

What Do College Students Think About Speech, Progress, and the Economy?

Summary of the 2026 American College Student Freedom, Progress, and Flourishing Survey

The 2026 American College Student Freedom, Progress, and Flourishing Survey is a representative nationwide survey of 1,999 students currently enrolled in 439 four-year U.S. colleges and universities. It is conducted in collaboration with College Pulse.

The purpose of the survey is to understand (1) student comfort level with diverse views and their attitudes toward regulating speech, (2) their understanding of human progress, views of the world and U.S., and optimism about the future, and (3) their understanding of capitalism and socialism, and their economic views. Details of the survey can be found in the full survey report: <https://www.ndsu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/2026AmericanCollegeStudentFreedomProgressandFlourishingSurvey.pdf>.

Demographic Highlights of the Sample

- 64% female, 31% male, 5% other/unidentified
- 40% white, 26% Asian, 13% Hispanic/Latino, 8% black, 6% 2 or more races, 2 percent Middle Eastern, 5% other/unidentified
- 69% public colleges/universities, 31% private colleges/universities
- 49% liberal, 24% conservative, 27% independent/apolitical

Campus Free Speech and Viewpoint Diversity

- **Comfort in sharing opinion:** 76 percent are at least somewhat comfortable sharing an opinion on a controversial or sensitive topic in class, but 44 percent of those say the reason is because others agree with them.
- **Fear of what other student think:** Students are most concerned about the opinions of other students. 56 percent of those who are not comfortable sharing their opinion say it is out of concern that their opinion would be unacceptable to other students.
- **Preventing speech that is disagreeable or causes discomfort:** 32 percent of students say speaker invitations should be withdrawn if many students disagree with views, 32 percent say readings that make students uncomfortable should be dropped, and 26 percent say class discussion topics that make students uncomfortable should be dropped.
- **Reporting Professors:** 73 percent of students are in favor of reporting professors for something deemed offensive by students. 67 percent are in favor of reporting professors for stating opinions on police shootings, DEI practices, vaccines, sex/gender, guns, and climate change.
- **Reporting other students:** 56 percent of students are in favor of reporting other students for saying something deemed offensive.

- **Shouting down speakers:** 58 percent of students say shouting down a speaker to share one or more of 6 views on police shootings, vaccines, and sex/gender is acceptable.
- **Blocking speakers from entering the auditorium:** 42 percent are in favor of blocking a speaker from sharing one or more of the same 6 views.
- **Using violence to prevent speakers from speaking:** 13 percent are in favor of using violence to prevent a speaker from sharing one or more of the same 6 views.
- **Students say they value free speech more than comfort, but they are also largely in favor of censoring others:** The reductions in the percentages of students in favor of the above actions are small in comparison to all students, for those who say they value free speech more than comfort.
- **Liberal students are more intolerant than conservative students by most measures:** Liberal students are significantly more in favor of disinviting controversial speakers, reporting professors and other students who say something deemed offensive, shouting down speakers, and blocking speakers from entering the auditorium than conservative students. On the other hand, a significantly higher percentage of conservative students say it is acceptable to use violence to prevent a controversial speaker from speaking.
- **Female students are more intolerant than male students by most measures:** Female students are significantly more in favor of disinviting controversial speakers, dropping class readings and discussion topics that make students uncomfortable, reporting professors and other students who say something deemed offensive, shouting down speakers, and blocking a speaker from entering the auditorium than male students. A significantly higher percentage of male students say it is acceptable to use violence to prevent a controversial speaker from speaking.

Human Progress, Attitudes About the Future, and National Pride

- **Beliefs on World Progress:** Only 38 percent of students think the world has improved over the last 50 years in terms of extreme poverty, life expectancy, hunger, and literacy.
- **Beliefs on U.S. Progress:** Only 39 percent of students think the U.S. has improved over the last 50 years in terms of life expectancy, per capita income, and education level.
- **Reasons for progress or lack thereof:** For students who think the world and the U.S. have improved, the top reason is freedom and the private sector. For those who think they have declined, the top reason is not enough government and rules.
- **Optimism:** Only 27 percent of students are optimistic about the future of the world and 26 percent about the future of the U.S. Just over half are optimistic about their own future and about their ability to make a difference in the world.
- **Pride in being American:** 61 percent of American students are proud to be American.

- **Conservative students are more likely to believe things have improved and to be optimistic than liberal students:** Conservative students are significantly more likely to believe the U.S. has improved, to be more optimistic about the future of the world and the U.S., and to be more optimistic about their own future and ability to make a difference in the world than liberal students. They are also more proud to be American than liberal students.
- **Male students are more likely to believe things have improved and to be optimistic than female students:** Male students are significantly more likely to believe the world has improved, the U.S. has improved, and to be more optimistic about the future of the world and the U.S. than female students.
- **Changes over time:** Student beliefs on whether the world and the U.S. has improved have declined in the last couple of years. Optimism over students' ability to make a difference in the world has increased to its highest level in our 6-year survey.

Capitalism and Socialism and Other Economic Beliefs

- **Defining capitalism:** 55 percent of students define capitalism as free market capitalism, while 26 percent define it as cronyism.
- **Attitudes toward capitalism:** 24 percent of students have a positive view of capitalism and 31 percent a negative view. For those who define capitalism as free market capitalism, 37 percent have a positive view. For those who define it as cronyism, 9 percent have a positive view.
- **Defining socialism:** 31 percent of students define socialism using the classic definition of government ownership of property and central planning, while 48 percent define it as active government and redistribution.
- **Attitudes toward socialism:** 27 percent of students have a positive view of socialism and 26 percent have a negative view. For those who define socialism as government ownership and central planning, 16 percent have a positive view. For those who define it as active government and redistribution, 43 percent have a positive view.
- **College influence on capitalism/socialism views:** Most students say that college hasn't influenced their opinion of capitalism and socialism. 11 percent say college has given them a more positive view of capitalism and 23 percent a more negative view. 18 percent say college has given them a more positive view of socialism and 13 percent a more negative view.
- **Professors expressing opinions of capitalism and socialism:** Most students say that professors have not expressed their opinions on capitalism and socialism. 18 percent say professors have expressed favorable views on capitalism and 22 percent say unfavorable views. For socialism, 17 percent say professors have expressed favorable views and 15 percent unfavorable views.
- **Most students are in favor of universal healthcare and free higher education when someone else pays, but not when everybody pays:** 76 percent are in favor of these when funded by a wealth tax on the top 1%. 73 percent are in favor of these when funded by higher income taxes on the top 10%. When funded by higher income

taxes on most workers, student support drops to 42 percent. 49 percent support these when funded by a universal consumption tax.

- **A majority of students are in favor of heavy government involvement in the economy:** 72 percent are in favor of rent freezes on apartments, 67 percent are in favor of government-owned grocery stores, 62 percent are in favor of a \$30 minimum wage, and 76 percent are in favor of a wealth tax. However, only 34 percent are in favor of government ownership in strategic sectors like AI and steel.
- **Students hold contradictory beliefs on government ownership of business property:** 67 percent are in favor of government-owned grocery stores, while 66 percent are opposed to government ownership in strategic sectors.
- **59 percent of students think billionaires should not exist.**
- **Liberal and conservative students have large differences in economic beliefs:** Conservative students are significantly more likely to define capitalism as free market and socialism as central planning than liberal students, and to have a positive view of capitalism and a negative view of socialism than liberal students. Conservative students are also significantly less likely to be in favor of universal healthcare and free higher education under any funding scheme, to be in favor of rent freezes, to be in favor of government-owned grocery stores, to be in favor of a minimum wage, to be in favor of a wealth tax, or to think billionaires should not exist than liberal students.
- **Female and male students have large differences in economic beliefs:** Male students are significantly more likely to define capitalism as free market and socialism as central planning than female students, and to have a positive view of capitalism than female students. Male students are also significantly less likely to be in favor of universal healthcare and free higher education when paid for by the rich, to be in favor of rent freezes, to be in favor of government-owned grocery stores, to be in favor of a \$30 minimum wage, to be in favor of a wealth tax, and to think billionaires should not exist than female students. However, male students are significantly more likely to be in favor of government ownership in strategic sectors than female students.
- **Changes over time:** There have not been large changes in student attitudes toward capitalism and socialism over time. However, there have been fewer students defining socialism as government ownership and central planning over time.