



June 6, 2023

Civitas Institute Poll: Many Americans express doubts about the security of fundamental freedoms

Less than a majority are positive about the way democracy is working in the United States

Americans are enormously supportive of fundamental freedoms identified in the Bill of Rights, but that they are also extremely concerned about the future of American democracy. That's the main takeaway from the inaugural poll of the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas at Austin.

The survey, conducted from April 24-May 1, asked respondents an array of questions about democracy and capitalism, about first amendment rights and fundamental freedoms, about how well our political actors and institutions are performing, and about issue priorities.

Here are the highlights...

Democracy and Capitalism

When asked how well democracy and capitalism are working in the United States today, Americans were split. Forty-six percent offered a positive assessment of democracy in the US, while 39% gave it a negative rating and 16% said it was neither good nor bad. On the American economic system, 49% gave positive assessments of capitalism and the free enterprise system, whereas 32% offered negative ratings and 17% gave it a middling rating.

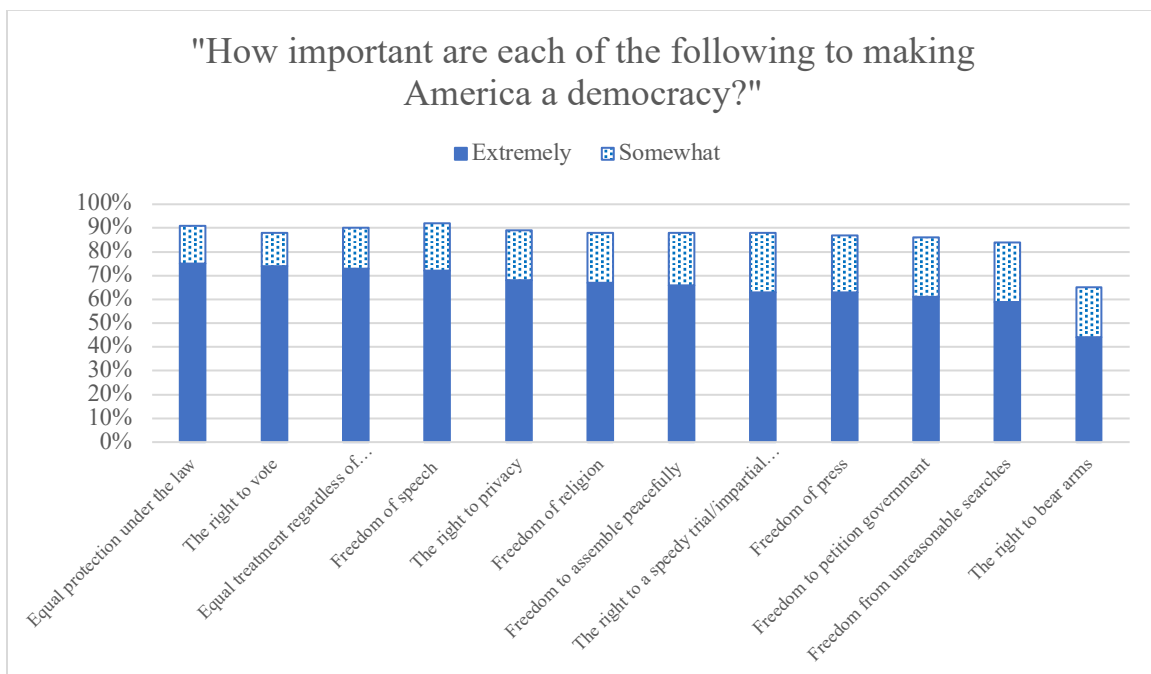
These misgivings are probably why less than a majority says either American democracy or American capitalism is a "good example" for other countries around the world to follow. Forty-seven percent say American democracy is a good example, compared to 29% who say it is a bad example and 24% say they don't know. This net +18 good example rating is slightly better than what we see for the American economic system: 46% of respondents say it is a good example versus 33% bad example and 21% don't know, for a net +13 good example rating.

The survey also asked about the US providing more or less assistance to promote democratic movements around the world. With respect to economic assistance, 25% said we should provide

more, 40% said less, and 35% said we are currently providing the right amount. With respect to military assistance, only 18% said more, 45% said less, and 38% said the right amount.

How Important are Fundamental Freedoms?

The Civitas Poll corroborates what previous surveys on American rights and liberties have found: most everyone thinks that all of them are important to democracy. All told, 11 of the 12 rights or liberties show at least 80% rating them as either somewhat or extremely important (only the right to bear arms falls below this marker, with 65% rating it as important). Based on the percent saying it is “extremely” important, equal protection under law tops the list (75% extremely important), followed by the right to vote (74%), equal treatment regardless of race or ethnicity (73%), and freedom of speech (72%). Slightly below are the right to privacy (68% extremely important), freedom of religion (67%), freedom to assemble peacefully (67%), the right to a speedy trial and an impartial jury (63%), freedom of the press (63%), freedom to petition the government (61%), protection against unreasonable search and seizure (59%), and the right to bear arms (44%).

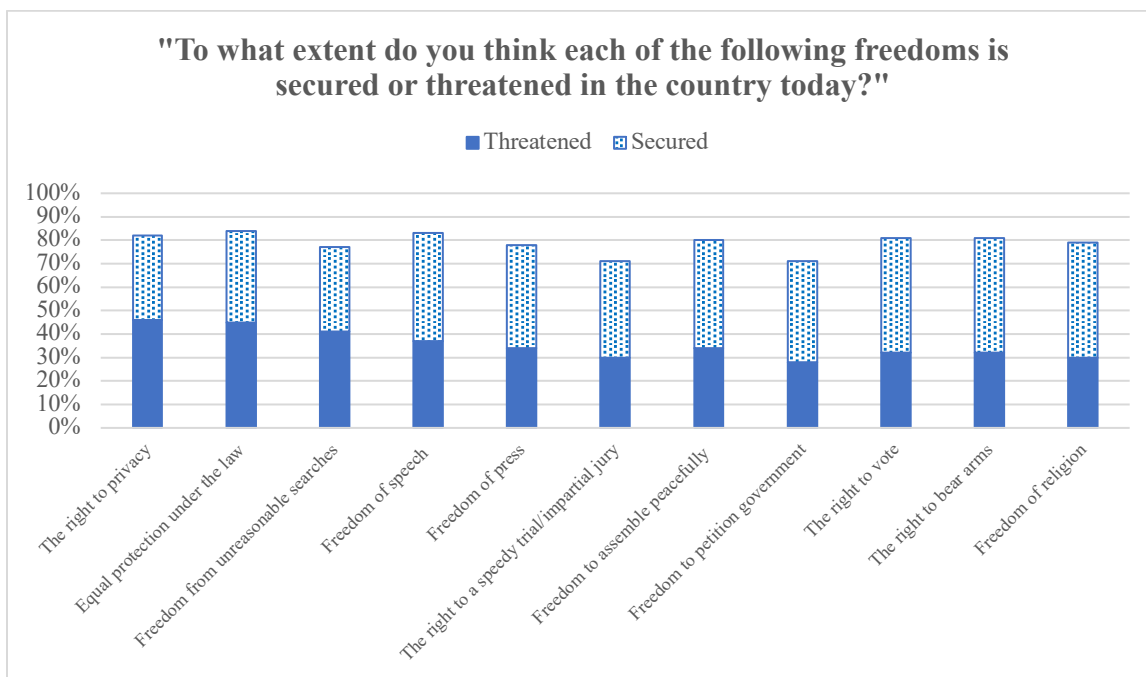


However, when asked which of these freedoms is most important, freedom of speech comes out on top (22% rate it first). After that, equal protection under law (18%), the right to vote (15%), freedom of religion (12%), and the right to bear arms (11%) round out the top five. If we rank these liberties and rights by total top three mentions (we also asked for their second and then third most important liberties/rights), freedom of speech again ranks first (55% rank it in the top three), followed by equal protection (46%), the right to vote (41%), the right to privacy (33%), freedom of religion (30%), and the right to bear arms (29%). The next six are freedom of the press (16% rank it in the top three), freedom to assemble (15%), right to a speedy trial with an impartial jury (12%), freedom from unreasonable search and seizures (12%), and the right to petition the government (11%).

More broadly, people think the protections of the First Amendment to the US Constitution protect Americans. Thirty-seven percent say they protect us “a great deal” and another 39% say they protect us “a fair amount”: the combined percentage expressing a sanguine view of the First Amendment is thus 76%. This figure drops when respondents are asked how much the First Amendment protects “people like you.” Here, 69% say a great deal (30%) or a fair amount (39%).

How Threatened are Fundamental Freedoms?

In the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn the Roe v. Wade abortion ruling, which was historically associated with the Court’s privacy jurisprudence, and with the rise of technology and concerns about government and corporate intrusiveness, many respondents viewed the unenumerated right to privacy as the most threatened right. By 10 percentage points, Americans are more likely to say that this right is “threatened” rather than “secured.” Other rights that are viewed as more threatened than secured are equal protection under the law (by 6 points) and freedom from unreasonable searches (by 5 points). The most secured rights are freedom of religion (19 percentage points more secured than threatened), the right to bear arms and the right to vote (17 points each), the freedom to petition the government (15 points), the freedom to assemble peacefully (12 points), the right to a speedy trial by jury (11 points), freedom of the press (10 points), and then freedom of speech (9 points).



When asked to rate (using a 1-7 scale) how well the rights of Americans are taught to K-12 students, respondents gave the highest marks for the right to vote (39% scored the schools at the high end of the scale), followed by freedom of speech (33%), freedom of religion (30%), freedom to assemble peacefully (29%), and freedom of the press (29%). Fewer than one quarter gave positive marks for freedom from unreasonable searches or arrests (21%), the right to a speedy trial with an impartial jury (23%), and freedom to petition the government (24%).

RANKED BY MEAN RATING	MEAN	Very good job (1)	(2)	(3)	Middle (4)	(5)	(6)	Very poor job (7)
Freedom from unreasonable searches or arrests	4.55	6%	5	10	33	16	11	19
The right to bear arms	4.50	8%	7	10	30	12	11	21
The right to privacy	4.48	7%	8	11	28	16	13	18
The right to a speedy trial with an impartial jury	4.45	6%	7	10	35	14	11	17
Freedom to petition the government	4.43	7%	7	10	34	14	12	17
Freedom of religion	4.41	10%	9	11	26	13	13	20
That all people have equal protection under the law	4.41	8%	8	10	28	16	12	17
Freedom for people to assemble peacefully	4.31	8%	10	11	31	14	11	16
Freedom of press	4.28	8%	10	11	29	15	10	16
Freedom of speech	4.22	10%	10	13	25	15	9	17
The right to vote	3.99	12%	13	14	26	13	10	14

Exercising Free Speech Rights

While respondents reaffirm the importance of free speech to American democracy, they do not believe that their fellow citizens have equal access to this right. When asked to rate, using a 1-7 scale, how easy or hard it is for certain people to use their free speech rights without fear of being penalized in America today, we see considerable variance.

Free speech rights are seen as most easily exercised by the most affluent and most educated. Whites and men are also viewed as easily exercising this fundamental right, as are those with left-of-center political attitudes, such as liberals and socialists.

Conversely, right-leaning groups score in the middle of the pack, while racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups are seen as having the hardest time exercising their free speech rights.

Perhaps most interesting, Americans say that “people like you” are among those for whom it is most difficult to exercise free speech rights.

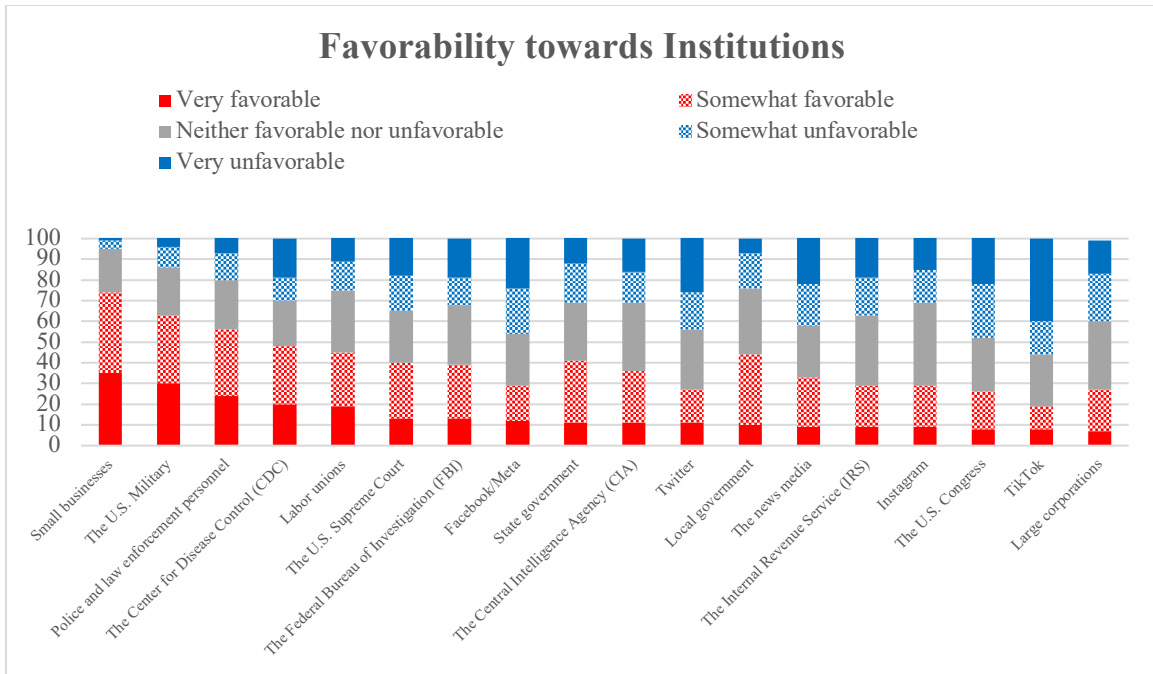
RANKED BY MEAN RATING	MEAN	Very Hard (1)	(2)	(3)	Middle (4)	(5)	(6)	Very Easy (7)
Wealthy people	5.94	3%	2	3	9	10	18	54
Liberals	5.14	5%	4	9	17	17	18	31

Men	5.06	7%	4	8	15	19	18	30
College students	5.02	4%	3	8	22	23	16	24
White Americans	5.01	10%	6	7	12	14	19	32
Socialists	4.80	6%	5	11	24	16	15	24
Defund the police activists	4.65	7%	8	11	21	15	11	26
Women	4.62	7%	7	11	21	20	15	19
Black Lives Matter activists	4.61	10%	10	11	15	14	12	28
Religious Christians	4.60	11%	7	10	17	15	15	25
Conservatives	4.51	13%	7	8	19	14	16	22
White supremacists	4.51	13%	7	10	17	16	14	23
LGBTQ people	4.47	11%	10	14	16	11	10	28
MAGA people	4.44	15%	6	8	19	15	13	23
Hispanic and Latino Americans	4.33	7%	10	15	25	18	11	15
Black and African Americans	4.32	12%	11	14	16	14	13	21
Asian Americans	4.19	8%	9	16	26	17	13	11
Religious Jews	4.17	9%	10	16	24	18	11	13
People like you	4.09	14%	9	14	20	18	12	13
Working-class people	4.08	9%	10	17	26	16	13	10
Immigrants	4.01	14%	13	14	19	14	10	16
Religious Muslims	3.96	13%	12	16	21	14	9	15

Attitudes towards institutions

The general skepticism of Americans concerning how well our country is living up to its ideals is also manifest in attitudes towards an array of political and economic institutions. For example, less than one-third have a favorable opinion of large corporations—their net favorable/unfavorable rating is -12 (27% favorable, 39% unfavorable). And corporations are hardly alone in this regard. Congress is -23 (26% favorable, 49% unfavorable); the IRS is -9 (29% favorable, 38% unfavorable); the news media are -10 (33% favorable, 43% unfavorable).

Social media institutions are among the most reviled. Unfavorable opinions dominate towards TikTok (-37 favorable/unfavorable rating), Twitter (--18), Meta/Facebook (-8), and Instagram (-3).



On the other side of the ledger, we are still favorable (if not wholly so) towards small business (+68 net favorable/unfavorable rating), the military (+48), and police and law enforcement (+35). Labor unions also score a positive rating (+19).

Mixed (but slightly favorable) attitudes prevail towards state (+9) and local (+20) government, as well as federal governmental agencies such as the CIA (+5), the FBI (+7), and the CDC (+18).

Full topline and crosstab results from the poll are available on the Civitas Institute website.

Methodology

Conducted April 24-May 1, 2023 by YouGov, this Civitas Institute Poll includes interviews with 1,200 adults nationwide. YouGov uses a unique methodology where a random sample of adult Americans is drawn, and then matched to participants from YouGov’s online panel. Currently, YouGov’s American online panel has over two million participants. Matching is based on several social and political characteristics, including sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, residential location, and party identification. These matched respondents are then asked to complete the survey online. Results are weighted to subgroup population estimates based on the 2021 American Community Survey (conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau). The Civitas Poll has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.83 percentage points for all respondents. The error margins are larger for subgroups.¹

¹ Technically, the poll is a representative non-probability sample. As such, margins of error are estimates derived from a probability sample of similar size and representativeness.