

Tolerance grows for a wide variety of groups, except for Muslim extremists

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Although Americans are increasingly tolerant of the open expression of a variety of views, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 have made most Americans reluctant to extend those freedoms to Muslim extremists, research released Aug. 25 by NORC at the University of Chicago shows.

The finding, reported in NORC's [General Social Survey](#), illustrates a lingering impact of the horrific events from ten years ago, as well as the consequences on American [public opinion](#) of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Tom W. Smith, director of the survey.

"These figures are a result of people responding to what they perceive to be a serious threat," Smith said. The survey found in 2008 that when asked if "A Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States" should be able to speak publicly, 41 percent of Americans said yes. The percentage remained unchanged in the 2010 survey. When asked if a Muslim extremist should be able to teach, 29 percent of Americans said yes in 2008 and 32 percent said yes in 2010. The survey found that 49 percent of Americans in 2008 would allow a book by a Muslim extremist to be in their local library, while 48 percent approved in 2010.

Yet tolerance has increased for the expression of other non-majority viewpoints. For example, the GSS found that a majority of Americans are no longer opposed to civil liberties for Communists. In 1972, the first year the survey was conducted, 53 percent of Americans felt that Communists should be allowed to speak, compared to 64 percent in

2010. In 2010, 61 percent (versus 33 percent in 1972) said that a Communist should be allowed to teach, and 69 percent (versus 53 percent in 1972) said that a book by a Communist was appropriate for a library collection.

The increases in tolerance for other groups have been similar. Americans have become more willing to support civil liberties for [homosexuals](#), people who oppose churches and religion, and even those who advocate doing away with elections and letting the military run the country.

"Two things in particular account for this trend: an increase in education and changing attitudes across generations," Smith said.

College attendance in particular, which has increased in the last 40 years, has prompted people to become more open-minded, he said. In addition, younger generations do not feel the same threat from some of the controversial groups as did their parents.

Smith is author of the NORC report "Trends in Support for [Civil Liberties](#)." In addition to the findings on attitudes towards Muslim extremists, the report shows:

- Support for allowing a "person who is against all churches and religions" to speak rose from 66 percent in 1972 to 76 percent in 2010; approval for teaching rose from 42 percent in 1972 to 60 percent in 2010; and tolerance of having such a book in the library grew from 61 percent in 1972 to 74 percent in 2010.
- Support for allowing "a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country" to speak grew from 55 percent in 1976 to 69 percent in 2010; approval for teaching went from 37 percent in 1976 to 57 percent in 2010; and tolerance of having such a book in the library climbed from

57 percent in 1976 to 71 percent in 2010.

- Support for allowing an "admitted homosexual" to speak increased from 62 percent in 1972 to 86 percent in 2010; approval for teaching rose from 48 percent in 1973 to 84 percent in 2010; and tolerance of having such a book in the library from 54 percent in 1973 to 78 percent in 2010.

Over the period of the survey, there has been very little gain in [tolerance](#) for racists. Fifty-eight percent of Americans in 2010 felt people with anti-black views had the right to speak, compared to 61.5 percent in 1977. Forty-eight percent felt they had the right to teach in 2010, compared with 41 percent in 1977. Sixty-five percent felt they had the right to have a book the library, compared with 60 percent in 1977.

The General Social Survey, conducted for the past 40 years, monitors societal change and the growing complexity of American society. The biennial [survey](#), supported by the National Science Foundation, includes a sample of more than 2,000 interviews of randomly selected people. With the exception of the U.S. Census, the GSS is the most widely used source of information about social trends and attitudes.

Provided by University of Chicago

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