

Americans' Troubling Views on Speech, Harm, and Violence

Zach Goldberg, Ryan Owens, & Lynn Woodworth
November 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between September 17 and 23, 2025, Florida State University's Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) surveyed 1,447 U.S. adults—including an oversample of 252 Florida residents—to examine how Americans define the boundaries of free expression. The results offer a snapshot of how Americans think about the harm words can cause—and how far they are willing to go, from restriction to force, to prevent their public expression in an era of deep political polarization.

- **Most Americans (59%) think some speech can be as damaging as physical violence.**
- **Though only one in ten (11%) of all adults say physical violence is ever justified to stop someone from engaging in “harmful” public speech, 20% of young adults believe people can employ violence to prevent such speech.**
- **Americans are nearly evenly divided over whether free expression should yield to social harmony and inclusion. Forty-three percent disagree that speech should sometimes be restricted when it conflicts with inclusivity, while 37% agree.**
- **Respondents who believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence—or who view violence as occasionally justified—are notably more supportive of restricting expression for the sake of social harmony and inclusion.**

INTRODUCTION

Debates over the limits of free speech have intensified in recent years. To understand better how citizens navigate these tensions, the Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) conducted a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults in late September 2025. The study took place shortly after the assassination of Charlie Kirk during a campus event in Utah, an incident that sparked renewed national debate over political violence and the safety of public discourse on

college campuses.

The survey explored three key questions. First, it asked whether Americans believe some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence. Second, because those who see speech and violence as comparable may also be more willing to justify force to prevent it, the survey asked whether Americans believe physical violence is sometimes justified to stop a person from engaging in harmful public speech. Finally, it asked whether Americans favor limiting free

expression when it conflicts with broader social goals such as harmony and inclusion. The results show some positive signs but also serious areas of concern.

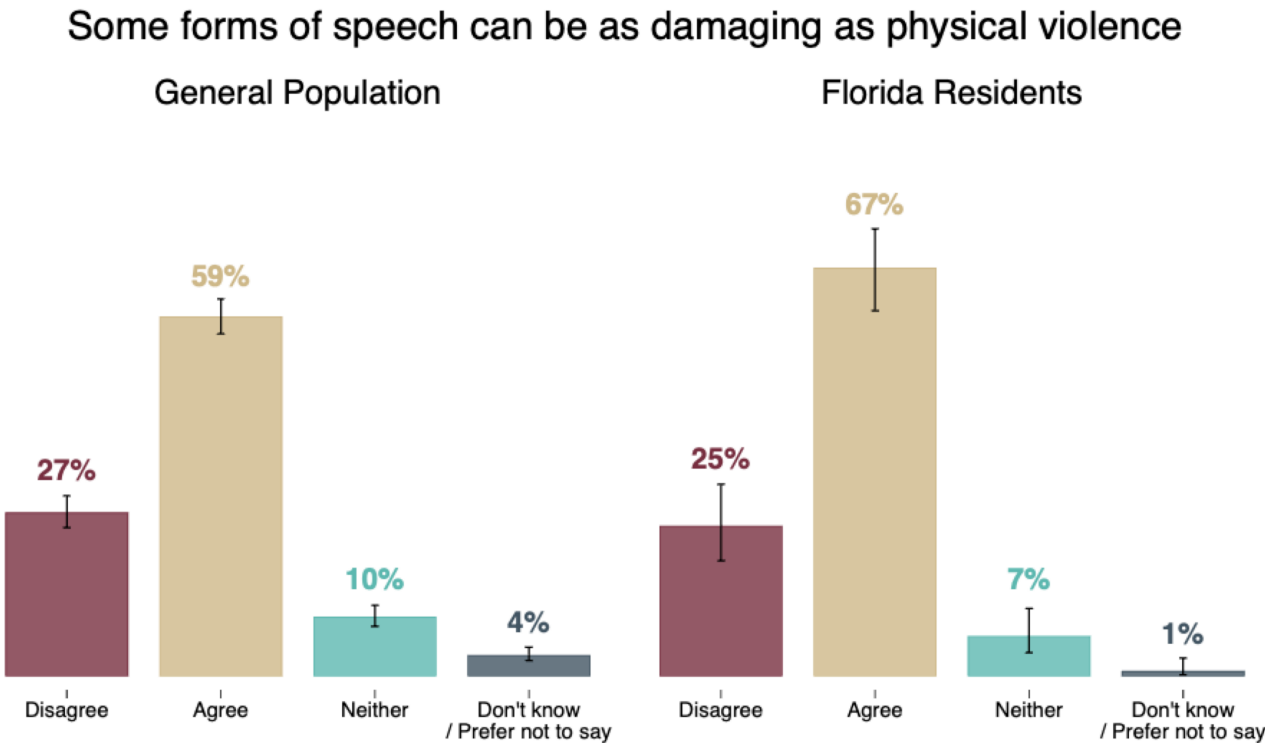
MOST AMERICANS THINK SOME FORMS OF SPEECH ARE AS HARMFUL AS PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

A majority of Americans believe certain kinds of speech can be as damaging as physical violence. We summarize responses to this item in Figure 1. For ease of interpretation, we collapse the seven-point response scale into three categories—agree, neutral, and disagree.

Nearly sixty percent of respondents (59%) agree with this statement, while just over a quarter (27%) disagree. One in ten (10%) take a neutral position. On the full seven-point scale, the intensity of agreement stands out: one-third (33%) say they *strongly* agree that speech can be as damaging as physical violence—almost three times the share who strongly disagree (12%).

Patterns in Florida track the national picture. Two-thirds of Florida residents (67%) agree that some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence,

Figure 1. Belief That Some Speech Can Be as Harmful as Physical Violence: National and Florida Residents



Note. Data are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. and Florida adult populations, respectively. The general population sample includes 1,447 adults nationwide, and the Florida subsample includes 252 adult residents of Florida. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall.

compared with one-quarter (25%) who disagree. Although modest, this difference—roughly eight percentage points higher than the national average—persists after demographic and political controls, suggesting that Floridians are slightly more inclined than other Americans to view certain speech to be as damaging as physical violence.

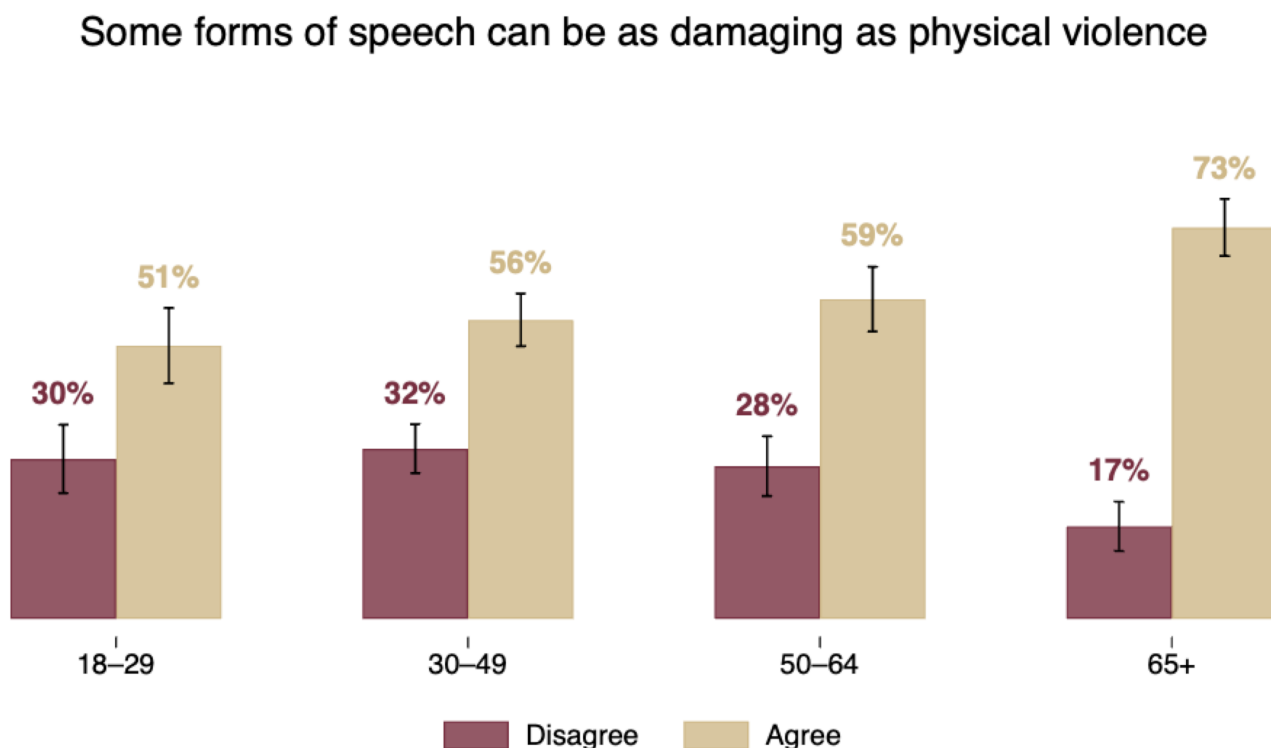
OLDER AMERICANS MORE LIKELY TO EQUATE SPEECH TO PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Contrary to popular narratives suggesting that younger generations are

hypersensitive to offensive speech, the data reveal the opposite pattern (Figure 2). Agreement that speech can be as damaging as physical violence rises steadily with age—from roughly half (51%) of adults under 30 to nearly three-quarters (73%) of those 65 and older. This age gradient persists after controlling for demographic and political characteristics. Older Americans, it appears, are more—not less—likely to see words as capable of real injury than their younger counterparts.

Ideological divisions, though present,

Figure 2. Belief That Some Speech Can Be as Harmful as Physical Violence, by Age Group



Note. Data ($N = 1,446$) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. “Neither agree nor disagree” and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say” responses are included in the data but not displayed in the chart.

are smaller than one might expect. About two-thirds of liberals (63%) and moderates (62%) agree that speech can be as damaging as physical violence, compared with just over half of conservatives (52%). Yet when gender is considered, the results reveal a striking interaction (Figure 3). Only about 44% of conservative men agree that speech can be as damaging as physical violence, while 63% of conservative women agree. Among liberals and moderates, by contrast, men and women differ little

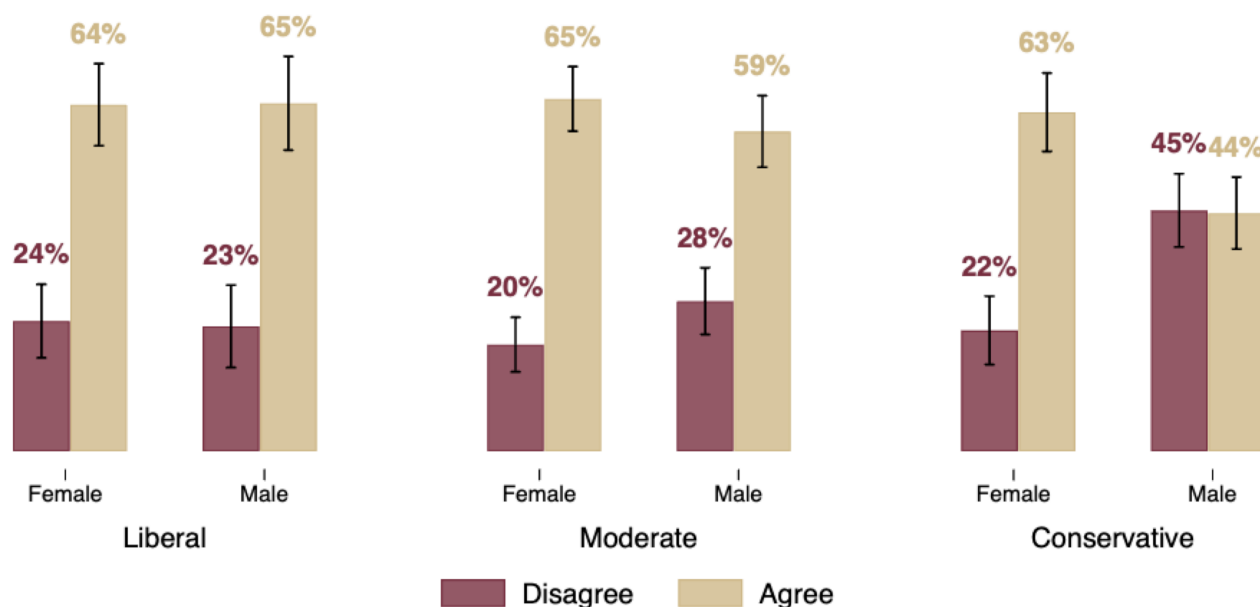
from one another.[1]

FEW AMERICANS THINK VIOLENCE IS JUSTIFIED TO STOP HARMFUL SPEECH

Though most Americans believe speech can be as damaging as physical violence, that belief rarely translates into support for violence (Figure 4). Greater than three-quarters of adults (76%) disagree that “using physical violence is sometimes justified to stop a person from engaging in harmful public speech.” Only about one in ten (11%) agree, while 7% neither agree nor disagree and 6%

Figure 3. Belief That Some Speech Can Be as Harmful as Physical Violence, by Gender and Political Ideology

Some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence



Note. Data ($N = 1,415$) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. “Neither agree nor disagree” and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say” responses are included in the data but not displayed in the chart. Respondents who identified as another gender ($n = 11$) or declined to specify a gender ($n = 20$) are excluded from the analysis.

decline to answer. In short, although many Americans believe speech can be as harmful as violence, they overwhelmingly reject violence as a legitimate response.

Older Americans are more likely to see speech as capable of causing real harm but rarely translate that belief into tolerance for violent action.

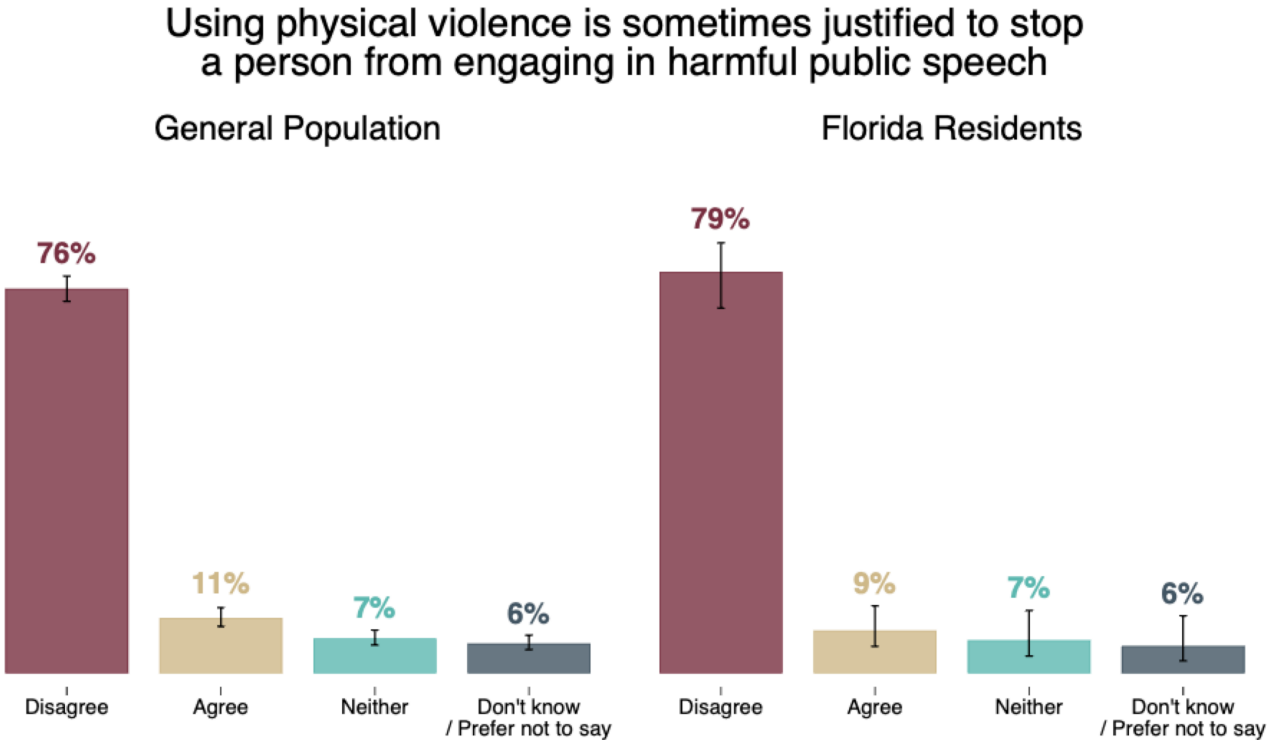
Patterns in Florida closely mirror the national picture (right panel of Figure 4).

Roughly eight in ten Florida residents (79%) disagree that violence can ever be justified to prevent harmful speech, while fewer than one in ten (9%) agree.

YOUNGER ADULTS ARE MOST OPEN TO JUSTIFYING VIOLENCE

Some groups are more inclined to justify violence to stop harmful speech than others. The clearest divide is by age (Figure 5). Agreement with the statement that violence can be justified is highest among adults under 30 (19%) and lowest among those 65 and older (5%). These differences remain sizable even after

Figure 4. Views on the Use of Violence to Stop Harmful Speech: National and Florida Residents



Note. Data are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. and Florida adult populations, respectively. The general population sample includes 1,447 adults nationwide, and the Florida subsample includes 252 adult residents of Florida. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall.

taking things like education and political views into account. This suggests that the pattern is caused by generational beliefs, with younger adults more willing than their elders to entertain violence as a response to perceived harmful public speech.

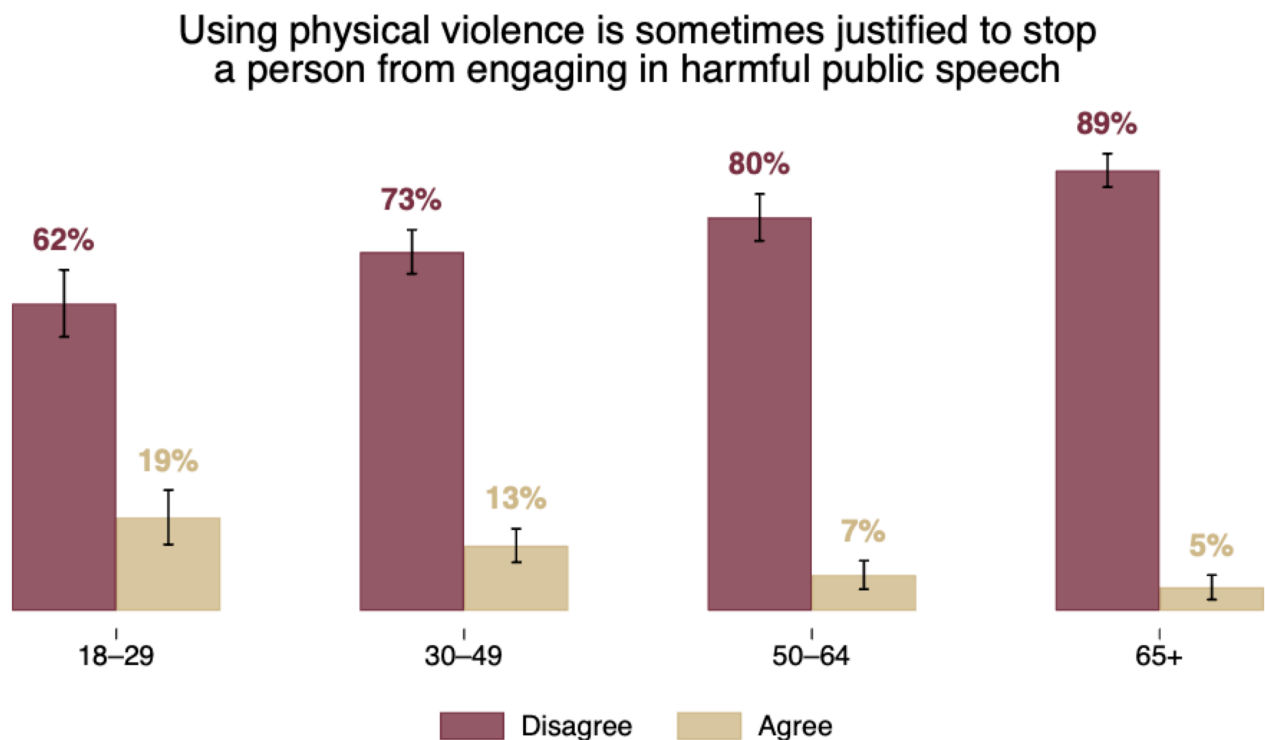
Young liberals are the most open to justifying violence in response to harmful speech, whereas older liberals are the group most opposed

Attitudes toward the use of violence also

differ by ideology. Liberals (16%) are roughly twice as likely as conservatives (8%) to say violence can sometimes be justified, while conservatives are ten points more likely to disagree (80% vs. 70%).

But when ideology and age are considered together, a striking pattern emerges: young liberals, age 18-29, are the most open (31%) to justifying violence in response to harmful speech, whereas older liberals, age 65+, are the group most opposed (92%) to violence as a response to speech (Figure 6). Among conservatives, the youngest differ little

Figure 5. Views on the Use of Violence to Stop Harmful Speech, by Age Group



Note. Data (N = 1,446) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. “Neither agree nor disagree” and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say” responses are included in the data but not displayed in the chart.

from their older peers in agreement, but disagreement rises steadily with age—from 66% among those under 30 to 89% among those 65 and older. These contrasts point to deeper generational differences in how Americans reason about harm and conflict, beyond what can be explained by demographics alone.

BELIEFS ABOUT HARM INFORM JUSTIFICATIONS OF VIOLENCE

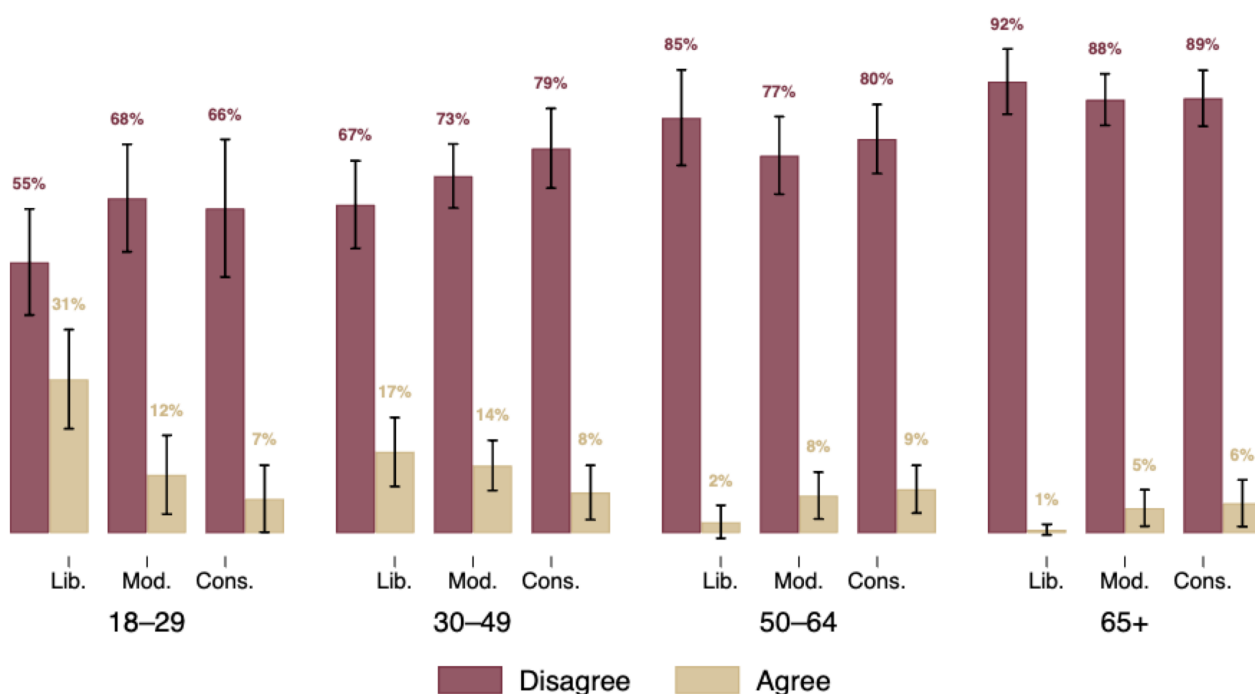
Beliefs about the harm of speech also shape attitudes toward violence—though the relationship is weaker than one might

expect. Only 7% of respondents who disagree that speech can be as damaging as physical violence say violence is ever justified, compared with 14% among those who agree.

This relationship, however, is concentrated among younger adults. As Table 1 shows, believing speech can be as damaging as physical violence increases the likelihood of justifying violence by about 11 percentage points among adults under 50—but has virtually no effect among those 50 and older. Older

Figure 6. Views on the Use of Violence to Stop Harmful Speech, by Political Ideology

Using physical violence is sometimes justified to stop a person from engaging in harmful public speech



Note. Data ($N = 1,445$) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. “Neither agree nor disagree” and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say” responses are included in the data but not displayed in the chart. Estimates adjust for differences in gender, race and ethnicity, party affiliation, educational attainment, household income, marital status, employment status, homeownership, parenting status, total household size, number of adults in the household, metropolitan status, and census region.

Americans, in other words, are more likely to see speech as capable of causing

real harm but rarely translate that belief into tolerance for violent action.

Table 1. Effect of Believing Speech Can Be Harmful on Justifying Violence to Stop It, Among Younger (< 50) and Older (50+) Adults

Age Group	Response Outcome	Speech = Violence	Speech ≠ Violence	Difference
Under 50	Violence Justified	18%	7%	+11
	Violence Not Justified	72%	83%	-11
50+	Violence Justified	9%	9%	0
	Violence Not Justified	81%	84%	-3

Note. Data are weighted to represent the national U.S. adult population (N = 1,417). Cells show model-estimated probabilities that adults under 50 versus those aged 50 and older agree or disagree that “using physical violence is sometimes justified to stop a person from engaging in harmful public speech,” conditional on agreement versus disagreement with the statement “some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence.” The Difference column reports the change in predicted probability (in percentage points) when moving from disagreement to agreement with the speech-violence statement. “Neither agree nor disagree” and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say” responses were retained in estimation but are not displayed. Estimates adjust for gender, race and ethnicity, party affiliation, political ideology, educational attainment, household income, marital status, employment status, homeownership, parenting status, total household size, metropolitan status, and census region. Respondents with missing values on covariates (n = 30) were excluded.

MANY AMERICANS ARE TORN BETWEEN FREE EXPRESSION AND SOCIAL HARMONY

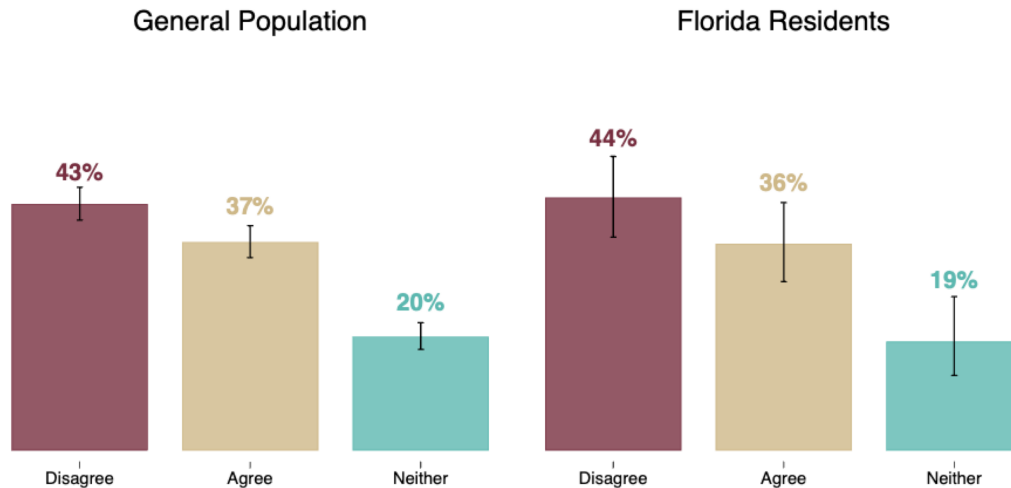
A much larger share of Americans are willing to accept limits on expression when it threatens social harmony and inclusion (Figure 7). The public is almost evenly divided—and Florida residents mirror this national picture (right panel)—on whether “freedom of expression should sometimes be restricted when it conflicts with the goal of promoting social harmony and inclusivity.” Roughly 37% agree, 43% disagree, and 20% neither agree nor disagree.

YOUNGER AMERICANS SHOW THE LEAST OPPOSITION TO RESTRICTIONS

Support for restrictions shows little variation by age (Figure 8). Opposition, however, increases sharply—from 33% among the youngest respondents to 54% among those 65 and older. Much of this difference stems not from stronger opposition among seniors per se, but from greater ambivalence among younger adults. Indeed, one in four younger respondents selected “neither agree nor disagree,” compared with just 11% of seniors.

Figure 7. Support for Restricting Free Expression When It Conflicts with Social Harmony: National and Florida Residents

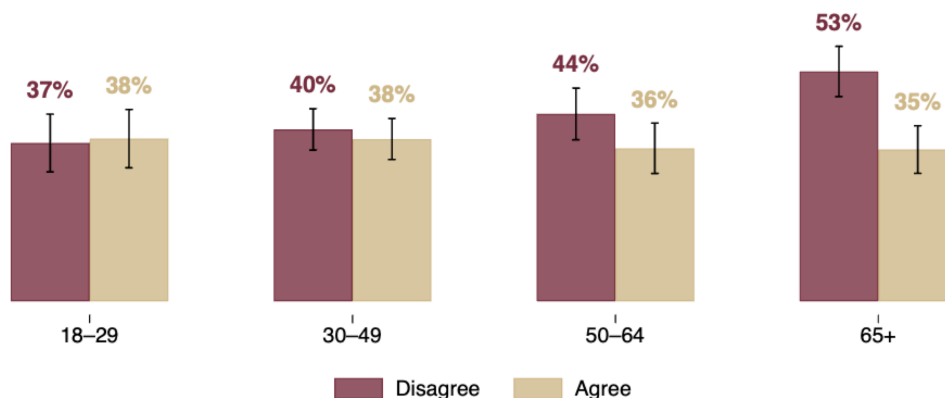
When there is a conflict between freedom of expression and the goal of promoting social harmony and inclusivity, freedom of expression should sometimes be restricted



Note. Data are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. and Florida adult populations, respectively. The general population sample includes 1,447 adults nationwide, and the Florida subsample includes 252 adult residents of Florida. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall.

Figure 8. Support for Restricting Free Expression When It Conflicts with Social Harmony, by Age Group

When there is a conflict between freedom of expression and the goal of promoting social harmony and inclusivity, freedom of expression should sometimes be restricted



Note. Data ($N = 1,446$) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. "Neither agree nor disagree" responses are included in the data but not displayed in the chart.

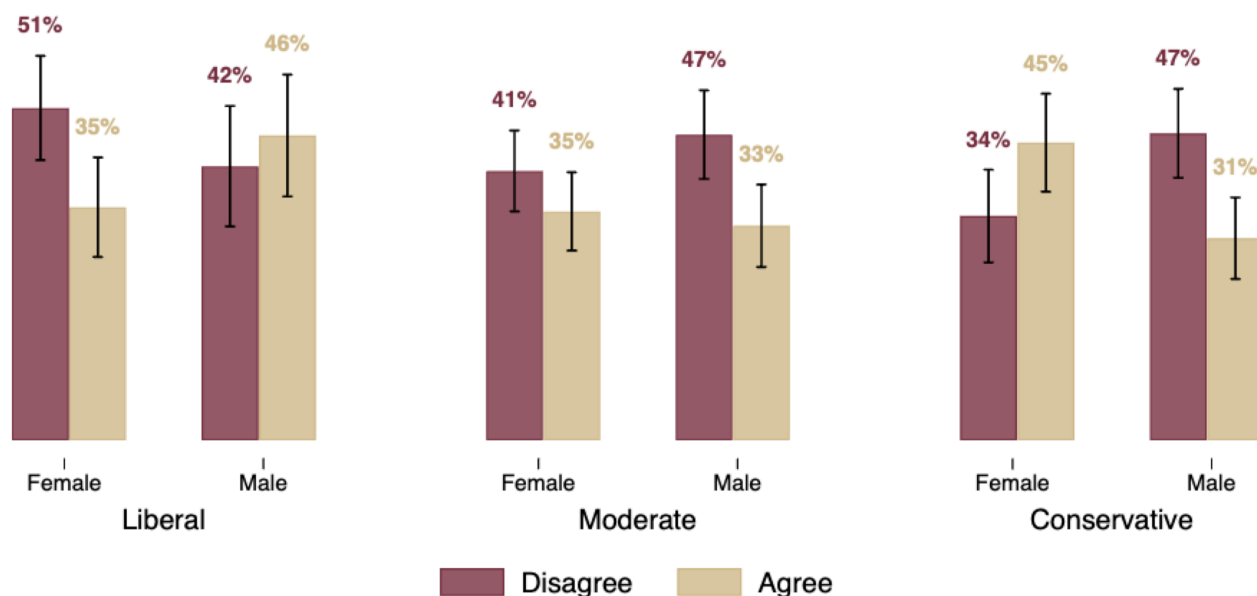
IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES IN SUPPORT FOR RESTRICTIONS ARE MODEST, BUT GENDER COMPLICATES THE PICTURE

Ideological divides are relatively modest. About 46% of liberals disagree (41% agree) that speech should sometimes be restricted, compared with 41% of conservatives who disagree (37% agree).

When ideology is considered together with gender, however, the pattern grows more complex (Figure 9). Conservative men (31%) and liberal women (35%)—groups that typically differ on many social issues—show similar skepticism toward restricting speech. In contrast, conservative women (45%) and liberal men (46%) express nearly identical and considerably higher support. These

Figure 9. Support for Restricting Free Expression When It Conflicts with Social Harmony, by Gender and Political Ideology

When there is a conflict between freedom of expression and the goal of promoting social harmony and inclusivity, freedom of expression should sometimes be restricted



Note. Data ($N = 1,387$) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. “Neither agree nor disagree” and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say” responses are included in the data but not displayed in the chart. Respondents who identified as another gender ($n = 11$) or declined to specify a gender ($n = 20$) are excluded from the analysis. Estimates adjust for differences in age, gender, race and ethnicity, party affiliation, educational attainment, household income, marital status, employment status, homeownership, parenting status, total household size, number of adults in the household, metropolitan status, and census region. Respondents who identified as another gender ($n = 11$), declined to specify a gender ($n = 20$), or are missing data on one or more covariates ($n=30$) are excluded from the analysis.

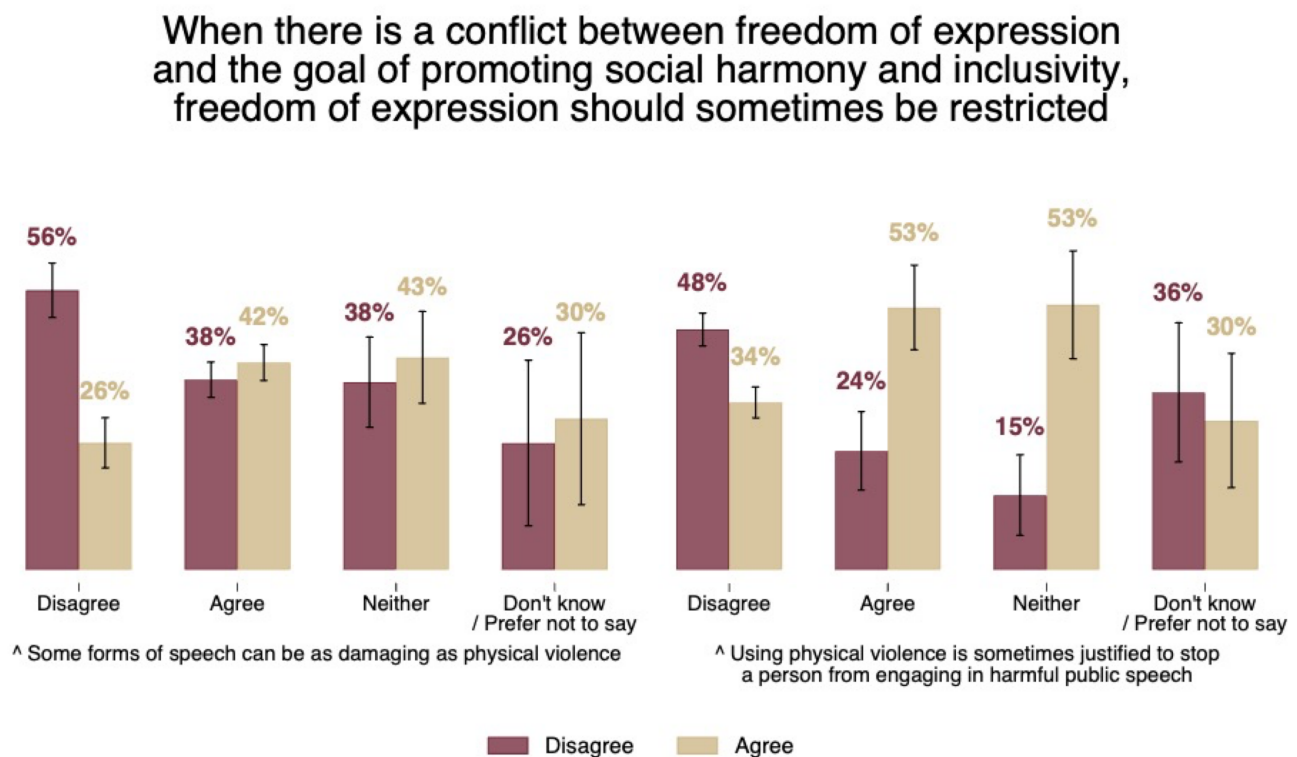
differences persist even after adjusting for education and other demographic and political characteristics, suggesting that they are not simply artifacts of who falls into each ideological group. The precise source of this pattern remains unclear. If genuine rather than anomalous, it may reflect the subtle and

sometimes counterintuitive ways that gender and ideology interact in shaping views about when speech should be limited.

BELIEFS ABOUT HARM AND VIOLENCE SUBSTANTIALLY SHAPE SUPPORT FOR RESTRICTIONS

Beyond demographics and ideology,

Figure 10. Support for Restricting Free Expression, by Beliefs About Harmful Speech and Justifying Violence



Note. Data ($N = 1,417$) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. X-axis labels in the left panel correspond to responses to the statement “Some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence,” while those in the right panel correspond to responses to “Using physical violence is sometimes justified to stop a person from engaging in harmful public speech.” Bars represent the predicted probability of agreeing or disagreeing with the statement shown in the figure header. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. “Neither agree nor disagree” and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say” responses are included in the data but not displayed in the chart. Each panel presents joint effects, with estimates adjusted for both predictors (belief that speech can be harmful and belief that violence can be justified) as well as for gender, race and ethnicity, party affiliation, educational attainment, household income, marital status, employment status, homeownership, parenting status, total household size, number of adults in the household, metropolitan status, and census region. Respondents with missing data on one or more covariates ($n = 30$) are excluded from the analysis.

attitudes toward harm and violence exert the strongest influence on support for limiting expression. As shown in the left panel of Figure 10, respondents who believe some forms of speech can be as damaging as physical violence are roughly 16 points more likely (42% vs. 26%) to support restrictions on expression, even after accounting for other factors—including their views on the legitimacy of violence.

Those who view words as capable of real harm—and especially those open to using force to prevent it—are also more inclined to endorse limiting speech when it conflicts with social harmony.

The right panel of Figure 10 tells a similar story: respondents who believe physical violence is sometimes justified to stop harmful speech are about 20 points more likely (53% vs. 34%) to favor restrictions on expression. These associations persist when adjusting for ideology, age, and other background characteristics, suggesting that perceptions of harm and moral justification, rather than political orientation alone, drive support for limiting speech.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that while most Americans draw a firm boundary between violent and

and non-violent responses to harmful speech, the two attitudes are connected. Those who view words as capable of real harm—and especially those open to using force to prevent it—are also more inclined to endorse limiting speech when it conflicts with social harmony. Yet support for such limits remains far from universal. Even as Americans seek to preserve open expression, many also prize civility, inclusion, and mutual respect—revealing an ongoing effort to balance freedom with social harmony.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this report show that Americans' attitudes toward speech are shaped by competing moral considerations. Most believe that speech is capable of inflicting serious harm, yet far fewer support restricting expression, and even fewer condone violence to suppress it.

Still, while only a small minority condone violence in response to harmful speech, the fact that 19% of adults under 30—and 31% of young liberals—express at least some openness to political violence is noteworthy. These attitudes, though limited to a minority, suggest that moral and emotional reasoning about harm can blur the line between speech and violence for some younger Americans. Younger adults are also distinct in that their willingness to justify violence tracks closely with their belief

that speech can be as damaging as physical violence—a connection largely absent among older cohorts. This pattern deserves continued attention from educators, civic leaders, and policymakers seeking to reinforce nonviolent norms in an increasingly polarized environment.

Ultimately, the patterns highlighted here may signal a gradual shift in how Americans define the boundaries of free expression. Where older generations tended to treat free speech as an almost absolute value, younger Americans appear more inclined to weigh it against competing concerns such as inclusion, civility, and emotional safety.

What is clear is that the nation's consensus on free speech is being quietly renegotiated—a shift reflecting not just politics, but evolving understandings of harm, tolerance, and the boundaries of acceptable expression.

Poll Information

This study was conducted online between September 17–23, 2025 by Social Science Research Services (SSRS) using a Probability-Based Opinion Panel. The sample consisted of 1,447 respondents age 18 or older, including an oversample of 252 Florida residents. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-2.9% at the 95% confidence level. Weighted demographic characteristics of the survey group are presented in Table 2 on the next page.

[1] Differences by race and ethnicity are modest. Black respondents are somewhat more likely than others to agree that speech can be as damaging as violence, but these gaps narrow considerably once other demographic factors are taken into account.

Table 2. Descriptive Characteristics by Survey Sample

Category	General Population	Florida Sample
Sex		
Male	49%	49%
Female	51%	51%
Age		
18 to 29	20%	18%
30 to 49	34%	30%
50 to 64	24%	25%
65 or older	23%	27%
Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	61%	55%
Black	12%	14%
Hispanic	18%	26%
Asian	6%	3%
Other	2%	2%
Household Income		
Less than \$50,000	40%	39%
\$50,000-\$74,999	15%	18%
\$75,000-\$99,999	14%	16%
\$100,000 and over	30%	27%
Education		
Less than HS	9%	8%
HS Graduate	29%	31%
Some college	26%	26%
BA Degree	20%	20%
Postgrad / Prof. Degree	16%	16%
Parent Status		
Parent	26%	17%
Not a Parent	74%	83%
Stated Party		
Democrat	30%	28%
Republican	27%	28%
Independent/ Something Else	43%	44%
Political Ideology		
Liberal	26%	21%
Moderate	43%	49%
Conservative	31%	30%