

Free Speech Online: What Americans Think—and Know—About Social Media and the First Amendment

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Incomplete public understanding of the First Amendment's limits**
Fewer than half of Americans correctly recognize that the First Amendment does not apply to private social media companies, and substantial shares remain unsure about the distinction between government censorship and private moderation.
- **Constitutional knowledge about the First Amendment's limits is closely linked to attitudes toward online speech.**
Americans who correctly understand that the First Amendment restricts government—but not private platforms—are far less likely to support expanding constitutional free-speech protections to cover social media companies.
- **Most Americans reject the idea that social media platforms are obligated to amplify all speech.**
Across multiple surveys, solid majorities agree that free speech does not require private platforms to host or widely distribute every user's views. This view is shared across party lines and has become more common since 2022.

INTRODUCTION

Americans' political and cultural conversations have shifted to privately owned digital platforms, raising questions about the boundaries of free expression online—particularly whether the law may require social media companies to moderate, amplify, or even provide a forum for their users' speech.

Despite the ubiquity of the digital environment, systematic data on what Americans think and know about how the First Amendment applies to it remain limited.

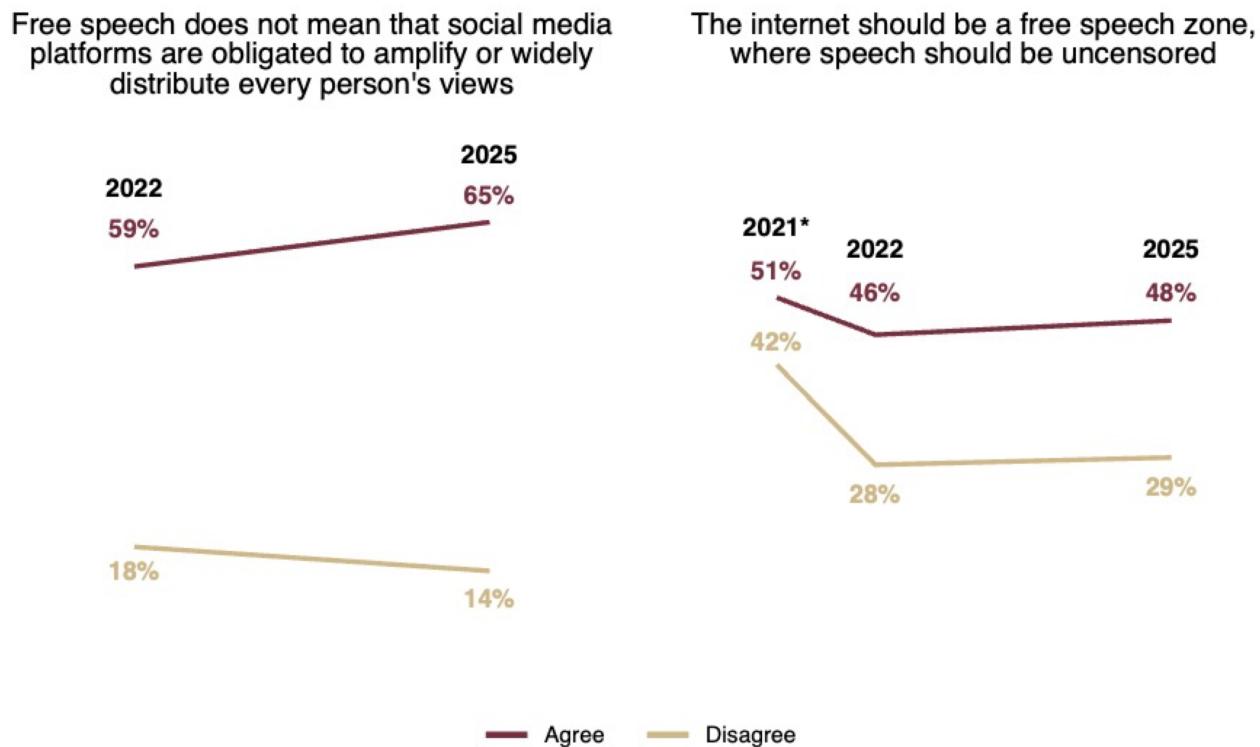
This data brief compiles and analyzes nationally representative survey items currently available on two core areas: (1) Americans' understanding of whether constitutional free-speech protections extend to private platforms, and (2) public attitudes toward the obligations of social media companies to host or amplify user speech.¹ It also examines how constitutional knowledge relates to these attitudes, providing an early baseline for observing how public opinion on digital free expression evolves overtime.

MOST AMERICANS REJECT THE IDEA THAT SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES ARE OBLIGATED TO AMPLIFY ALL SPEECH

Although public views about online speech remain unsettled, most Americans reject the idea that social media companies are obligated to host all forms of speech. In a 2025 YouGov survey, 65% of Americans—up from 59% in 2022—agreed that free speech does not mean social media companies are “obligated to amplify or widely distribute every person’s views” (Figure 1, left panel).

When the question shifts, however, from platform obligations to a more abstract normative principle—whether “the internet should be a free-speech zone”—public opinion becomes more divided. In 2025, 48% of Americans agreed and 29% disagreed that online speech should be “uncensored,” a distribution nearly unchanged from 2022 (46% agreed) (Figure 1, right panel).

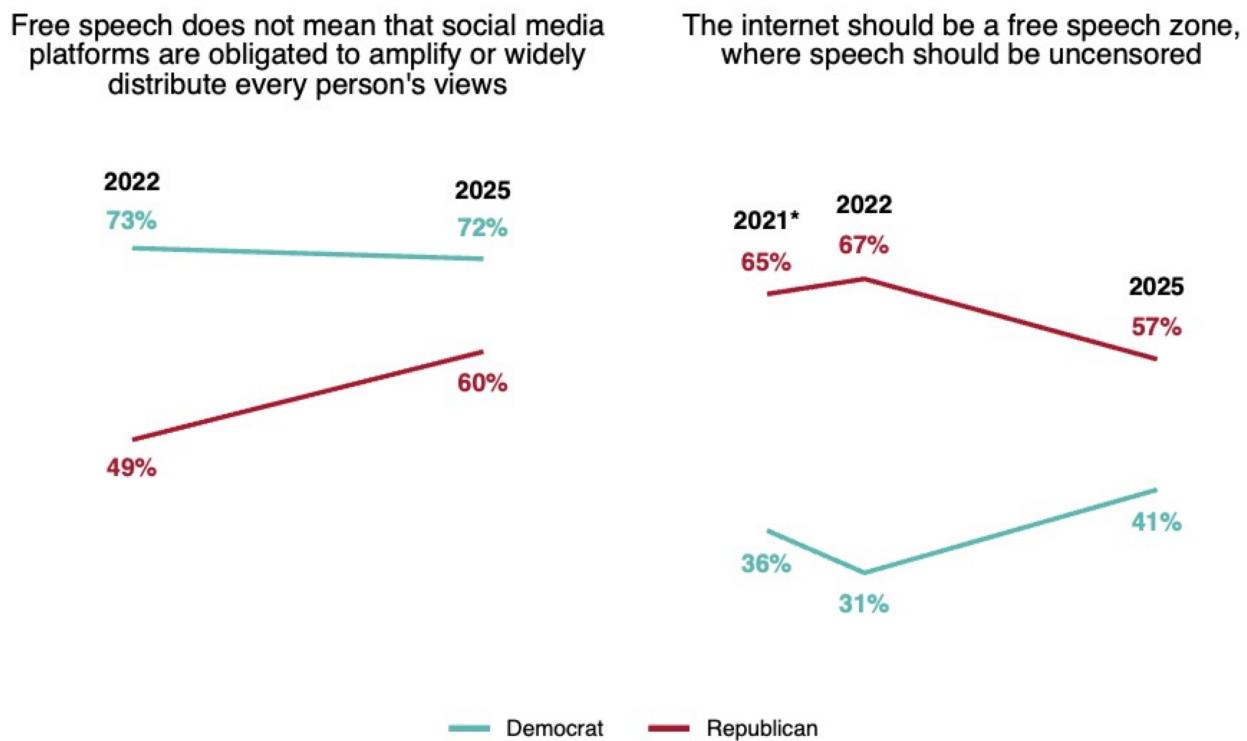
Figure 1. Public Views Toward Free Expression on Social Media and the Internet More Broadly



Note: All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. The 2021 estimates (marked with *) come from a Knight Foundation survey that measured this attitude using a five-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), rather than the three-point scale used in the YouGov surveys. Despite this difference in response format, the 2021 data provide a useful baseline for tracking change over time.

When examined by party, these divisions become more pronounced, though there has been some convergence in recent years. In 2025, 57% of Republicans—compared with 41% of Democrats—said that internet speech should be uncensored, a gap that has narrowed substantially since 2022 (67% vs. 31%). Seventy-two percent of Democrats and 60% of Republicans agreed in 2025 that social media companies are not required to amplify every user’s views. This 12 percentage point gap is down from a 24-point difference in 2022 (73% vs. 49%) (Figure 2). This narrowing is driven almost entirely by Republicans. In 2022, 49% of Republicans agreed that free speech could still exist even if platforms did not promote every person’s view. That number rose to 60% in 2025.

Figure 2. Views Toward Free Expression on Social Media and the Internet More Broadly, by Party Affiliation



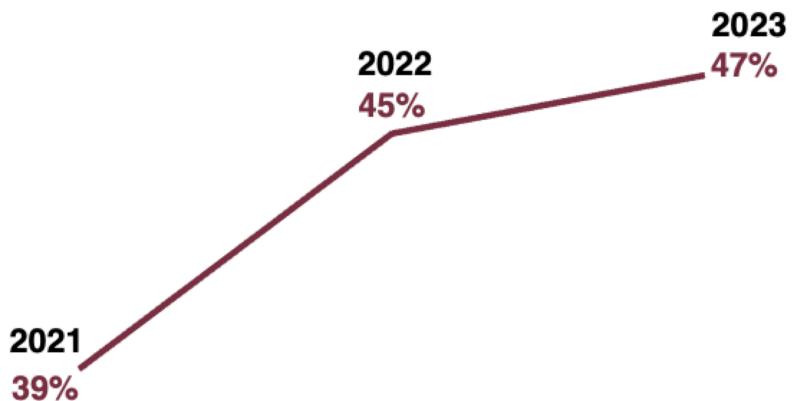
Note: All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Lines show the share of respondents in each party group who selected Agree for each statement. Disagree and Neither agree nor disagree responses are included in the underlying data but not displayed. The 2021 estimates (marked with *) come from a Knight Foundation survey that measured this attitude using a five-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), rather than the three-point scale used in the YouGov surveys. Despite this difference in response format, the 2021 data provide a useful baseline for tracking change over time.

LARGE NUMBERS OF AMERICANS DON'T KNOW HOW THE FIRST AMENDMENT APPLIES TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Many Americans remain uncertain about how the First Amendment actually applies to speech on privately owned platforms. Evidence from the Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey shows that fewer than half of Americans correctly recognize that the First Amendment does not require social media companies to host all speech (Figure 3). Between 2021 and 2023, the share answering correctly rose modestly but remained below a majority, indicating that widespread uncertainty about who and what the First Amendment protects persists.

Figure 3. Public Knowledge of the First Amendment's Application to Social Media

Inaccurate to say that the First Amendment's protection of freedom of speech means that Facebook must permit all Americans to freely express themselves on Facebook pages

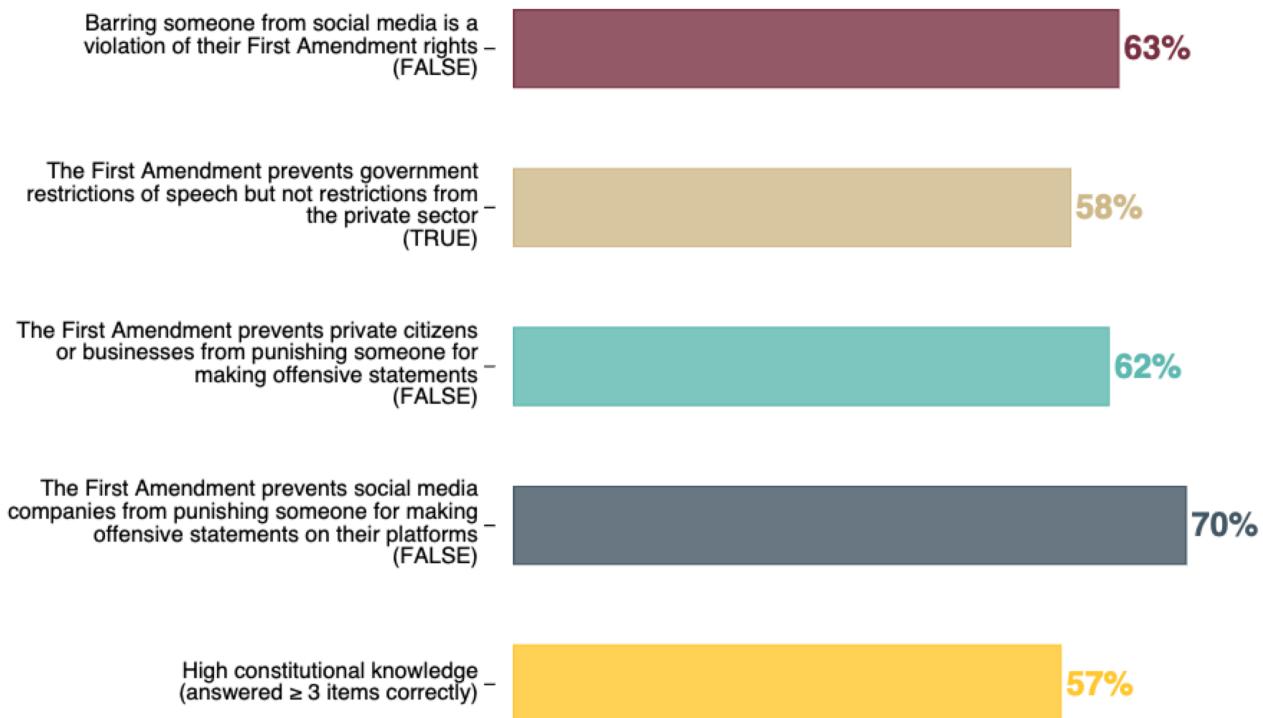


Note: All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. The full question prompt reads: "How accurate is it to say that the First Amendment's protection of freedom of speech means that Facebook must permit all Americans to freely express themselves on Facebook pages?—Very accurate, somewhat accurate, somewhat inaccurate, very inaccurate." Lines show the share of respondents who properly identified the statement as being "inaccurate".

Data from the 2021 Knight Foundation survey reinforce this conclusion (Figure 4). When asked whether the First Amendment restricts private companies or individuals from punishing offensive speech, only modest majorities correctly answered individual items. Just 57% answered at least three of the four questions correctly, indicating that many Americans do not consistently understand how the First Amendment

applies to the private sector. Moreover, while varying in size, such knowledge gaps were evident across the political spectrum (Appendix Figure A1).

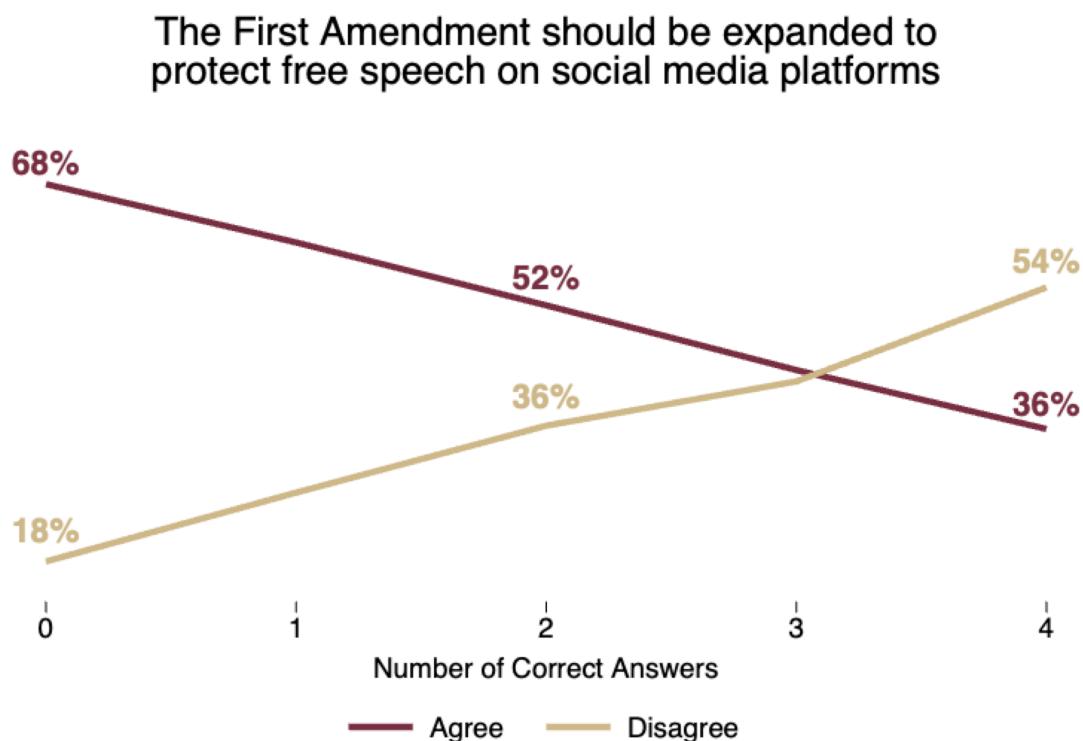
Figure 4. Public Knowledge of the First Amendment and Private-Sector Speech



Note: All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. The first four bars show the share of respondents who correctly answered each listed item; correct responses (true or false) are shown in parentheses. The fifth bar shows the share of respondents who answered at least three of the four questions correctly.

Importantly, constitutional knowledge is closely linked to attitudes in these data (Figure 5). Americans who answered more First Amendment items correctly were substantially less likely to support expanding constitutional free-speech protections to cover social media platforms, while those with little or no correct knowledge were far more likely to favor such an expansion. This relationship holds among members of both major parties, though it appears to be stronger for Democrats than for Republicans (Appendix Figure A2).

Figure 5. Constitutional Knowledge and Support for Expanding Free-Speech Protections to Social Media



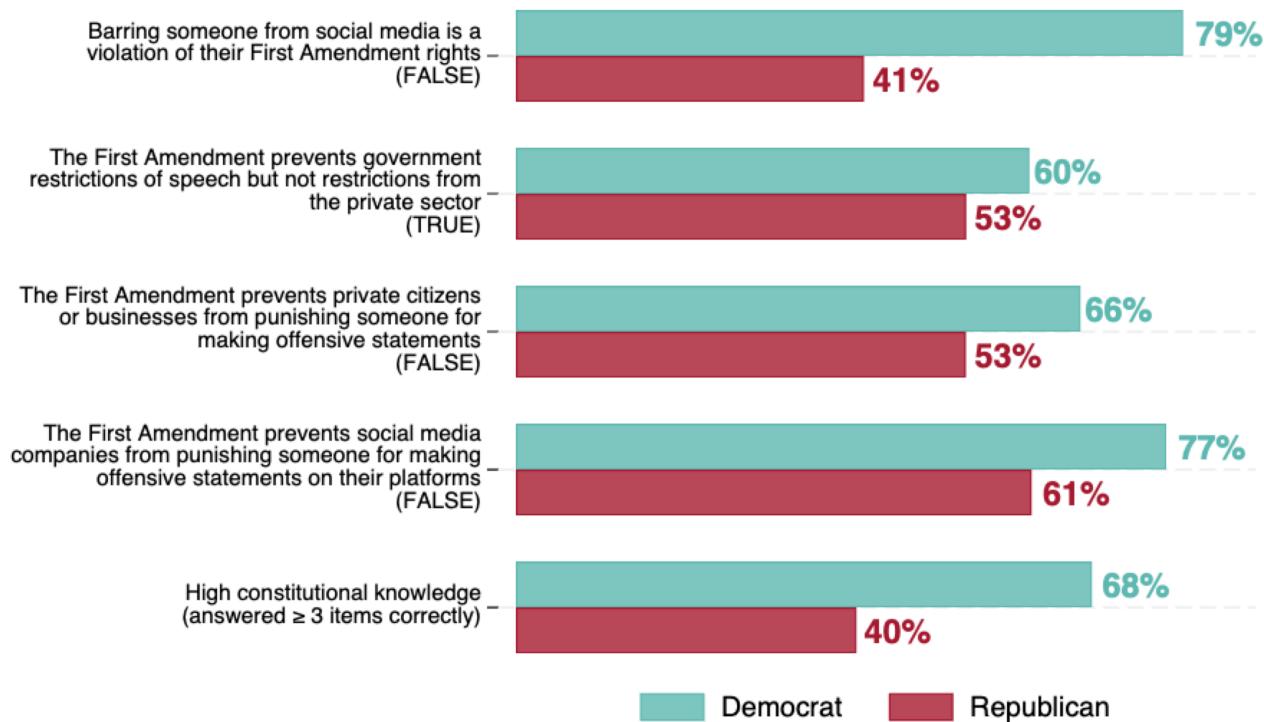
Note: All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Lines show the share of respondents who agree or disagree with the listed statement, by the number of four related constitutional knowledge questions they answered correctly. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, age, education, household income, census region, metropolitan status, marital status, and party affiliation.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these findings suggest that public debates about online speech reflect not only partisan disagreement, but also widespread uncertainty about the First Amendment's limits. Misunderstandings about constitutional protections remain common—and are closely tied to attitudes about how online speech should be governed. Because public opinion on these questions has only recently begun to be measured systematically, the patterns documented here should be understood as an early baseline. As new data become available, future updates will be better positioned to assess whether recent shifts reflect lasting changes or short-term responses to evolving political and technological contexts.

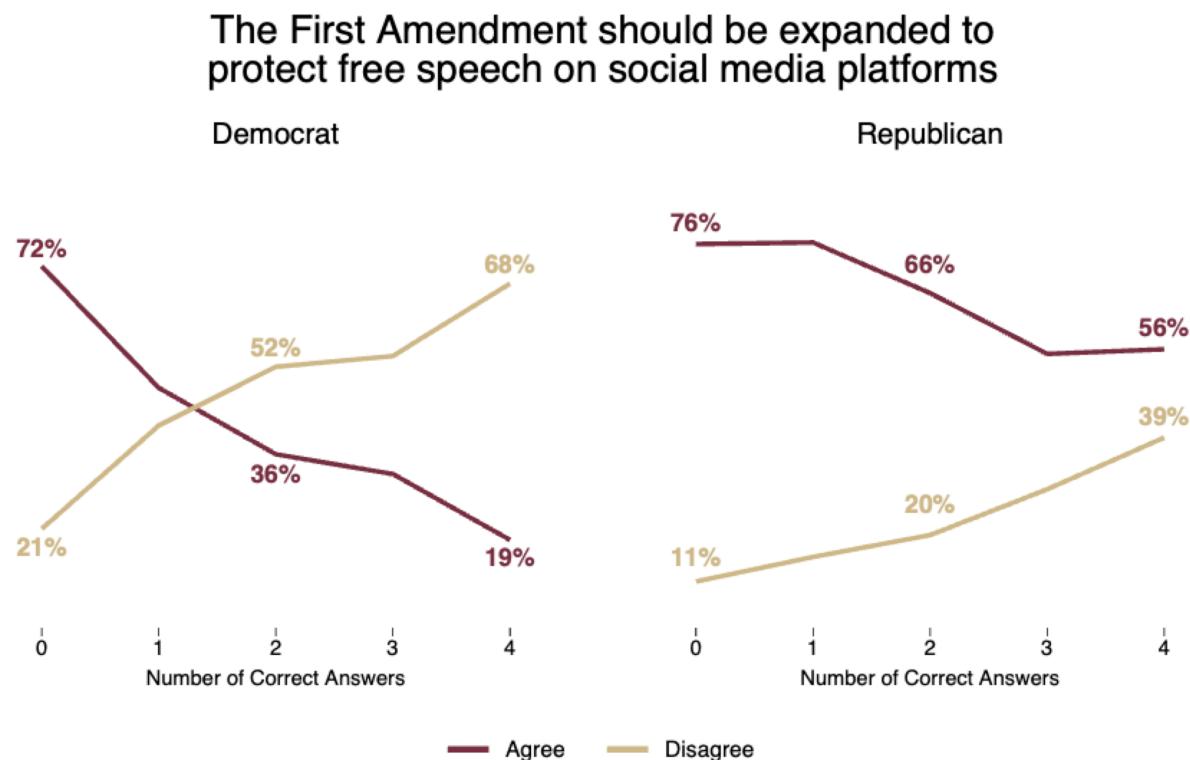
APPENDIX

Figure A1. Knowledge of the First Amendment and Private-Sector Speech, by Party Affiliation



Note: All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. The first four pairs of bars show the share of respondents in each party group who correctly answered each listed item; correct responses (true or false) are shown in parentheses. The fifth bar shows the share of respondents who answered at least three of the four questions correctly.

Figure A2. Constitutional Knowledge and Support for Expanding Free-Speech Protections to Social Media, by Party Affiliation



Note. All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. Lines show the share of respondents in each party group who agree or disagree with the listed statement, by the number of four related constitutional knowledge questions they answered correctly. Estimates adjust for sex, race/ethnicity, age, education, household income, census region, metropolitan status, and marital status.

¹ Section A of the online appendix lists all survey items, their question wording, and the surveys from which they originate. Section B contains a dataset with all individual survey items, metadata, and available covariates.