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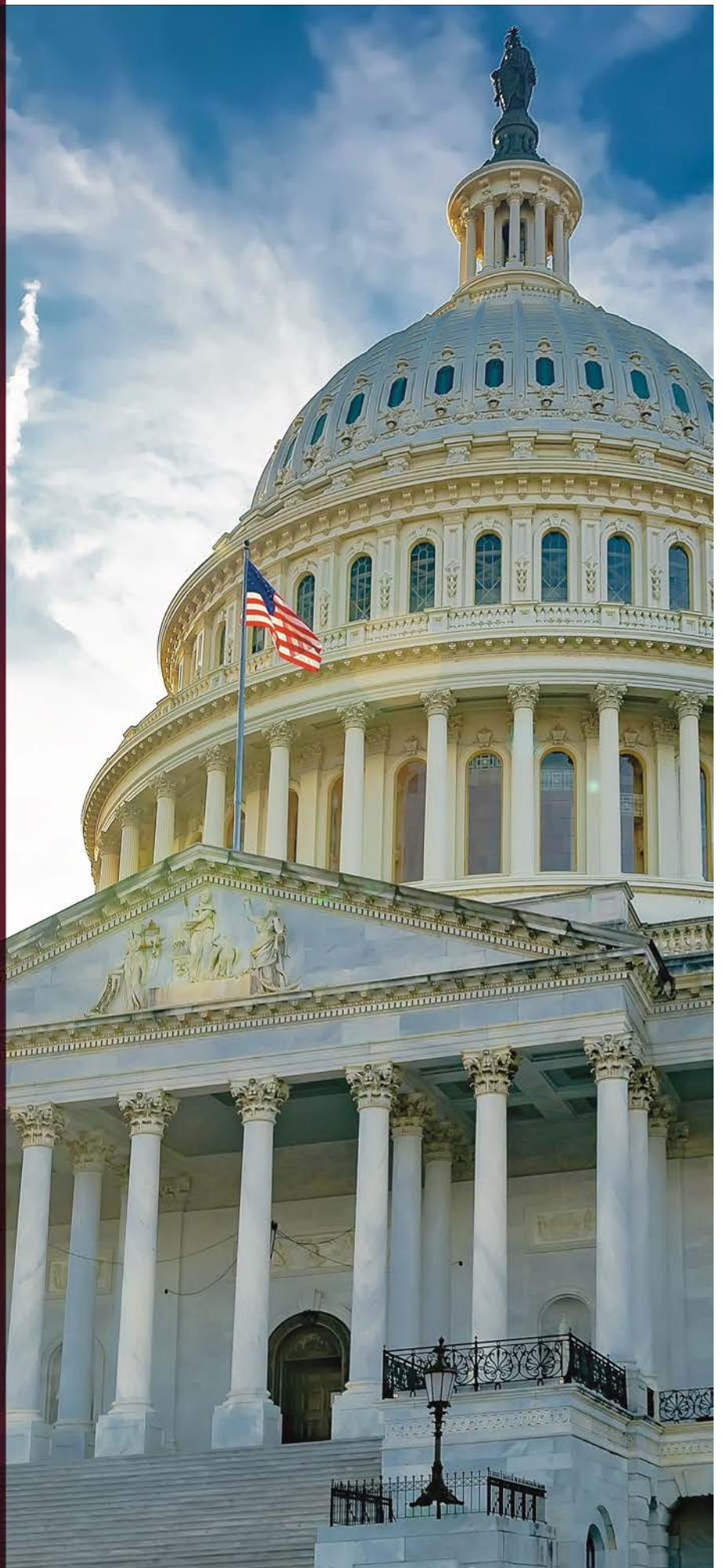


INSTITUTE FOR
GOVERNANCE & CIVICS
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

IGC POLL REPORT

Beyond "Cancel Culture": When Should Off-Duty Speech Cost Someone Their Job?

Zach Goldberg,
Robert VerBruggen,
Ryan Owens, &
James L. Woodworth





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Controversies over firing employees for speech outside of work are often framed as debates over “cancel culture,” but the harder question is when such speech should cost someone their job. In a series of survey experiments with 2,042 U.S. adults, respondents evaluated seven scenarios involving employees whose off-duty expression came to the attention of their employers. Across the experiments, we varied features including the political direction or target of the speech, the employee’s occupation, and whether an offensive post had been written during adolescence or adulthood. Respondents separately evaluated whether the employee should be fired, whether employees in similar circumstances should receive legal protection against firing, and how objectionable they considered the expression itself. Key findings include:

- **Support for firing varied considerably across scenarios.**

Across the seven scenarios, between 40% and 60% of respondents supported firing employees for controversial off-duty speech, with majorities doing so in five. Support was highest for celebrating a political assassination, making an anti-Black social media post, and directing a racial slur at a child. Support was lowest for statements about mass deportation and a ten-year-old anti-Chinese post.

- **Partisan differences in support for firing depended heavily on the type and direction of the speech.**

Although Republican respondents were somewhat more supportive of firing overall than Democratic respondents, that average concealed substantial variation across experiments. In some scenarios Republican respondents were much more supportive of firing, while in others the partisan gap was small or reversed.

- **Many respondents supported both firing and legal protection against firing.**

Across most scenarios, large minorities—and often close to half—of respondents who favored firing also supported legal protection for employees in similar circumstances. In other words, many respondents favored firing the employee in the

particular case while also supporting legal limits on employers' ability to fire workers for similar off-duty speech.

- **Occupation and the age at which speech occurred shaped reactions more selectively.**

In the anti-Black post scenario, support for firing was highest when the employee was a public-school teacher or police officer and lowest when the employee was a computer programmer or fast-food worker. This suggests that respondents may have held employees in more publicly trusted roles to a higher standard. These occupational differences largely disappeared in the flag-burning and anti-government scenario. Respondents were also somewhat more forgiving of speech expressed during adolescence rather than adulthood, although the overall age differences were modest.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, a Mississippi elementary-school teacher was fired after a Facebook post on her account told Black Americans to “move back to Africa.”¹ In September 2025, employers across a wide range of industries fired, suspended, or investigated workers after social-media posts about the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk, including posts that celebrated or dismissed the killing.² The cases differed in content, occupation, and political direction, but followed a common pattern: expression outside the workplace became widely visible, outsiders objected, and employers disciplined or dismissed the speakers.

The rise of social media has amplified this dynamic and made the boundary between personal expression and professional life increasingly difficult to maintain.³ Comments made outside the workplace—and sometimes years earlier—can quickly reach coworkers, customers, employers, and the wider public. Employees have long faced professional consequences for controversial expression, but available evidence suggests that disputes over such expression have become increasingly prominent in the social-media era.⁴

1 See Miller, J. R. (2017, September 20). ‘Move back to Africa’: Teacher fired for racist Facebook post. *New York Post*. <https://nypost.com/2017/09/20/move-back-to-africa-teacher-fired-for-racist-facebook-post/>

2 See Fortin, J., et al. (2025, September 26). A broad wave of firings followed Charlie Kirk’s assassination. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/26/us/kirk-critics-fired-free-speech.html>. Reuters later identified more than 600 people who were fired, suspended, investigated, or otherwise disciplined in connection with comments about Kirk’s killing. See *Reuters*. (2025, November 19). The Charlie Kirk purge: How 600 Americans were punished in a pro-Trump crackdown. <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/charlie-kirk-purge-how-600-americans-were-punished-pro-trump-crackdown-2025-11-19/>

3 To be sure, the underlying phenomenon is not new. One of the more notable earlier cases was *Rankin v. McPherson* (1987), where a data-entry employee in a Texas constable’s office was fired after privately remarking, following the attempted assassination of President Reagan, “if they go for him again, I hope they get him.” The Supreme Court ultimately held that the firing violated her First Amendment rights. Unlike the scenarios examined here, however, McPherson made the remark at work, during a private conversation with a coworker.

4 No comprehensive historical series tracks off-duty-speech firings across the U.S. workforce. Two imperfect indicators suggest that controversies over professional sanctions for expression have become more prominent in the social-media era. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) recorded 1,080 attempts to sanction U.S. scholars for their expression between 2000 and 2022, 81% of them from 2014 onward; the database covers several forms of scholar expression and is not limited to off-duty social-media posts. Robards and Graf (2022) likewise found that news reports of employees fired following social-media disclosures increased from 16 in 2010 and 14 in 2011 to 71 in the first half of 2020. These measures may capture

Such incidents are often discussed under the broad label of “cancel culture,” but that label can obscure the more difficult question that underlies them: when, if ever, should what someone says as a private citizen cost them their job?

This question involves competing interests. Employees have an interest in engaging in lawful expression outside the workplace without risking their livelihoods. Employers have interests of their own in deciding who represents their organizations, protecting relationships with coworkers and customers, preserving public trust, and distancing themselves from expression they believe conflicts with their values or mission. Legal protections for off-duty speech may give employees greater freedom to express themselves without fear of losing their jobs, but they also constrain employers’ discretion over whom they employ and with whom associate. Leaving those decisions entirely to employers preserves greater organizational autonomy but can make lawful expression professionally and economically costly. The debate therefore concerns not only freedom of expression, but also who should bear its consequences and where the law should draw the boundary between employee expression and employer discretion.

The broad “cancel culture” label also risks overlooking important differences in how people judge particular cases. Does support for firing depend on what an employee said, whom the speech targeted, or the kind of job the employee holds? Do Democrats and Republicans apply similar standards across different kinds of controversial expression, or do their judgments change with the political direction or target of the speech? And do people distinguish between believing that an employer should fire someone and believing that the law should allow the employer to do so?

THE CURRENT STUDY

To examine these questions, we conducted a series of survey experiments with 2,042 U.S. adults between May 29 and June 4, 2026. Respondents were recruited through Cint’s opt-in online sampling platform, so the results should not be interpreted as precise estimates of national public opinion.⁵

Respondents evaluated seven scenarios involving employees whose controversial expression outside the workplace came to the attention of their employers. Several of the scenarios were modeled on or closely resembled real controversies in which employees faced professional consequences after off-duty speech became public.

increased visibility and scrutiny as well as changes in the underlying frequency of such incidents. See Frey, K., & Stevens, S. T. (2023). Scholars under fire: Attempts to sanction scholars from 2000 to 2022. Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/scholars-under-fire-attempts-sanction-scholars-2000-2022>; Robards, B., & Graf, D. (2022). “How a Facebook update can cost you your job”: News coverage of employment terminations following social media disclosures, from racist cops to queer teachers. *Social Media+ Society*, 8(1), 20563051221077022.

⁵ Because Cint uses opt-in rather than probability-based sampling, descriptive percentages should be interpreted as estimates for the study sample rather than as precise estimates of U.S. public opinion. Conventional margins of error also do not account for possible differences arising from respondent self-selection or sample composition. As Appendix Table A1 shows, the sample approximates the U.S. adult population on some demographic and political characteristics but differs on others, including age, race and ethnicity, education, and region. Prior benchmarking research suggests that nonprobability online samples often recover the broad contours of public attitudes, although individual estimates can differ from those obtained using probability-based samples. Research also finds that randomized treatment effects estimated using nonprobability online samples frequently correspond reasonably closely to those obtained using probability-based samples. These findings provide greater confidence in the experimental comparisons that are the primary focus

Across the experiments, we randomly varied features such as the employee's occupation, the political direction or target of the speech, and whether an offensive post had been written during adolescence or adulthood. Table 1 presents the seven scenarios, the prompts respondents read, and the features that were randomly varied in each.

Module	Scenario	Prompt
1	Resurfaced anti-Black post	A few years ago, a person posted on social media that <i>"Black people should go back to Africa where they belong."</i> The post recently resurfaced and spread online, and some people contacted the person's employer to complain. This person works as a [fast-food worker / doctor / public school teacher / police officer / computer programmer / lawyer] .
	Flag burning and call for government overthrow	A person was filmed at a political rally burning an American flag while chanting anti-government slogans and calling for the overthrow of the current administration. The video went viral, and offended viewers contacted the person's employer to complain. This person works as a [fast-food worker / doctor / public school teacher / police officer / computer programmer / lawyer] .
2	Racial slur against child	A [Black / White] person is caught on video using a racial slur toward a [White / Black] child at a park. The video goes viral, and some viewers contact the person's employer to report it. This person works as a retail sales associate.
	Anti-Israel/Palestinian activist post	A person posts on social media expressing intense hatred toward [pro-Israel activists / pro-Palestinian activists] , calling them "evil" and saying they deserve harm. The post spreads, and some people contact the person's employer to complain. This person works as a retail sales associate.
	Mass deportation post	A person posts on social media strongly [opposing / endorsing] the federal government's mass deportation program for undocumented immigrants, calling it "a cruel human rights violation that demands widespread resistance and civil disobedience" / "an essential security measure that all citizens should help enforce and report" . The post goes viral, and coworkers and customers contact the employer to complain that it creates a hostile or unprofessional work environment. This person works as a retail sales associate.
	10-year-old anti-Chinese post	Ten years ago, when this person was [15 / 35] , they posted on social media that <i>"Chinese people eat dogs and bring diseases and should be banned from the country."</i> The old post recently resurfaced, went viral, and some people contacted the person's current employer to complain. This person works as a retail sales associate.
	Celebration of political assassination	A prominent [Democratic / Republican] political figure is killed in an attack. A person posts on social media celebrating the killing and saying the victim 'deserved it.' The post spreads, and some viewers contact the person's employer to report it. This person works as a retail sales associate.

Table 1. Experimental Scenarios and Randomized Features

Note: Bolded text indicates features that were randomly varied. All respondents evaluated both Module 1 scenarios and all five Module 2 scenarios, with the order of scenarios randomized within each module. In Module 1, the employee's occupation was randomly varied across six occupations. In Module 2, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two bolded versions of each scenario.

of this report, although the extent to which any particular percentage or treatment effect generalizes to the broader U.S. adult population remains uncertain. See Courtney Kennedy et al., *Evaluating Online Nonprobability Surveys* (Pew Research Center, 2016); Bo MacInnis et al., "The Accuracy of

For each scenario, we measured three distinct reactions. Respondents indicated whether they favored or opposed firing the employee, whether the employee should receive legal protection against being fired for the expression, and how objectionable they considered the expression itself. Separating these judgments allows us to examine not only which forms of off-duty speech respondents condemned, but also when that condemnation translated into support for firing—and whether respondents believed the law should protect employees in similar circumstances from losing their jobs.

The results reveal several broad patterns. Across the seven scenarios, support for firing was common but varied depending on the speech and circumstances involved. Political differences were highly context-dependent, while differences associated with the employee's occupation or age were generally more limited. Respondents also did not always treat support for firing and support for legal protection as opposites. Overall, the findings suggest that attitudes toward off-duty speech are more context-dependent than broad debates over “cancel culture” often imply.

SUPPORT FOR FIRING IS COMMON BUT VARIES ACROSS FORMS OF OFF-DUTY SPEECH

Large shares of respondents supported firing employees for controversial off-duty speech. As shown in Table 2, support for firing across the seven scenarios ranged from 40% to 60% and reached a majority in five of them.

Scenario	Favor firing	Favor legal protection	Very/ extremely objectionable
Post celebrating assassination	60%	41%	49%
Resurfaced anti-Black post	60%	45%	49%
Racial slur toward a child	60%	42%	47%
Flag burning/call for government overthrow	56%	49%	37%
Post targeting pro-Israel/ pro-Palestinian activists	53%	45%	41%
10-year-old anti-Chinese post	43%	50%	38%
Post about mass deportation	40%	52%	31%

Table 2. Support for Firing, Legal Protection, and Perceived Objectionability, by Speech Scenario

Note: Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored an employer firing the employee; somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored legal protection against being fired under the circumstances described; and rated the expression as very or extremely objectionable (vs. not at all, slightly, and moderately objectionable). Results are averaged across randomized experimental conditions, including employee occupations in the first two scenarios. Sample sizes ranged from 2,025 to 2,040 across the first two scenarios and from 2,034 to 2,039 across the remaining five scenarios.

of Measurements with Probability and Nonprobability Survey Samples: Replication and Extension,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2018): 707–744; Kevin J. Mullinix et al., “The Generalizability of Survey Experiments,” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2, no. 2 (2015): 109–138; and Alexander Coppock, Thomas J. Leeper, and Kevin J. Mullinix, “Generalizability of Heterogeneous Treatment Effect Estimates Across Samples,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 49 (2018): 12441–12446.

Support was highest when the employee celebrated a political assassination (60%), made an anti-Black social media post (60%), or directed a racial slur at a child (60%). It was lowest for statements about mass deportation (40%) and an anti-Chinese social media post that had been written ten years earlier (43%).

Notably, while respondents' judgments about the objectionability of the speech itself generally tracked their judgments about firing, the relationship was far from perfect.⁶ For example, respondents were much more likely to consider the anti-Black post very or extremely objectionable compared to the flag-burning and government-overthrow statements (49% vs. 37%), but support for firing in each scenario differed by only four percentage points (60% vs. 56%).

Similarly, respondents' attitudes toward legal protection from firing were related to, but did not simply mirror, their views on firing.⁷ Support for legal protection varied relatively little across scenarios, ranging from 42% (post celebrating assassination) to 52% (post on mass deportation). In fact, as Figure 1 shows, substantial shares of respondents who favored firing the employee nevertheless supported legal protection against being fired under similar circumstances.

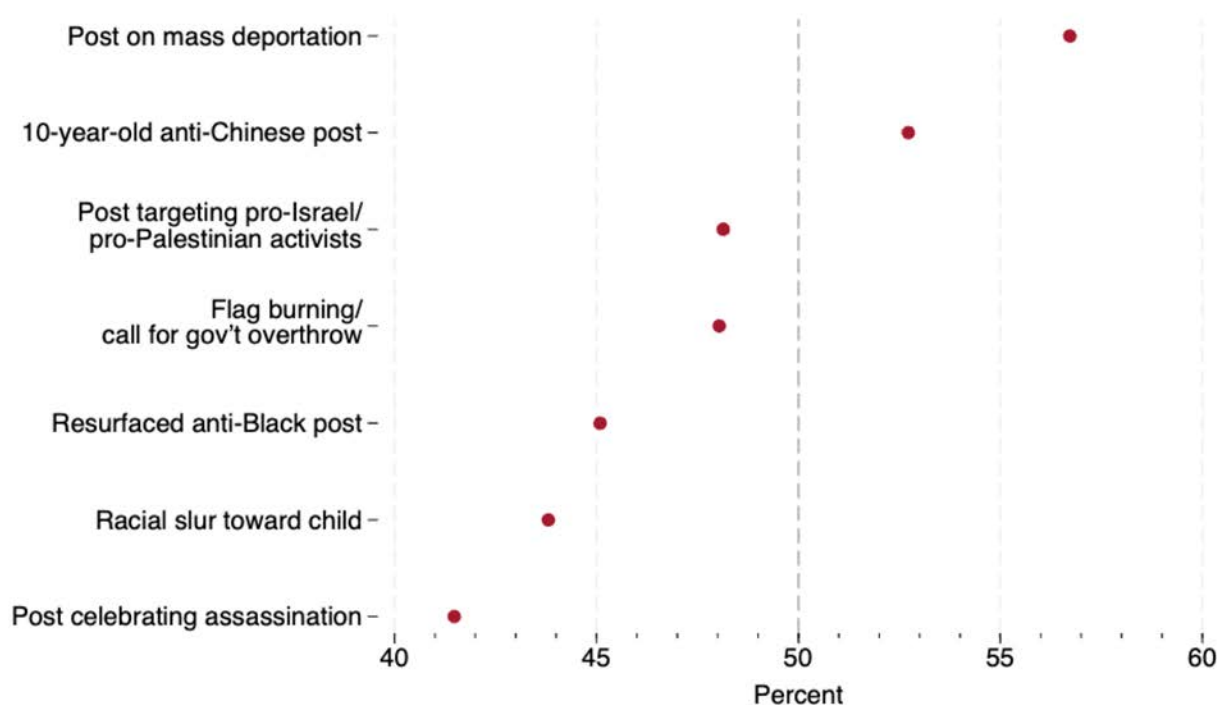


Figure 1. Support for Legal Protection Among Respondents Who Favor Firing, by Speech Scenario

Note: Markers represent the percentage of respondents who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored legal protection against being fired under the circumstances described, among respondents who also somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored firing the employee. Results are averaged across randomized experimental conditions, including employee occupations in the two Module 1 scenarios. Sample sizes ranged from 1,124 to 1,213 across the Module 1 scenarios and from 818 to 1,227 across the Module 2 scenarios.

6 Ratings of objectionability and support for firing were positively but modestly correlated in both sets of experiments (Spearman's $\rho = .21$ in Module 1 and $.14$ in Module 2).

7 Support for firing and legal protection were modestly negatively correlated in both sets of experiments (Spearman's $\rho = -.18$ in Module 1 and $-.11$ in Module 2).

Even at the low end, 41% of those who favored firing a retail sales associate for celebrating a political assassination on social media still supported such protection.

At first glance, favoring both firing and legal protection may appear contradictory. Yet this combination was not confined to isolated responses: 53% of respondents both favored firing and supported legal protection in at least one scenario, and 29% did so in three or more. The tendency to hold both views also varied little across the six occupations tested in Module 1.⁸

Legal-protection preferences were also more stable across scenarios than firing preferences, consistent with respondents approaching the two questions differently.⁹ Some may have treated firing as a case-specific judgment about what should happen to the particular employee while viewing legal protection as a broader principle concerning how much authority employers should have over lawful off-duty speech. The pattern may also reflect genuine ambivalence between competing values, with respondents simultaneously favoring consequences for expression they find offensive and protection against losing one's job for lawful speech outside the workplace.¹⁰ Because the survey did not ask respondents to explain their reasoning, these interpretations remain tentative.

PARTISANS DIFFER IN THE TYPES OF SPEECH THEY BELIEVE SHOULD RESULT IN FIRING

Partisan differences in support for firing varied considerably across the experiments.¹¹ As Table 3 shows, their size and direction depended heavily on the speech and circumstances involved.

The racial-slur experiment exemplifies this variation. When a White employee used a racial slur toward a Black child, 69% of Democratic respondents and 63% of Republican respondents supported firing. When the racial configuration was reversed, support among Democratic respondents fell to 53%, while support among Republican respondents remained similar at 66%. Thus, Democratic respondents were far less likely to support firing a person for making a racial slur towards a white child than a Black child, while support among Republican respondents changed little across the two racial configurations.

A similar pattern appeared in the political-assassination experiment. Notably, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to support firing even when the employee had celebrated the assassination of a Democratic political figure (69% vs. 62%). Republicans' support for firing increased by only 4 percentage points (69% to 73%) when the victim was a Republican, Democrats' support fell by 8 points (62% to 54%).

8 In Module 1, the share favoring both firing and legal protection ranged from 25.8% to 28.2% across the six occupations. Differences by occupation were not statistically significant ($p = .902$; adjusted omnibus test, $p = .716$).

9 Legal-protection responses showed greater within-respondent stability than firing responses. Using the full seven-point scales, respondent-level intraclass correlations were .47 for legal protection and .41 for firing; using binary support measures, the corresponding values were .63 and .58.

10 Research on public opinion suggests that people often hold competing considerations rather than a single internally consistent position, especially when an issue implicates important values pointing in different directions. The response they give may depend on which consideration is most salient in the particular question, and support for a general principle may not always correspond to judgments about its application in a concrete case. See Philip E. Tetlock, "A Value Pluralism Model of Ideological Reasoning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50, no. 4 (1986): 819–827; Stanley Feldman and John Zaller, "The Political Culture of Ambivalence: Ideological Responses to the Welfare State," *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 1 (1992): 268–307; and John Zaller and Stanley Feldman, "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences," *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 3 (1992): 579–616.

11 Averaged across the seven scenarios, 59% of Republican respondents and 53% of Democratic respondents favored firing.



Scenario	Democrats	Republicans	Difference
Resurfaced anti-Black post	65%	58%	Democrats +7**
Flag burning/call for government overthrow	47%	72%	Republicans +25***
White person slurs Black child	69%	63%	Democrats +6
Black person slurs White child	53%	66%	Republicans +13***
Post targetting pro-Israel activists	51%	61%	Republicans +10***
Post targetting pro-Palestinian activists	57%	54%	Democrats +3
Calls for resistance to mass deportation	34%	52%	Republicans +18***
Calls for citizens to report undocumented immigrants	45%	36%	Democrats +9*
Anti-Chinese post made at age 15	43%	43%	0
Anti-Chinese post made at age 35	48%	45%	Democrats +3
Celebrates assassination of Democrat	62%	69%	Republicans +7*
Celebrates assassination of Republican	54%	73%	Republicans +20***

Table 3. Support for Firing Across Speech Scenarios and Experimental Conditions, by Party

*Note: Cell entries in the Democratic and Republican columns are adjusted percentages who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored an employer firing the employee. Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. The Difference column reports the percentage-point gap between the two groups and identifies which party had the higher adjusted percentage. Estimates adjust for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and region. Module 1 estimates additionally adjust for employee occupation and presentation order, including their interactions with speech scenario; Module 2 estimates additionally adjust for vignette position. Module 1 estimates are based on 829 Democrats and 742 Republicans. Across the five Module 2 scenarios, Democratic sample sizes range from 827 to 828 and Republican sample sizes from 741 to 743. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ for the difference between Democrats and Republicans within each row.*

Other experiments showed even larger partisan reversals. In the mass-deportation experiment, Democratic support for firing increased from 34% when the employee opposed mass deportation and called for resistance and civil disobedience to 45% when the employee supported mass deportation and called for citizen enforcement and reporting. Republicans moved even more in the opposite direction, with support falling from 52% to 36%.¹²

¹² The 11-percentage-point increase among Democrats was statistically significant ($p = .001$), as was the 17-point decrease among Republicans ($p < .001$). The difference between these two within-party effects was also statistically significant ($p < .001$).

The anti-Black and flag-burning scenarios produced a similarly large partisan reversal.¹³ Overall, respondents were only slightly more likely to favor firing for the anti-Black post than for flag burning and calls for government overthrow (60% vs. 56%). Among Democrats, however, support for firing was 18 percentage points higher for the anti-Black post than for the flag-burning scenario (65% vs. 47%). Republicans showed the opposite pattern: 72% favored firing for the flag-burning and anti-government speech, compared with 58% for the anti-Black post.¹⁴

In light of growing partisan divisions over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—with Democrats now expressing considerably greater sympathy for Palestinians and Republicans continuing to express greater sympathy for Israelis—we might expect a similar target-dependent pattern in reactions to the Israel/Palestine experiment.¹⁵ While such a pattern did emerge, it was relatively modest. Among Democrats, support for firing increased from 51% when the employee expressed hatred toward and wished harm on pro-Israel activists to 57% when the target was pro-Palestinian activists—a 6 percentage point increase. Republicans again moved in the opposite direction, with support falling from 61% to 54%—a 7 percentage point decrease.¹⁶

PARTISAN DIFFERENCES WERE LESS CONSISTENT FOR LEGAL PROTECTION

Partisan differences in support for firing carried over less consistently to views about legal protection (Appendix Table A2). The clearest cases in which they did were the anti-Black/flag-burning comparison and the mass-deportation experiment. In the former, Democrats were more likely to favor legal protection for the employee who burned the flag and called for the government's overthrow than for the employee who made the anti-Black post (58% vs. 45%), while Republicans showed the opposite pattern (43% vs. 53%).

A similar reversal appeared in the mass-deportation experiment. Democratic support for legal protection fell from 58% when the employee opposed mass deportation to 52% when the employee supported it, while Republican support increased from 48% to 60%.¹⁷ In the racial-slur, Israel/Palestine, anti-Chinese, and political-assassination experiments, by contrast, the effect of the randomized condition on support for legal protection did not differ significantly between Democrats and Republicans.

Partisan differences in support for firing were also not always mirrored by differences in how objectionable respondents considered the speech itself (Appendix Table A3). In the racial-slur experiment, Democrats and Republicans showed similar shifts

13 Responses to the flag-burning and anti-government scenario varied somewhat depending on presentation order (Appendix Figure A1). When respondents encountered it after the anti-Black post rather than before, support for firing increased from 53% to 59%, support for legal protection fell from 51% to 46%, and the share rating the speech as very or extremely objectionable increased from 33% to 43%. Reactions to the anti-Black post were generally more stable across presentation order, although support for legal protection was lower when that scenario appeared second. These order effects did not meaningfully differ across political parties or assigned occupations. The statistical analyses of these scenarios account for presentation order.

14 The 4-percentage-point difference among respondents overall was statistically significant ($p = .001$), as were the 18-point decrease among Democrats and the 14-point increase among Republicans (both $p < .001$).

15 Gallup. (2026). Israelis no longer ahead of Americans in Middle East sympathies. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/702440/israelis-no-longer-ahead-americans-middle-east-sympathies.aspx>

16 The 6-percentage-point increase among Democrats approached but did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = .071$), while the 7-point decrease among Republicans was at the conventional threshold ($p = .050$). The difference between these two within-party effects was statistically significant ($p = .008$).

17 The 7-percentage-point decrease among Democrats was statistically significant ($p = .046$), as was the 12-point increase among Republicans ($p = .001$). The difference between these two within-party effects was also statistically significant ($p < .001$).

in perceived objectionability across the two racial configurations despite the much larger partisan difference in support for firing.¹⁸ Another such disconnect appeared in the political-assassination experiment: Republicans rated the speech as very or extremely objectionable at virtually identical rates regardless of the victim's party (52% in both conditions), even though their support for firing was higher than Democrats' in both versions.¹⁹

Collectively, these results show that partisan differences in support for firing employees for controversial off-duty speech were often substantial but highly context-dependent, whereas partisan differences in support for legal protection were generally smaller and less sensitive to context. Differences in support for firing also did not always correspond to differences in how objectionable respondents found the speech itself. This suggests that partisan disagreement over off-duty speech reflects not only differences in which expression people find offensive, but also differences in when they believe controversial speech should carry employment consequences.

OCCUPATION MATTERED MORE FOR SOME TYPES OF OFF-DUTY SPEECH THAN OTHERS

An important question that remains is whether respondents held speakers in some occupations more responsible than speakers in others. For example, might employees in roles associated with greater public trust, such as police officers and schoolteachers, face greater employment consequences than computer programmers and fast-food workers?

The results shown in Table 4 suggest that occupation matters, but more so for the anti-Black post than for the flag-burning and anti-government scenario.²⁰ Specifically, in the anti-Black post scenario, overall support for firing was highest when the employee was a public-school teacher (68%) or police officer (65%), somewhat lower for a lawyer or doctor (60% each), and lower still for a computer programmer (53%) or fast-food worker (52%). In the flag-burning and anti-government scenario, by contrast, support for firing was more consistent across occupations, ranging from 51% for a fast-food worker to 58% for a police officer. None of the occupational differences in this scenario reached statistical significance.

The relationship between occupation and support for firing also differed by party.²¹ Among Democrats, support for firing the anti-Black social media poster was high across all six occupations, ranging from 60% for a doctor or fast-food worker to 77% for a police officer. Republicans showed even greater occupational variation, with support highest for a public-school teacher (73%), followed by a doctor (61%), lawyer (60%), and police officer (57%), and lowest for a computer programmer (49%) or fast-food worker (48%).

18 The share of Democrats rating the speech in the racial slur scenario very or extremely objectionable was 6 percentage points higher when the speaker was White and the child was black than the reverse configuration (55% vs. 49%, $p = .070$). Republicans shifted to a similar degree in the same direction (49% vs. 44%, $p = .131$).

19 The difference between the two scenarios was statistically significant among Democrats ($p = .021$), but not among Republicans ($p = .938$). The difference between the estimated effects among Democrats and Republicans did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = .102$).

20 Occupational differences in support for firing were statistically significant in the anti-Black post scenario ($p < .001$), but not in the flag-burning and anti-government scenario ($p = .463$), and the relationship between occupation and support for firing differed significantly across the two scenarios ($p = .008$). After adjusting for multiple comparisons within the anti-Black post scenario, support for firing was significantly higher for public-school teachers and police officers than for computer programmers and fast-food workers. No other pairwise occupational differences reached statistical significance. Analyses using the full seven-point firing scale produced the same broad pattern.

21 The three-way interaction between occupation, speech scenario, and party affiliation was statistically significant when firing attitudes were measured as support for firing ($p = .024$), on the full seven-point firing scale ($p = .037$), and as opposition to firing ($p = .049$).



Occupation	Group	Resurfaced "Go back to Africa" post	Flag burning/ call for government overthrow
Public school teacher	All	68%	55%
	Democrats	66%	42%
	Republicans	73%	77%
Police officer	All	65%	58%
	Democrats	77%	55%
	Republicans	57%	73%
Lawyer	All	60%	57%
	Democrats	67%	48%
	Republicans	60%	73%
Doctor	All	61%	54%
	Democrats	60%	53%
	Republicans	61%	68%
Computer programmer	All	53%	58%
	Democrats	62%	46%
	Republicans	49%	78%
Fast-food worker	All	52%	51%
	Democrats	60%	41%
	Republicans	48%	62%

Table 4. Support for Firing by Employee Occupation and Speech Scenario, Overall and by Party

Note: Cell entries represent adjusted percentages of respondents who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored an employer firing the employee. Overall estimates are based on 1,981 respondents for the anti-Black post scenario and 1,980 for the flag-burning and anti-government scenario; within-party estimates are based on 829 Democrats and 742 Republicans in each scenario. Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. Estimates are derived from models that include employee occupation, speech scenario, party affiliation, and their interactions, while adjusting for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, and presentation order. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

The partisan pattern changed in the flag-burning and anti-government scenario. Democrats were generally less supportive of firing, and the occupational differences were less consistent. Democrats' support was highest when the employee was a police officer (55%) or doctor (53%), but lower for a public-school teacher (42%), which was roughly the same as for a fast-food worker (41%). Republicans, by contrast, were generally more supportive of firing in this scenario. Their support for firing was highest for a computer programmer (78%) and public-school teacher (77%), followed closely by a lawyer and police officer (73% each). Fast-food workers again received the lowest support for firing, though even there a clear majority favored firing (62%). These patterns thus indicate that the occupations respondents held to a higher standard differed not only by party but also across the two speech scenarios.

Respondents' judgments about the objectionability of the speech itself also varied somewhat by occupation, even though they were explicitly asked to set the employee's job aside when rating its objectionability (Appendix Table A4). These differences were

most apparent among Democrats evaluating the anti-Black post: 68% rated the speech as very or extremely objectionable when the employee was a police officer or lawyer, compared with 51% when the employee was a public-school teacher and 53% when the employee was a computer programmer.²² In the flag-burning and anti-government scenario, by contrast, perceived objectionability showed no clear occupational pattern, either overall or by party.

Finally, occupation had an even weaker and less consistent relationship with support for legal protection, with no clear occupational pattern emerging across the two speech scenarios (Appendix Table A5).²³

Taken together, these results suggest that occupational context can shape reactions to controversial off-duty speech, but its influence depends heavily on the speech in question. It mattered most for support for firing in the anti-Black post scenario but less consistently for judgments about the speech itself or views about legal protection.

RESPONDENTS WERE SOMEWHAT MORE FORGIVING OF SPEECH EXPRESSED DURING ADOLESCENCE

A final question we consider is whether people were more forgiving of offensive speech expressed during adolescence than adulthood. To examine this, respondents read about a current retail sales associate whose anti-Chinese social media post from ten years earlier had recently resurfaced and gone viral, prompting people to contact the employee's current employer to complain. In one version, the employee had made the post at age 15 and was therefore 25 when it resurfaced; in the other, the employee had made it at age 35 and was 45 when it resurfaced.

Respondents were somewhat more forgiving when the post had been written during adolescence, even though they did not consider the speech itself less objectionable. As shown in Table 5, 41% supported firing when the employee had made the post at age 15, compared with 45% when the post had been made at age 35. The difference was larger in opposition to firing (Appendix Figure A2): 32% opposed firing in the age-15 condition, compared with 26% in the age-35 condition.²⁴

At the same time, the employee's age at the time of the post had a smaller effect on how objectionable respondents considered the speech. Thirty-seven percent rated the age-15 post as very or extremely objectionable, compared with 39% in the age-35 condition. Support for legal protection was likewise only slightly higher when the post had been made at age 15 (51% vs. 48%).

22 More broadly, perceived objectionability differed significantly across occupations among Democrats presented with the anti-Black post ($p = .026$). Republicans, in contrast, showed less variation ($p = .251$): 48% rated the anti-Black post as very or extremely objectionable when the employee was a public-school teacher, compared with 37% to 41% across the other five occupations.

23 Analyses of support for legal protection, opposition to legal protection, and the full seven-point legal-protection scale produced the same broad conclusion. The relationship between occupation and speech scenario was not statistically significant for any of the three measures, nor did that relationship differ significantly by party. Some isolated differences nevertheless emerged; for example, among Democrats evaluating the anti-Black post, support for legal protection was lower when the employee was a police officer (37%) than when the employee held the other occupations (42% to 50%).

24 The 3-percentage-point difference in support for legal protection did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = .089$), nor did the 2-point difference in opposition ($p = .262$), although responses differed across the full seven-point legal-protection scale ($p = .050$). The difference in the percentage rating the post as very or extremely objectionable was also not statistically significant ($p = .279$), nor was the difference across the full five-point objectionability scale ($p = .201$). There was no evidence that the effect of the employee's age on either outcome differed between Democrats and Republicans.

	Favor firing		Favor legal protection		Very/ extremely objectionable	
Group	Age 15	Age 35	Age 15	Age 35	Age 15	Age 35
All	41%	45%	51%	48%	37%	39%
Democrats	43%	48%	54%	49%	42%	45%
Republicans	43%	45%	54%	52%	34%	33%

Table 5. Support for Firing, Legal Protection, and Perceived Objectionability, by Age at Time of Post, Overall and by Party

Note: Cell entries represent adjusted percentages of respondents who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored an employer firing the employee; somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored legal protection against being fired under the circumstances described; or rated the expression as very or extremely objectionable. Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. Estimates adjust for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, and vignette position. Overall sample sizes ranged from 1,977 to 1,981 across the three outcomes; Democratic sample sizes were 828 for each outcome, and Republican sample sizes ranged from 741 to 743. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

Although employee age at the time of the offensive post had only a modest influence on attitudes, the relatively low level of support for firing in both conditions is notable. As Table 2 showed, the ten-year-old anti-Chinese post produced one of the lowest levels of support for firing and one of the highest levels of support for legal protection across the seven scenarios we tested. This may indicate that respondents were more forgiving of controversial speech that had occurred long in the past, regardless of whether it had been expressed during adolescence or adulthood. But because both versions of the experiment involved a ten-year-old post, the study cannot isolate the effect of the passage of time itself.

CONCLUSION

The results of these experiments suggest that attitudes toward controversial off-duty speech do not divide neatly between people who favor “cancel culture” and those who oppose it. Support for firing varied with the speech and circumstances involved. The content and political direction of the expression mattered most consistently, while occupation and the age at which the speech occurred mattered in more limited ways. Taken together, the results suggest that respondents did not apply a single, stable rule to when controversial speech outside the workplace should cost someone a job.

The findings also complicate the idea that “cancel culture” belongs primarily to one side of the political divide. Republicans were somewhat more supportive of firing on average, but the size and direction of partisan differences varied significantly across the experiments. Each party became more willing to impose employment consequences in some contexts and less willing in others. The results therefore point less to a simple partisan divide over whether controversial speech should be punished than to disagreement over which kinds of speech should carry employment consequences.



Perhaps the most important broader finding is that support for firing did not necessarily translate into opposition to legal protection. Across most scenarios, large minorities—and often close to half—of respondents who favored firing also supported legal protection against being fired under similar circumstances. Further analysis shows that this combination was not confined to isolated responses and that legal-protection preferences were more stable across scenarios than firing preferences. The pattern is consistent with some respondents distinguishing between what they believed should happen in a particular case and the rules they believed should govern employers more generally. It may also reflect difficulty reconciling competing values.

What appears contradictory at first glance may therefore reflect a genuine tension between support for consequences in particular cases and support for broader protections for off-duty expression. Asking whether someone “should be fired” captures only part of what people believe about how controversial off-duty speech should be governed.

These tensions have no simple resolution. Legal protections for off-duty speech can preserve employees’ ability to express themselves without risking their livelihoods, but they necessarily restrict employers’ discretion over whom they employ and who represents their organizations. In some circumstances, such restrictions could also conflict with employers’ own rights of association and expression.

The central issue, then, is not simply whether controversial speech should have “consequences,” but when those consequences should include the loss of a job and how the law should balance protection for employees’ off-duty expression against employers’ discretion over whom they employ.



APPENDIX A: SUPPLEMENTARY TABLES AND FIGURES

Category	Cint Sample	U.S. Benchmark	Difference
Sex			
Female	49%	51%	-2.5
Age			
18 to 29	19%	20%	-1.1
30 to 44	28%	25%	2.9
45 to 64	34%	30%	3.9
65 or older	18%	24%	-5.7
Race/Ethnicity			
White	59%	56%	2.6
Black	20%	12%	8
Hispanic	16%	20%	-4.5
Asian	4%	6%	-2.7
Education			
High school or less	42%	36%	5.7
Some college/associate	32%	27%	4.8
Bachelor's or higher	26%	37%	-10.4
Region			
Northeast	20%	17%	2.9
Midwest	23%	20%	3.1
South	39%	39%	0.6
West	17%	23%	-6.6
Partisanship			
Democratic share among two-party aligned	53%	53%	0
N	2,042		

Table A1. Comparison of the Cint Sample with U.S. Population Benchmarks

Note: U.S. population benchmarks for age and sex are from the U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage 2025 national population estimates; regional benchmarks are from the corresponding Vintage 2025 estimates of the population age 18 or older. Race and ethnicity benchmarks are based on KFF tabulations of the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS), and education benchmarks are from the 2024 ACS one-year estimates for adults age 25 or older (Table S1501). The partisanship benchmark is from Pew Research Center's 2026 National Public Opinion Reference Survey and includes partisan leaners; the reported value is the Democratic share among respondents aligned with either major party. Cint sample percentages are unweighted. Differences are calculated as the Cint sample percentage minus the U.S. benchmark percentage using unrounded values; displayed percentages are rounded. Race and ethnicity comparisons are approximate because the Cint measure permits multiple racial selections that were subsequently coded into mutually exclusive categories, whereas the benchmark uses mutually exclusive race/ethnicity categories.



Scenario	Democrats	Republicans	Difference
Resurfaced Anti-Black post	45%	53%	Republicans +8**
Flag burning/call for government overthrow	58%	43%	Democrats +14***
White person slurs Black child	42%	47%	Republicans +5
Black person slurs White child	43%	41%	Democrats +2
Post targetting pro-Israel activists	47%	45%	Democrats +2
Post targetting pro-Palestinian activists	42%	48%	Republicans +6
Calls for resistance to mass deportation	58%	48%	Democrats +10**
Calls for citizens to report undocumented immigrants	52%	60%	Republicans +8*
Anti-Chinese post made at age 15	54%	54%	0
Anti-Chinese post made at age 35	49%	52%	Republicans +3
Celebrates assassination of Democrat	44%	39%	Democrats +5
Celebrates assassination of Republican	44%	41%	Democrats +3

Table A2. Support for Legal Protection Across Speech Scenarios and Experimental Conditions, by Party

*Note: Cell entries represent adjusted percentages of Democrats and Republicans who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored giving legal protection to employees in similar circumstances. Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. The Difference column reports the percentage-point gap between the two groups and identifies which party had the higher adjusted percentage. Estimates adjust for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and region. Module 1 estimates additionally adjust for the employee's occupation and presentation order, including their interactions with the speech scenario. Module 2 estimates additionally adjust for vignette position. For Module 1, estimates are based on 823 to 828 Democrats and 738 to 741 Republicans across the two scenarios. Across the five Module 2 scenarios, Democratic sample sizes ranged from 827 to 828 and Republican sample sizes from 741 to 744. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ for the difference between Democrats and Republicans within each row.*



Scenario	Democrats	Republicans	Difference
Resurfaced Anti-Black post	59%	40%	Democrats +19***
Flag burning/call for government overthrow	32%	46%	Republicans +14***
White person slurs Black child	54%	50%	Democrats +4
Black person slurs White child	48%	44%	Democrats +4
Post targetting pro-Israel activists	41%	44%	Republicans +4
Post targetting pro-Palestinian activists	46%	35%	Democrats +11**
Calls for resistance to mass deportation	26%	34%	Republicans +8*
Calls for citizens to report undocumented immigrants	40%	19%	Democrats +21***
Anti-Chinese post made at age 15	42%	34%	Democrats +8*
Anti-Chinese post made at age 35	45%	33%	Democrats +12***
Celebrates assassination of Democrat	54%	52%	Democrats +2
Celebrates assassination of Republican	47%	52%	Republicans +5

Table A3. Perceived Objectionability Across Speech Scenarios and Experimental Conditions, by Party

*Note: Cell entries represent adjusted percentages of Democrats (circles) and Republicans (triangles) who rated the expression as very or extremely objectionable (vs. not at all, slightly, and moderately objectionable). Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. The Difference column reports the percentage-point gap between the two groups and identifies which party had the higher adjusted percentage. Estimates adjust for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and region. Module 1 estimates additionally adjust for the employee's occupation and presentation order, including their interactions with the speech scenario. Module 2 estimates additionally adjust for vignette position. For Module 1, estimates are based on 824 to 825 Democrats and 741 to 742 Republicans across the two scenarios. Across the five Module 2 scenarios, Democratic sample sizes ranged from 827 to 829 and Republican sample sizes from 741 to 744. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ for the difference between Democrats and Republicans within each row.*



Occupation	Group	Resurfaced "Go back to Africa" post	Flag burning/ call for government overthrow
Public school teacher	All	51%	36%
	Democrats	51%	31%
	Republicans	49%	41%
Police officer	All	53%	38%
	Democrats	68%	32%
	Republicans	39%	48%
Lawyer	All	53%	38%
	Democrats	68%	28%
	Republicans	41%	48%
Doctor	All	48%	38%
	Democrats	58%	30%
	Republicans	37%	49%
Computer programmer	All	45%	40%
	Democrats	53%	38%
	Republicans	38%	44%
Fast-food worker	All	45%	38%
	Democrats	54%	33%
	Republicans	37%	45%

Table A4. Perceived Objectionability by Employee Occupation and Speech Scenario, Overall and by Party

Note: Cell entries represent adjusted percentages of respondents who rated the expression as very or extremely objectionable (vs. not at all, slightly, and moderately objectionable) in each scenario. Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. Overall estimates are based on 1,973 respondents in both the anti-Black post scenario and flag-burning/anti-government scenario; within-party estimates are based on 824 to 825 Democrats and 740 to 741 Republicans in each scenario. Estimates are derived from models that include employee occupation, speech scenario, party affiliation, and their interactions, while adjusting for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, and presentation order. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.



Occupation	Group	Resurfaced "Go back to Africa" post	Flag burning/ call for government overthrow
Public school teacher	All	46%	45%
	Democrats	49%	49%
	Republicans	49%	45%
Police officer	All	43%	49%
	Democrats	37%	56%
	Republicans	56%	44%
Lawyer	All	44%	46%
	Democrats	42%	60%
	Republicans	50%	34%
Doctor	All	44%	50%
	Democrats	44%	58%
	Republicans	47%	48%
Computer programmer	All	48%	48%
	Democrats	49%	57%
	Republicans	55%	41%
Fast-food worker	All	48%	54%
	Democrats	47%	64%
	Republicans	59%	47%

Table A5. Support for Legal Protection by Employee Occupation and Speech Scenario, Overall and by Party

Note: Cell entries represent adjusted percentages of respondents who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored giving legal protection to employees in similar circumstances in each scenario. Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. Overall estimates are based on 1,978 respondents in the anti-Black post scenario and 1,968 respondents in the flag-burning/anti-government scenario; within-party estimates are based on 823 to 828 Democrats and 738 to 741 Republicans in each scenario. Estimates are derived from models that include employee occupation, speech scenario, party affiliation, and their interactions, while adjusting for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, and presentation order. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

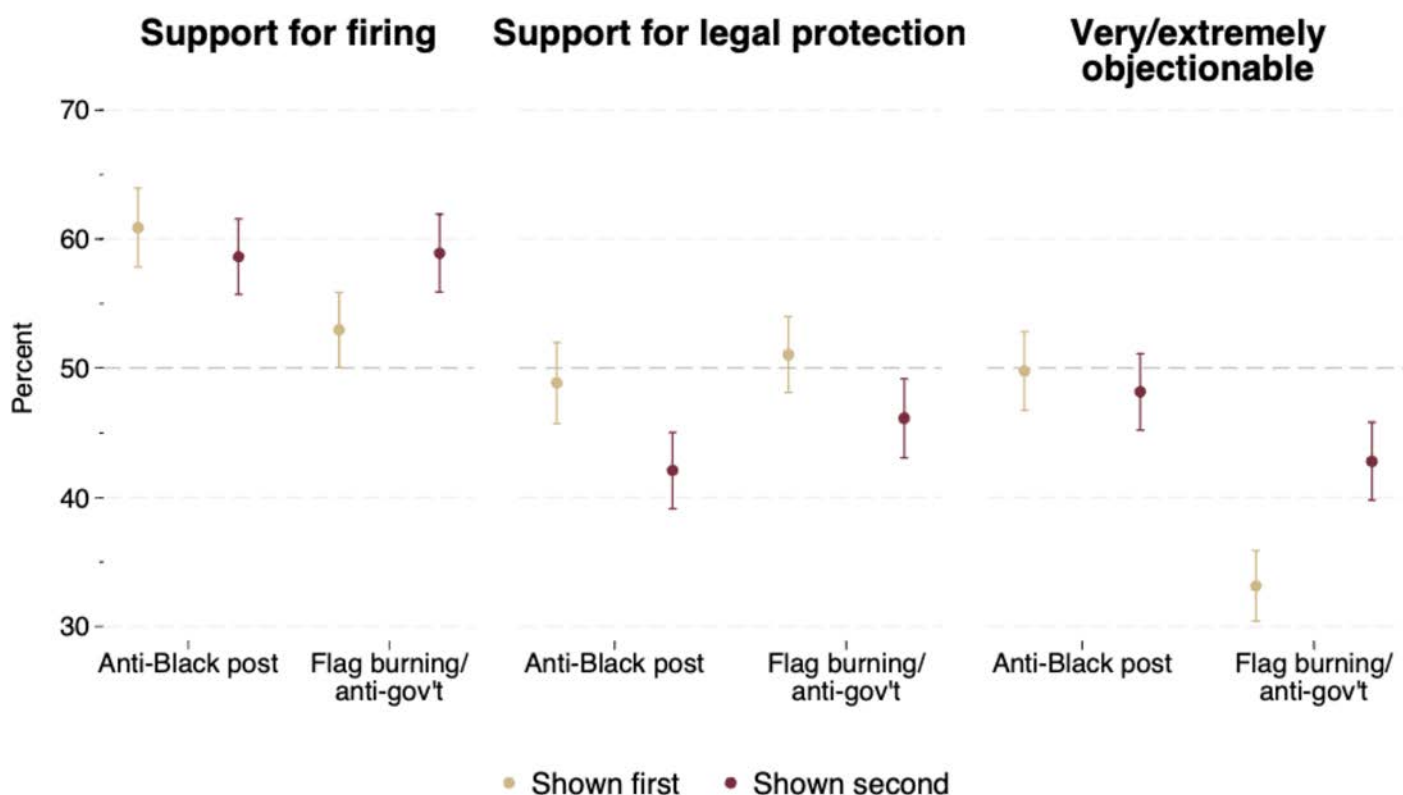


Figure A1. Effects of Presentation Order on Support for Firing, Legal Protection, and Perceived Objectionability

Note: Markers represent adjusted percentages of respondents who somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored firing the employee (left panel); somewhat favored, favored, or strongly favored legal protection against being fired under the circumstances described (middle panel); or rated the expression as very or extremely objectionable (right panel). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. "Shown first" and "Shown second" indicate whether the scenario appeared first or second within Module 1. Estimates are derived from models that include employee occupation, speech scenario, party affiliation, presentation order, and interactions between occupation and speech scenario and between presentation order and speech scenario, while adjusting for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and region. Sample sizes were 1,981 and 1,980 for the two scenarios in the firing model, 1,978 and 1,968 in the legal-protection model, and 1,973 in each scenario in the objectionability model. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

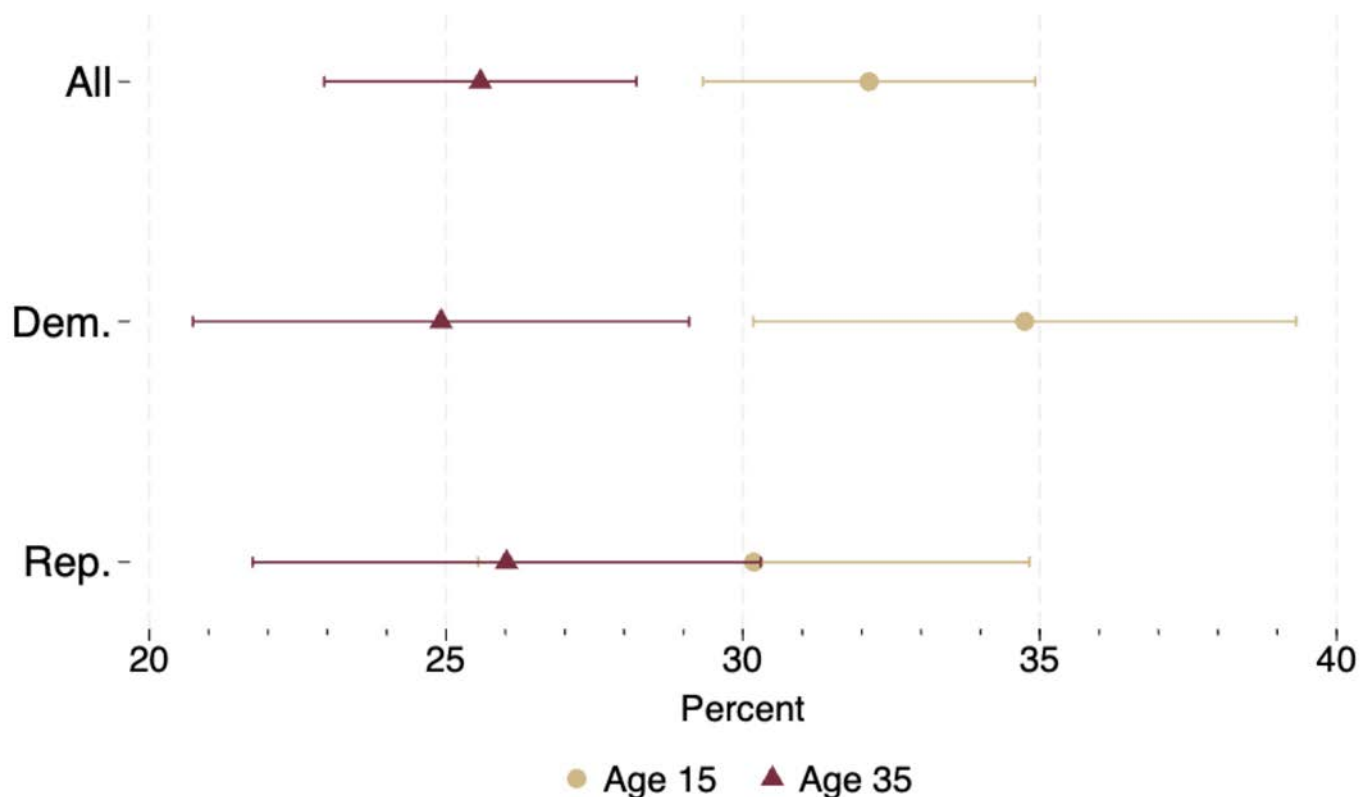


Figure A2. Opposition to Firing in the Resurfaced Anti-Chinese Post Scenario, by Age at Time of Post, Overall and by Party

Note: Markers represent adjusted percentages of respondents who somewhat opposed, opposed, or strongly opposed firing the employee. Democrats include respondents who identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic; Republicans include those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican. Estimates adjust for ideology, age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, and vignette position. Estimates are based on 1,981 respondents: 990 in the age-15 condition and 991 in the age-35 condition. The partisan estimates include 828 Democrats and 743 Republicans. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.