



The Associated Press-NORC
Center for Public Affairs Research

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES PAINTS A COMPLEX PICTURE

A large majority of adults feel state governments should not be allowed to restrict what is taught at state-funded colleges and universities and most do not want university administrators interfering with what professors are teaching in the classroom. But public attitudes toward freedom of expression on the country's university campuses are complex. A majority also say, for example, that professors should be barred from inviting academic speakers to campus who have been accused of offensive speech in the past and say professors should not be allowed to promote religious or political causes or to express views against marginalized groups while on campus.



That's according to a new poll from the University of Chicago Forum for Free Inquiry and Expression and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research which also finds the public perceives unequal freedom of expression for different groups on college campuses and believes that colleges and universities vary in their effectiveness creating respectful and inclusive environments for different groups. In particular, people are least likely to believe conservatives are able to freely express themselves or to be included and respected on campuses. Opinions among adults are almost evenly divided regarding whether people being allowed to say harmful or misleading things or prevented from saying what they want is a bigger problem on college and university campuses these days.

People are more supportive of freedom of expression across a number of scenarios for students compared to faculty. But there are still limits. A majority do not think students should be allowed to express anti-LGBTQ+, racist, or sexist views on campus, for example. Nearly all adults are supportive of students engaging in peaceful and non-disruptive protests against invited speakers who have views they find offensive, but there is almost no support for disruptive tactics that prevent the speaker from communicating to the audience or prevent audiences from attending.

When it comes to the primary purposes of universities, people most often cite functions like preparing students for careers, advancing knowledge and innovation, and teaching critical thinking. Roughly two-thirds of the public also consider fostering respectful learning environments and supporting the free exchange of ideas as primary

purposes. Advancing equity and inclusion as well as fostering a sense of community ranks lowest among what people see as higher education's primary purpose. And roughly 6 in 10 adults think professors should be allowed to conduct research on topics that some students might find offensive and about half find it acceptable for them to teach polarizing ideas in courses.

In general, Republicans view restricting free speech as a bigger problem on campuses, while Democrats believe saying harmful or misleading speech is the larger issue. However, Republicans are more supportive of state governments restricting what is taught at state universities and Democrats are more supportive of both peaceful protests at or outside an event or disruptive protests outside an event preventing people from attending. Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to feel conservatives are less able to freely speak due to a less inclusive environment for them on campuses.

Adults who have at least some college education view freedom of expression on campuses differently than those who do not have any college experience. They are also more likely to believe that colleges and universities have created a respectful and inclusive learning environment for many groups and students and professors should be able to speak more freely on campus than adults who have not attended college.

Men and women also have different views on which groups are able to speak more freely on college campuses. And more men than women believe students and professors should be able to express sexist, racist, or anti-LGBTQ+ views and have various other forms of free speech on campuses.

Views on issues of free speech and campus climate do not vary much by other demographic or social factors including race, ethnicity, or age.

The nationwide poll was conducted by the University of Chicago and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research from September 7 to 11, 2023, using AmeriSpeak®, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted with 1,095 adults. The margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points.

PEOPLE ARE MORE CONCERNED WITH ALLOWING HARMFUL OR MISLEADING SPEECH THAN FREE SPEECH RESTRICTIONS IN GENERAL, THOUGH MORE PEOPLE WORRY ABOUT RESTRICTING FREE SPEECH WHEN IT'S HAPPENING ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES THAN ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

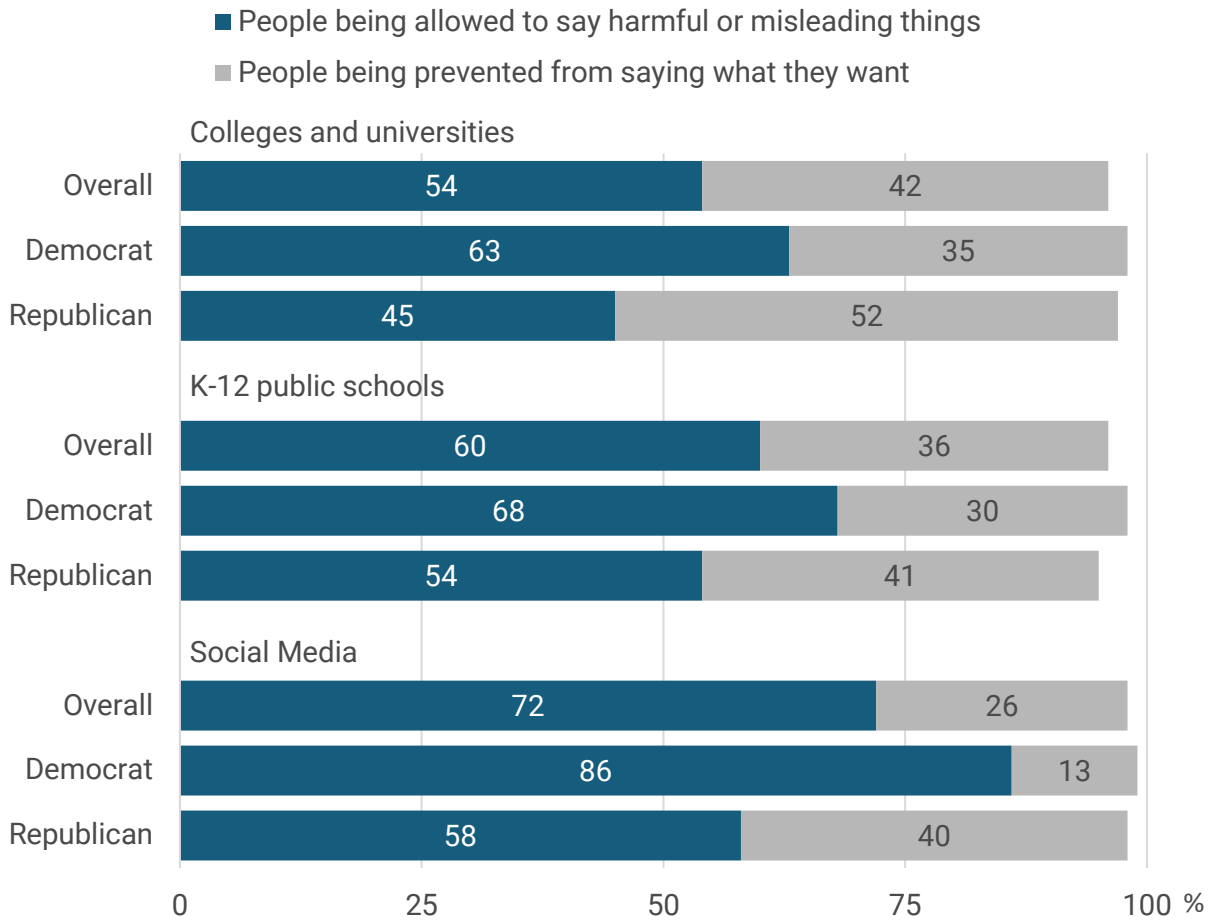
On social media, a large majority of adults say people being allowed to say harmful or misleading things (72%) is a bigger problem than people being prevented from saying what they want (26%). Concern about the proliferation of harmful speech and misinformation outweighs concerns about free speech restrictions for K-12 schools and on college and university campuses as well. However, across all three settings, concern for restrictions on free speech is highest on university campuses.

Across all three settings, Democrats tend to worry about the impact of harmful or misleading speech more than Republicans do. When it comes to university campuses, 52% of Republicans worry about restricting expression compared to 45% who worry more about the spread of harmful and misleading speech.

People's perceptions of this problem do not vary much or at all by other demographic or social factors including their educational backgrounds, race/ethnicity, or age.

Harmful or misleading speech is seen as a bigger problem than free speech restrictions.

Percent of adults



Question: Which do you think is a bigger problem for each of the following these days?

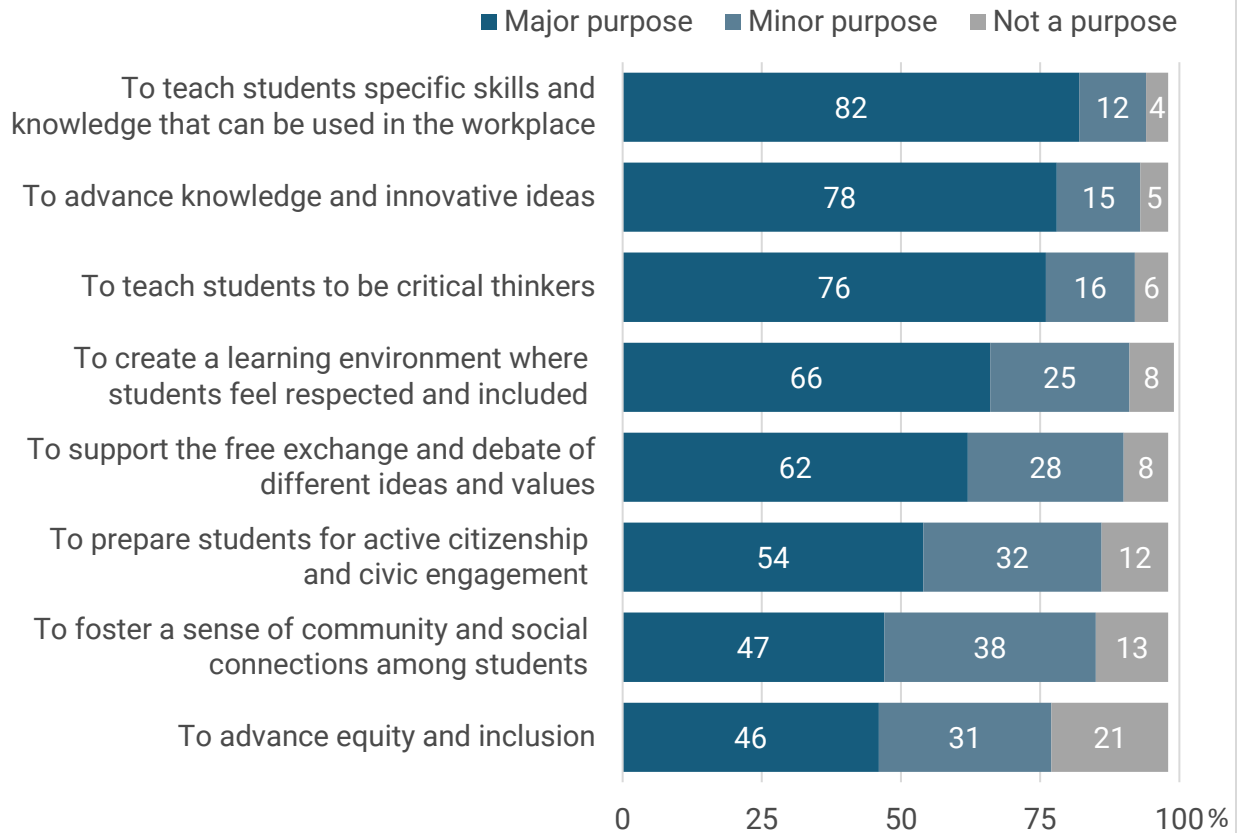
Source: UChicago/AP-NORC Poll conducted September 7-11, 2023, with 1,095 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



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Eighty-two percent of people consider teaching students specific skills and knowledge that can be used in the workplace to be a major purpose of colleges and universities in the United States. Large majorities also believe that the advancement of knowledge and innovative ideas and teaching students to think critically are significant objectives. About two-thirds consider supportive learning environments where students feel respected and included or where students can freely debate different ideas and values to be major purposes as well.

Most believe higher education's purpose is to prepare students for their careers and to advance knowledge.



Question: Do you think each of the following should be a major purpose, minor purpose, or not a purpose of colleges and universities in the United States?

Source: UChicago/AP-NORC Poll conducted September 7-11, 2023, with 1,095 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



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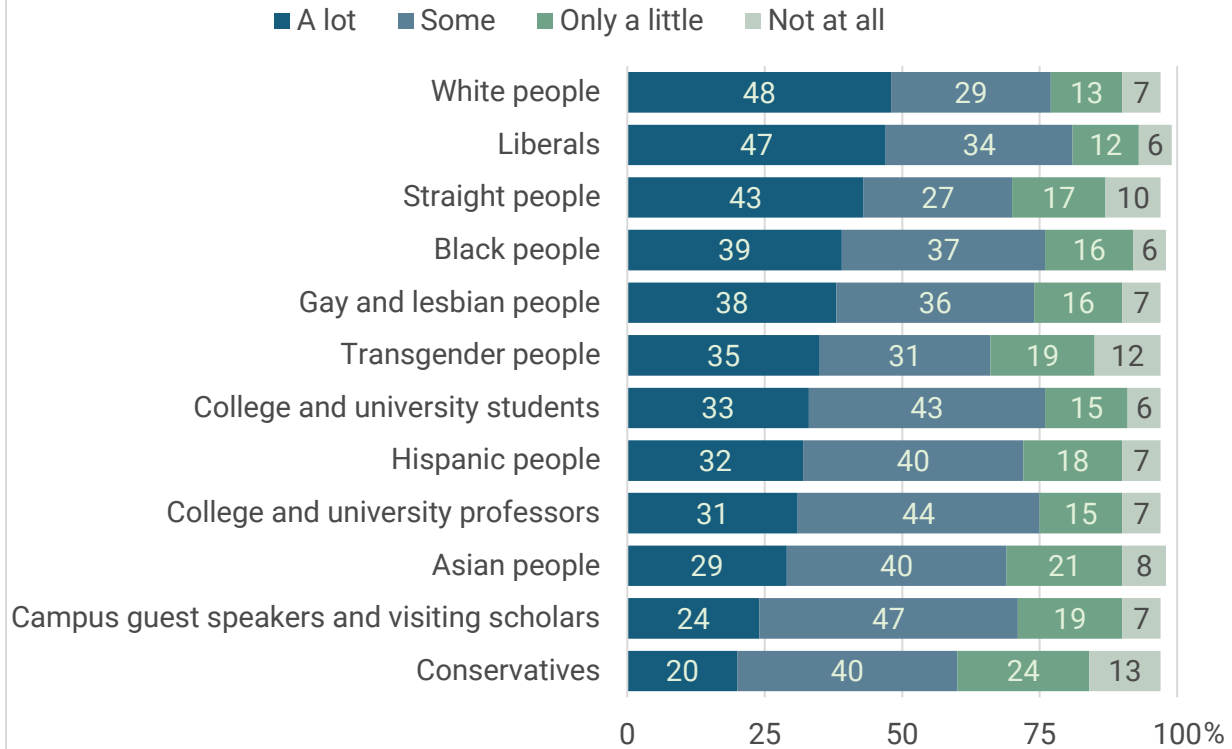
MANY ADULTS BELIEVE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES PROVIDE AN ENVIRONMENT FOR CERTAIN GROUPS TO SPEAK FREELY, BUT NOT ALL GROUPS.

When it comes to free expression on university campuses, many adults feel some groups have more latitude than others. Adults are more likely to believe white people have a lot of room to speak their minds compared to Black, Hispanic, or Asian people. There is less differentiation between straight, gay and lesbian, and transgender people. About a third of adults feel students or professors have a lot of leeway to express themselves, while slightly fewer feel the same about invited speakers and scholars.

The biggest gap is between liberals and conservatives. More than twice as many adults feel liberals can express themselves freely on campuses than conservatives (47% vs. 20%).

Many believe conservatives are not able to freely speak their minds on college campuses.

Percent of adults



Question: To what extent can the following groups freely speak their minds on college and university campuses in the United States today?

Source: UChicago/AP-NORC Poll conducted September 7-11, 2023, with 1,095 adults age 18 and older nationwide.

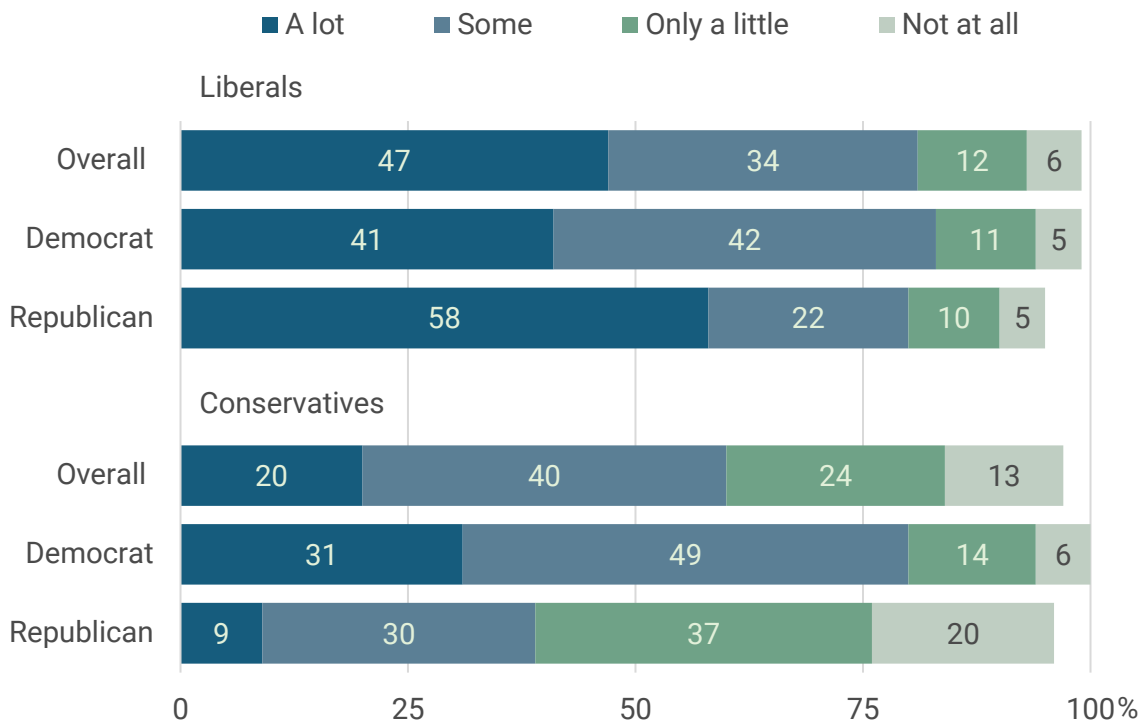


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Only 9% of Republicans say conservatives have a lot of ability to freely speak their minds on college campuses, compared to 31% of Democrats. Republicans are more likely to say transgender people can speak freely on college campuses whereas Democrats are more likely to say students, guest speakers and visiting scholars, white people, and straight people are able to speak freely on college and university campuses.

Republicans perceive conservatives as disadvantaged to freely speak on college campuses.

Percent of adults



Question: To what extent can the following groups freely speak their minds on college and university campuses in the United States today?

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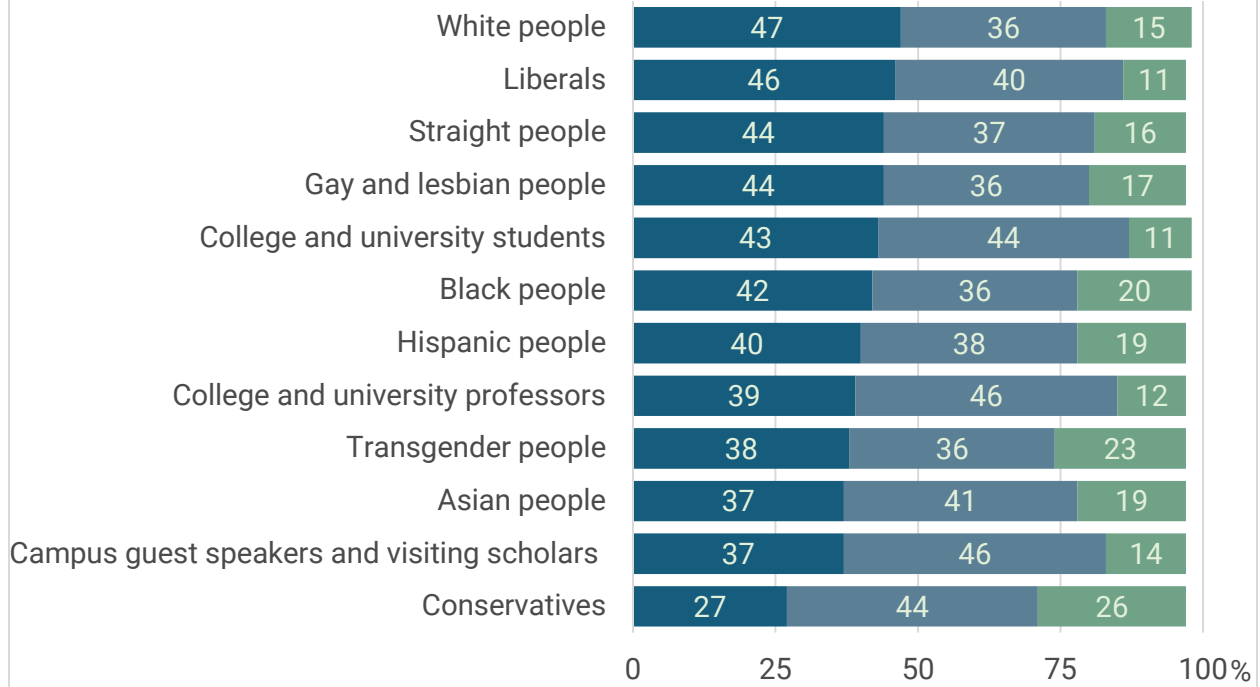
Men are more likely than women to say professors as well as racial minorities and members of the LGBTQ+ community are able to freely speak their minds on college campuses.

When it comes to providing a respectful and inclusive environment for these different groups of people, colleges and universities are seen as doing a better job on their campuses for liberals, Black, white, and Hispanic people, gay and lesbian people, straight people, and students, while fewer adults believe they are doing a good job for conservatives.

Most believe college campuses are doing a good job providing an inclusive environment for liberals, but not conservatives.

Percent of adults

■ Very/somewhat good job ■ Neither a good job nor a bad job ■ Very/somewhat bad job



Question: In general, do you think that colleges and universities do a good job, a bad job, or neither a good job nor a bad job at providing a respectful and inclusive environment for each of the following groups?

Source: UChicago/AP-NORC Poll conducted September 7-11, 2023, with 1,095 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



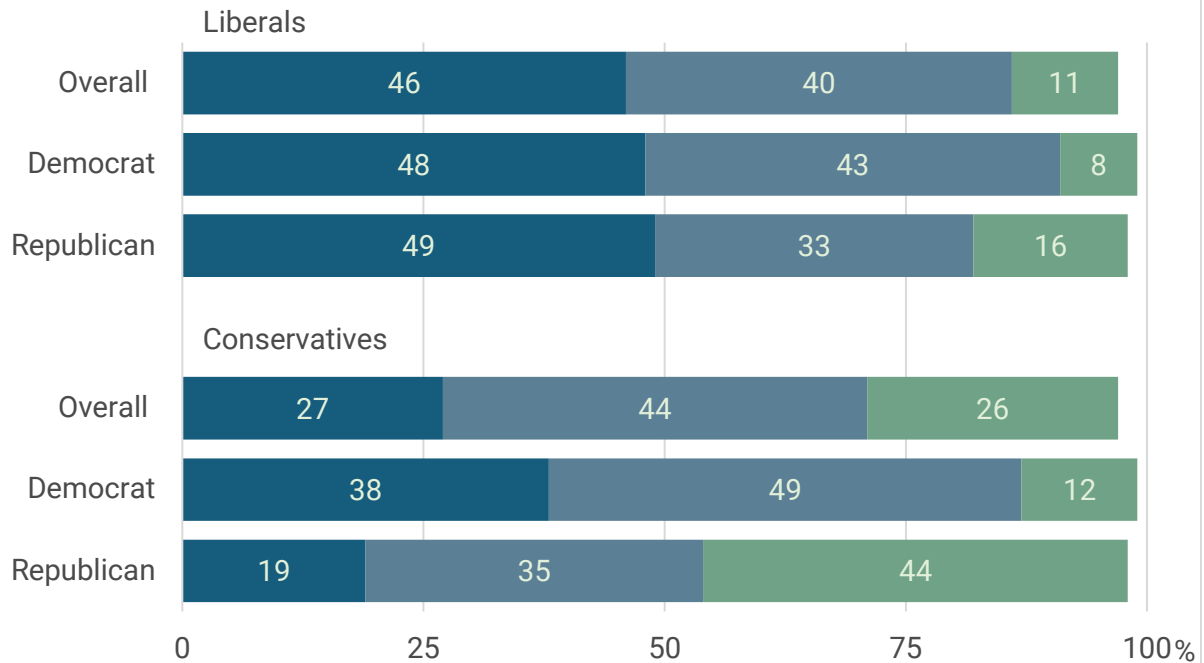
Thirty-eight percent of Democrats think colleges and universities are doing a good job creating an inclusive environment for conservatives, in contrast to just 19% of Republicans. Nearly half of both Democrats and Republicans feel universities are doing a good job for liberals though.

Republicans are more likely to say campuses are doing well for Black people, gay and lesbian individuals, and transgender individuals. Democrats, on the other hand, are more likely than Republicans to commend colleges and universities for fostering a respectful and inclusive environment for conservatives, university students, white individuals, and straight individuals.

Republicans perceive college campuses as respectful and inclusive environments for liberals, not conservatives.

Percent of adults

■ Very/somewhat good job ■ Neither a good job nor a bad job ■ Very/somewhat bad job



Question: In general, do you think that colleges and universities do a good job, a bad job, or neither a good job nor a bad job at providing a respectful and inclusive environment for each of the following groups?

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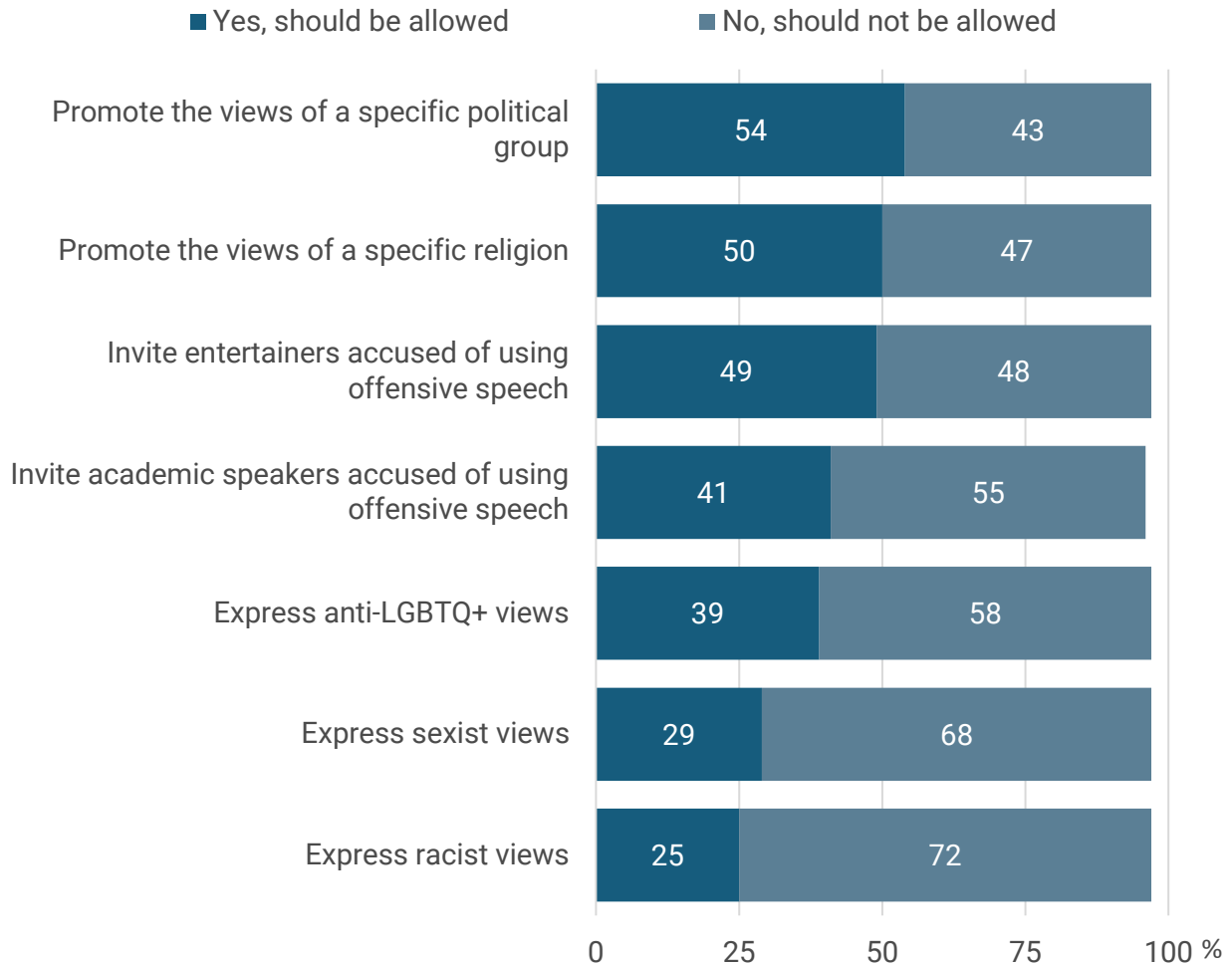
People with at least some college education are more likely to say colleges and universities have done a good job providing a respectful and inclusive learning environment for liberals, conservatives, Black and Hispanic people, gay and lesbian people, transgender people, and straight people than those with no college experience.

THE PUBLIC BELIEVE STUDENTS SHOULD BE AFFORDED MORE FREEDOM OF SPEECH ON CAMPUSES THAN PROFESSORS.

Adults are more likely to believe students should be allowed to practice freedom of speech in various ways on campus than college professors. About half of adults believe students should be able to promote the views of specific religions or political groups, or invite entertainers accused of using offensive speech. But a majority of adults draw the line at allowing students to invite academic speakers accused of using offensive speech or allowing students to express views against marginalized groups.

Half believe students should be allowed to promote the views of specific political or religious groups on campus.

Percent of adults



Question: Below are a few specific examples of some things you might see students do on a college or university campus. Do you think students should be allowed or not allowed to do each of the following on campus?

Source: UChicago/AP-NORC Poll conducted September 7-11, 2023, with 1,095 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



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Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say students should be allowed to express sexist (37% vs. 23%), racist (34% vs. 17%), and anti-LGBTQ+ views (51% vs. 29%), as well as to promote the views of a specific religion (61% vs. 45%) or invite entertainers accused of using offensive speech (56% vs. 43%).

Adults with at least some college education are more likely than less educated adults to say students should be allowed to express anti-LGBTQ+ views (43% vs. 34%), promote the views of a specific religion (55% vs. 42%), promote the views of a specific political group (61% vs. 43%), invite academic speakers accused of using offensive speech (46% vs. 33%), or invite entertainers accused of using offensive speech (55% vs. 39%).

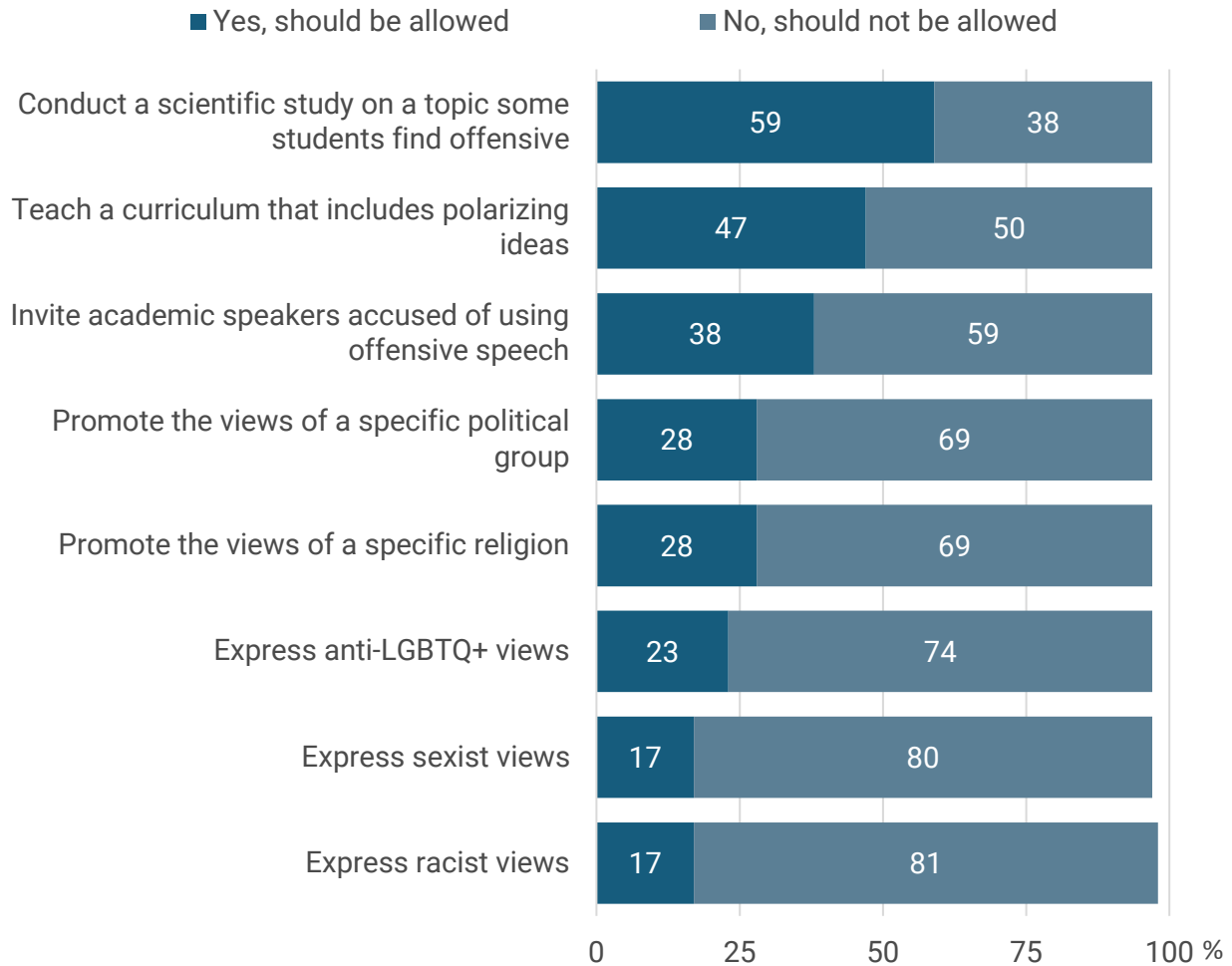
Men are more likely than women to say students should be allowed to express sexist (39% vs. 20%), racist (33% vs. 18%), or anti-LGBTQ+ views (50% vs. 29%). They are also more likely to say students should be allowed to promote the views of a specific political group (62% vs. 46%), invite academic speakers accused of using offensive speech (53% vs. 30%) or invite entertainers accused of using offensive speech (61% vs. 37%).

When it comes to university professors, most adults believe professors should be able to pursue their research agendas even if students find the topics offensive. And about half feel professors should be allowed to include polarizing ideas in their courses.

But people afford less latitude to professors than they do to students when it comes to promoting the views of a specific political group or religion or expressing views against marginalized groups.

Few believe professors should be able to promote the views of specific groups or express prejudice views.

Percent of adults



Question: Below are a few specific examples of some things you might see professors do on a college or university campus. Do you think professors should be allowed or not allowed to do each of the following on campus?

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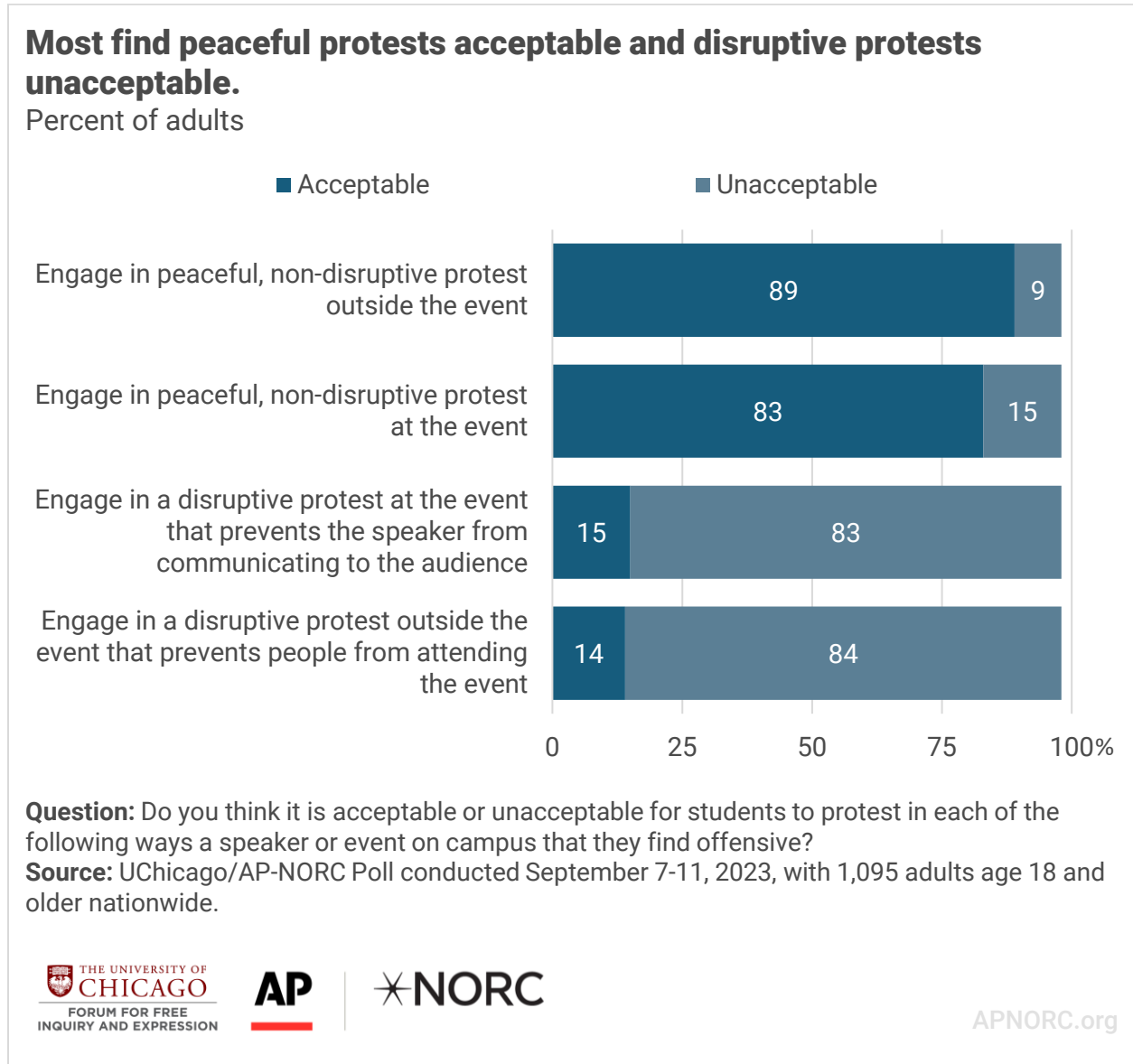
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Views on what professors should be allowed to do on campus are also related to partisanship and people’s educational backgrounds. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say professors should be allowed to express sexist (25% vs. 10%), racist (23% vs. 10%) or anti-LGBTQ+ views (34% vs. 16%) as well as promote the views of a specific religious group (35% vs. 23%) or political group (31% vs. 24%), or invite academic speakers accused of using offensive speech (46% vs. 34%).

Those with at least some college experience are more likely than those who have not attended college to say professors should be allowed to teach a curriculum that includes polarizing ideas (54% vs. 34%), conduct a

scientific study on a topic some students find offensive (65% vs. 50%), promote the views of a specific political group (31% vs. 23%), or invite academic speakers accused of using offensive speech (44% vs. 29%).

While many people believe there should be restrictions on what students and faculty can do on campus, most think it is unacceptable for students to use disruptive protests to object to speakers or events on campus that they find offensive.

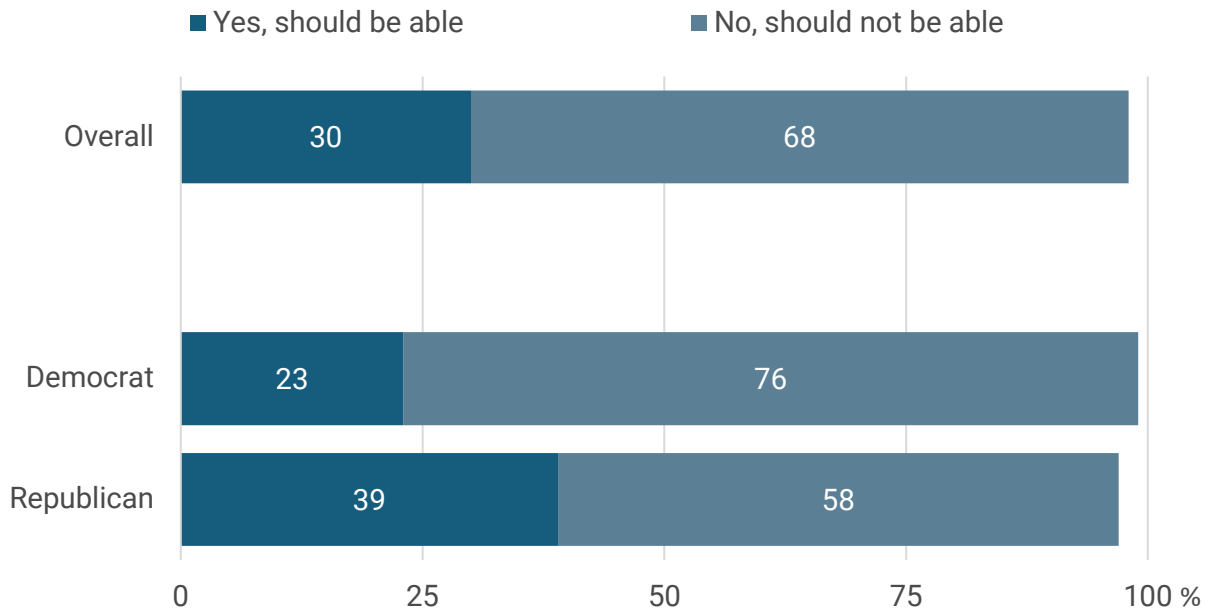


Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say it is acceptable to engage in a peaceful protest at or outside of the event or in a disruptive protest outside the event that prevents people from attending.

Although the public is split on whether professors should be allowed to teach polarizing ideas in their courses, most do not want the government determining what should and should not be allowed at state universities. Only 30% of adults believe state governments should be able to restrict what professors teach at state universities. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe state governments should have this authority.

Republicans are more likely to say state governments should be allowed to restrict what professors teach at state universities.

Percent of adults



Question: Do you think state governments should or should not be able to restrict what professors teach at state universities?

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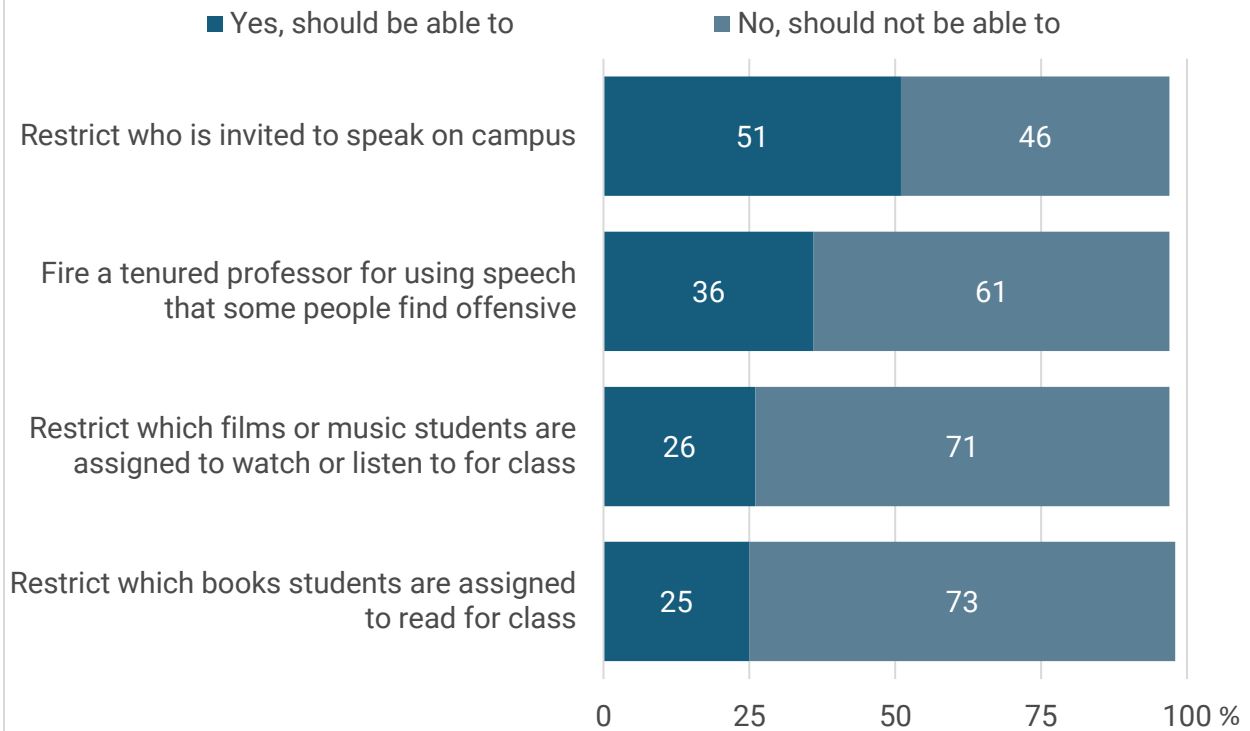
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MANY THINK COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS SHOULD NOT HAVE THE POWER TO RESTRICT FREEDOM OF SPEECH ON CAMPUSES.

About half of adults believe college and university officials should be able to restrict who is invited to speak on campus. However, the majority think administrators overstep when they fire a tenured professor for using speech that some people find offensive, restrict which books students are assigned to read for class, or restrict which films or music students are assigned to watch or listen to for class.

Many think colleges should not have the power to restrict freedom of speech on campus.

Percent of adults



Question: Do you think college and university officials should or should not be able to do each of the following?

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STUDY METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and with funding from 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 percent 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 September 7 and 11, 2023 with adults aged 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,095 completed the survey—1,060 via the web and 35 by telephone. Panel members were invited by email or by phone from an NORC telephone interviewer. Interviews were conducted in English. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for completing the survey. The final stage completion rate is 16.4 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 21.1 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 78.7 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 2.7 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect.

Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error and there may be other unmeasured error in this or any other survey.

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 50 interviews were removed for nonresponse to at least 50% of the questions asked of them, for completing the survey in less than one-third the median interview time for the full sample, or for straight-lining all grid questions asked of them. These interviews were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

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 2023 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults aged 18 and over.

Complete questions and results are available at: apnorc.org.

Additional information on the AmeriSpeak Panel methodology is available at: <https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak/Pages/Panel-Design.aspx>.

For more information, email info@apnorc.org.

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.

- 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. www.ap.org
- NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest objective and nonpartisan research institutions in the world. www.norc.org

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. In its 10 years, The AP-NORC Center has conducted more than 250 studies exploring the critical issues facing the public, covering topics like health care, the economy, COVID-19, trust in media, and more. Learn more at www.apnorc.org.

ABOUT THE FORUM FOR FREE INQUIRY AND EXPRESSION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The University of Chicago's [Forum for Free Inquiry and Expression](https://thechicagoforum.uchicago.edu), launching in October 2023, aims to promote the understanding, practice and advancement of free and open discourse. It builds on UChicago's historic commitment, since its founding in 1890, to the principles of free speech and academic freedom, and their importance to rigorous and open scholarly inquiry. Since that time, UChicago has continued to be a leading global advocate for the advancement of free expression, including developing the Chicago Principles, a statement outlining the importance of free expression and academic freedom that has been adopted by universities and colleges across the country. More information is available on the Chicago Forum's website:

<https://thechicagoforum.uchicago.edu>