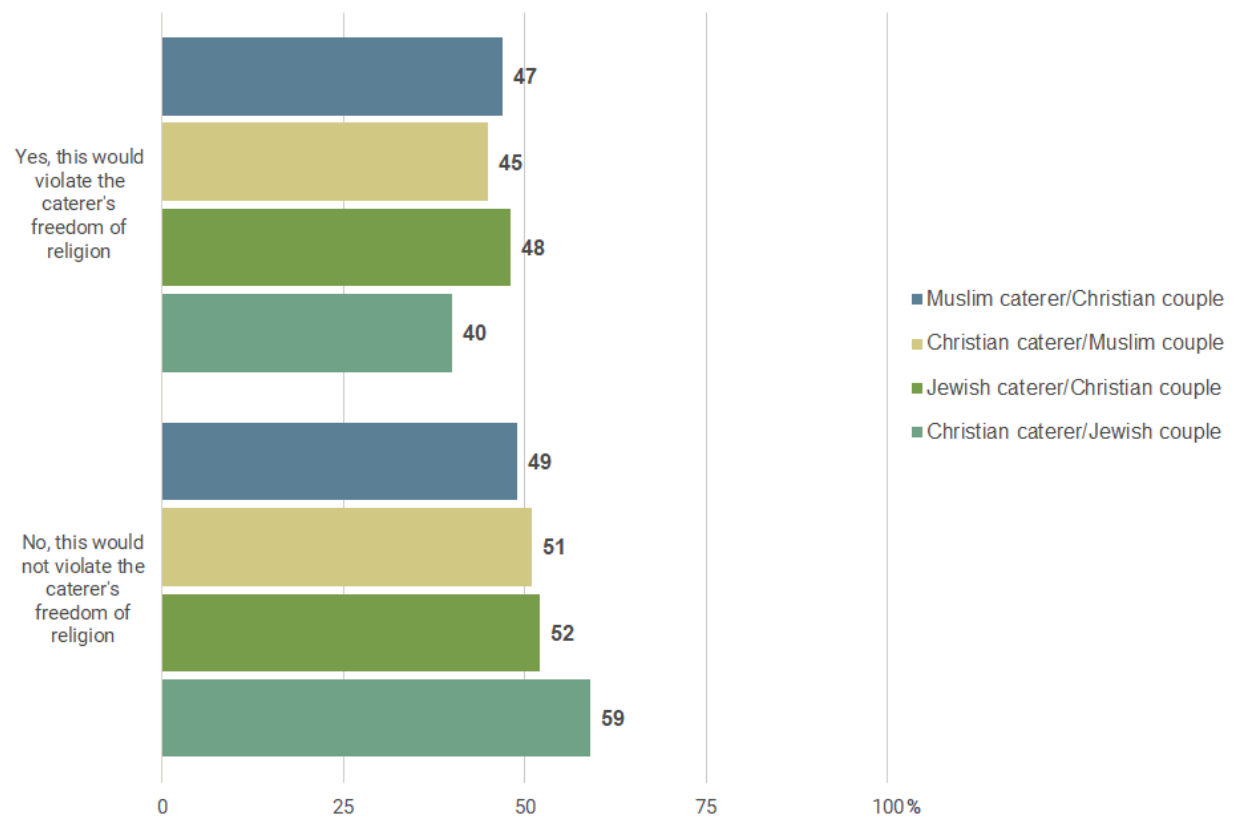
For three of the four scenarios, more Americans opposed than favored the caterer’s decision to refuse to make the food for the couple’s wedding. Only the fourth scenario showed split opinions where 33% supported the Muslim caterer’s decision, 33% neither supported nor opposed, and 32% opposed it.



When asked whether a court ruling that the caterer is required to make the food for the couple would violate the caterer’s freedom of religion, Americans’ opinions are similar across scenarios. In all four scenarios, less than half say this would violate the caterer’s freedom of religion.

### Americans' attitudes about a court requirement to cater the wedding do not significantly differ across scenarios.

Percent of American adults



**Question:** If a court ruled that the [Christian/Jewish/Christian/Muslim] caterer is required to make food for the [Jewish/Christian/Muslim/Christian] couple's wedding, would you say the caterer's freedoms or rights have been violated or not?  
**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

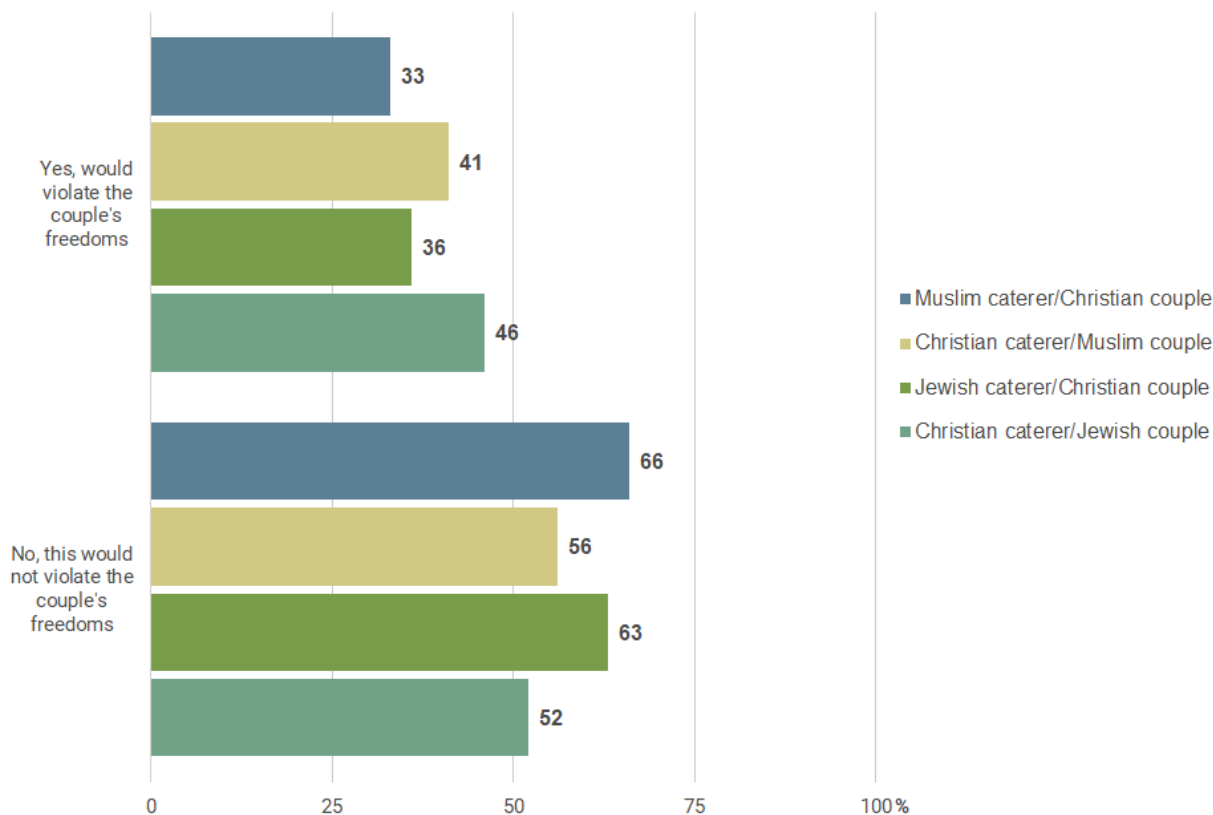


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Asked if the court had ruled the other way, deciding that the caterer is not required to make the food, would this violate the couple's freedoms and rights, a half to two-thirds in each scenario say it does not. The religion of the caterer and the couple was not associated with statistically different attitudes here, either.

### Attitudes about whether the couple's rights were violated do not differ across scenarios.

Percent of American adults



**Question:** If a court ruled that the [Christian/Jewish/Christian/Muslim] caterer is not required to make food for the [Jewish/Christian/Muslim/Christian] couple's wedding, would you say the couple's freedoms or rights have been violated or not?  
**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



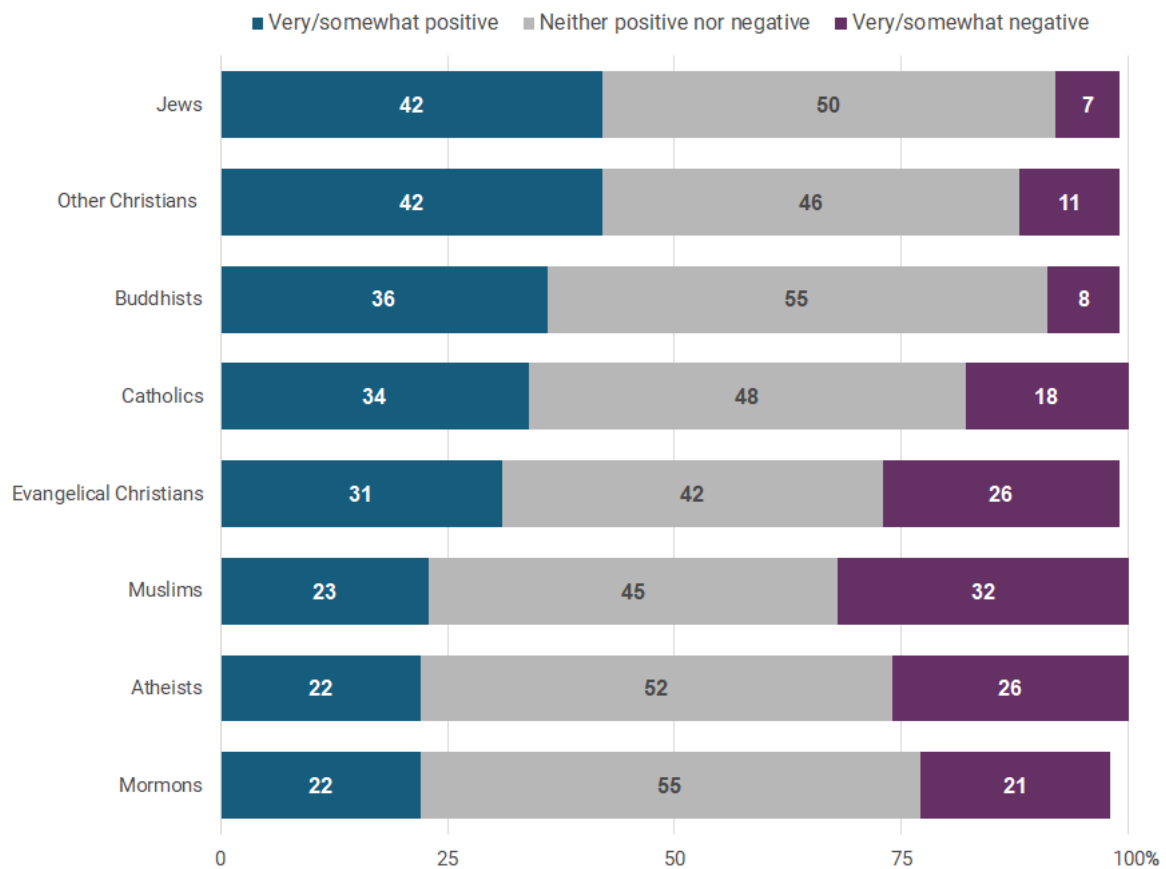
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### HOW AMERICANS VIEW RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND OTHER GROUPS IN SOCIETY DIFFERS BASED ON THEIR OWN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION.

Overall, Americans are most likely to say they have neither a positive nor a negative view of a variety of religious and non-religious groups. However, they are more likely to express positive than negative views about certain groups like Jews, Catholics, Buddhists, and non-Catholic or non-Evangelical Christians. On the other hand, more Americans express negative than positive views about atheists and Muslims. They express more mixed views about Evangelical Christians and Mormons.

## Americans have more negative than positive views about atheists and Muslims.

Percent of American adults



**Question:** Would you say you have a positive, negative, or neither positive nor negative view of each of the following groups?  
**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

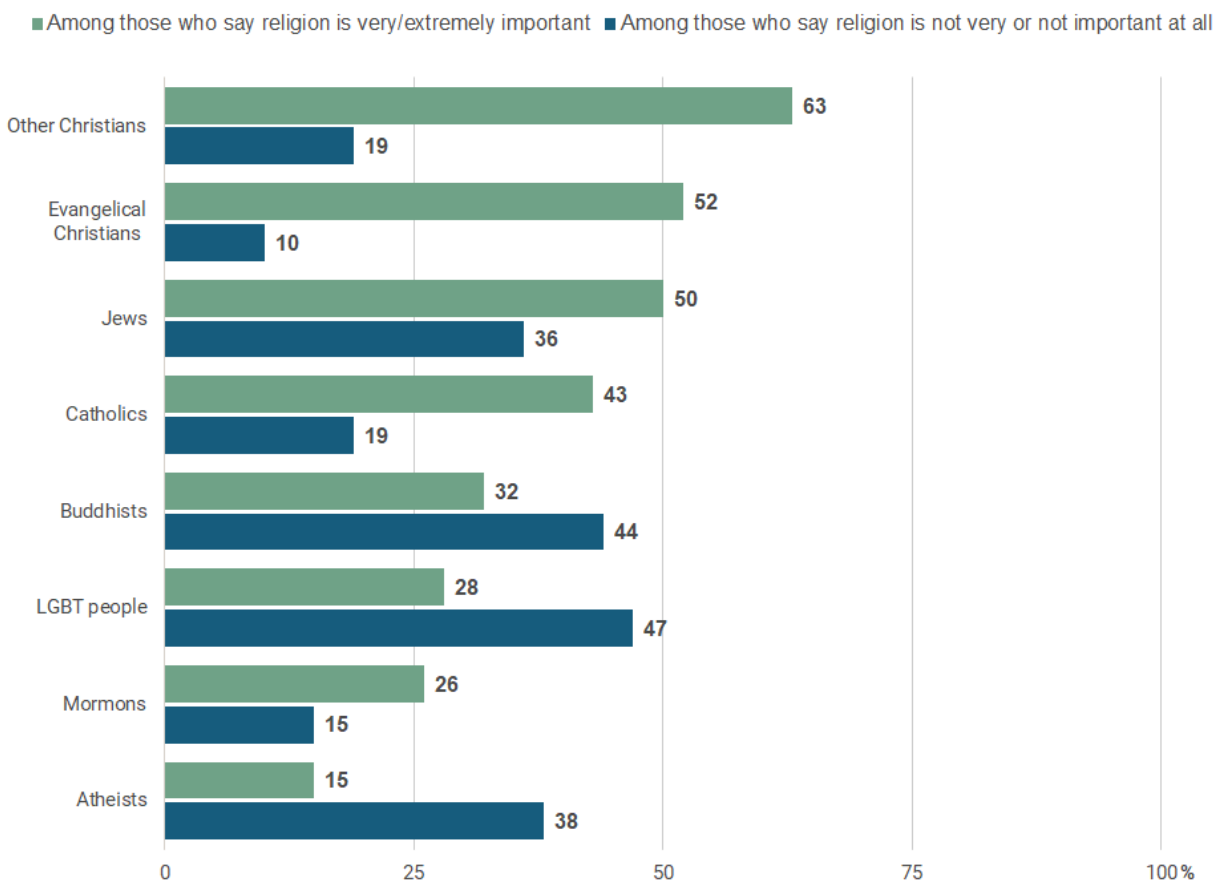
As a comparison to some non-religious groups, Americans have more positive than negative views about immigrants (36% vs. 17%) and LGBT people (34% vs. 20%). Though again, the most common response is holding neither positive nor negative views about immigrants (46%) and LGBT people (45%).

Opinions on these groups vary depending on the religious identity of the respondent. Even when controlling for other factors like age, race, and partisanship, those who say religion is very or extremely important to them have more positive views of Jews, Mormons, Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and other Christians compared to those who say religion is less important to them. On the other hand, those who say religion is less important are more likely to have positive views of LGBT people, Buddhists, and atheists. No matter the importance of religion, many have neither positive nor negative views of all these groups.



### Importance of religion relates to feelings about different religious groups.

Percent who have a positive view of...



**Question:** Would you say you have a positive, negative, or neither positive nor negative view of each of the following groups?  
**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

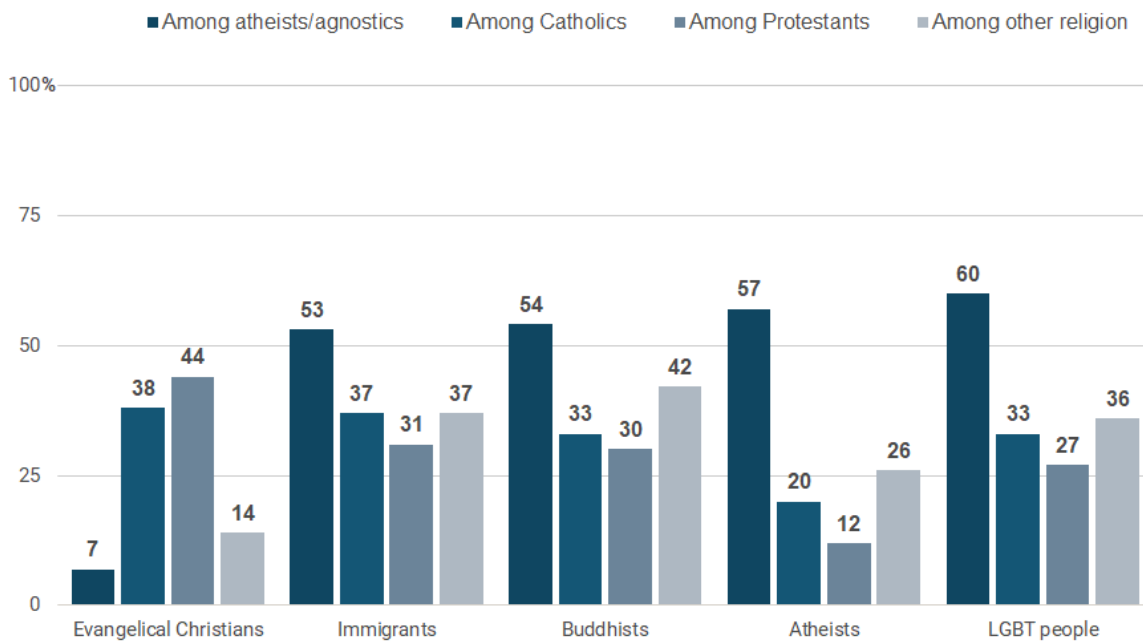


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Protestants and Catholics have similar views on many of these groups, but those views differ from those of atheists and agnostics. These religious groups have more positive views of Evangelical Christians, while atheists and agnostics have more positive views of Buddhists, LGBT people, immigrants, and atheists. Again, many across each of these religious identifications have neither positive nor negative views of all these groups.

### Attitudes about other religious groups differ by respondents' religious affiliation.

Percent who have a positive view of...



**Question:** Would you say you have a positive, negative, or neither positive nor negative view of each of the following groups?  
**Source:** UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC Poll conducted 2/13-16/2020, with 1,015 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



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Finally, white Evangelical Christians in particular have less positive views of Muslims compared to other Americans (10% vs. 25%).

### STUDY METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted by the University of Chicago Divinity School and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago.

Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was part of a larger study that included questions about other topics not included in this report. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between February 13 and 16, 2020, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,015 completed the survey—940 via the web and 75 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in English. The final stage completion rate is 20.3%, the weighted household panel response rate is 24.1%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 85.6%, for a cumulative response rate of 4.2%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/-4.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2018 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over.

For more information, email [info@apnorc.org](mailto:info@apnorc.org).

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