

Trends in Support for Civil Liberties

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April, 2011

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

As Table 1 shows, the % for allowing “somebody who is against all churches and religion” to speak rose from 66% in 1972 to 76% in 2010. Approval of teaching by an anti-religionist climbed from 41% in 1972 to 60% in 2010 and support for having a book in the library grew from 61% in 1972 to 74% in 2010.

Table 2 indicates that allowing an “admitted Communist” to speak went from 53% in 1972 to 64% in 2010, teaching climbed from 33% in 1972 to 61% in 2010, and having a book in the library rose from 53% in 1972 to 69% in 2010.

Table 3 shows that allowing an “admitted homosexual” to speak increased from 62% in 1973 to 86% in 2010, teaching rose from 48% in 1973 to 84% in 2010, and having a library book grew from 54% in 1973 to 78% in 2010.

Table 4 indicates that allowing “a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior” to speak declined from 62% in 1976 to 58% in 2010, teaching went from 41% in 1976 to 48% in 2010, and having a book in the library increased from 60% in 1976 to 65% in 2010.

Table 5 shows that allowing “a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country” to speak grew from 55% in 1976 to 69% in 2010, teaching went from 37% in 1976 to 57% in 2010, and having a book in the library climbed from 57% in 1976 to 71% in 2010.

Table 6 indicates that allowing a Muslim extremist to speak was favored by 41% in 2008 and 2010, teaching by 29% in 2008 and 32% in 2010, and having a library book by 49% in 2008 and 48% in 2010.

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

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

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

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

Over a longer span, there are trends on anti-religionists and Communists going back to a survey in 1954 (Samuel A. Stouffer, Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963). The six items show increases in allowing these groups to speak, teach, and have books in libraries of from 26 to 29 percentage points. These represent rises of 1.44 to 1.61 percentage points per annum. When looking over the whole period of 1954 to 2010, the change in tolerance is enormous with support for allowing an anti-religionist to speak rising from 37% to 76% (+ 39 points), support for teaching up from 12% to 60% (+ 48 points), and support for having a book in the library rising from 35% to 74% (+39 points). Similarly, allowing a Communist to speak rose from 27% to 64% (+37 points), to teach from 6% to 61% (+55 points), and to have a library book from 27% to 69% (+42 points). In each case, attitudes shifted from strong majorities against civil liberties to solid majorities backing civil liberties.

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

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

Appendix: Question Wordings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix (continued)

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1

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

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

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

Table 2

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

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

Table 3

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

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

Table 4

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

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

Table 5

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

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

Table 6

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

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

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

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

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

Table 8

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

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

Table 9

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

Speak

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

Teach

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

Library Book

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

Average of Speak, Teach, and Library Book

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