

Liberals Embrace Civil Liberties More than Conservatives

Support for, Not Opposition to, Gun Control May Be a Civil Liberty

PHOENIX — American citizens who identify themselves as liberals are far more likely than conservatives to embrace freedom and civil liberties, according to an analysis of national poll data.

“Liberals are far more tolerant of protestors and nonmainstream ideas and the people who hold and teach such ideas,” said Dr. David Demers, executive director of the American Center for Civil Liberties. “Although some conservative groups contend they embrace civil liberties more than liberal groups, the data show that among American citizens in general, liberals are about 39 percent more likely to embrace civil liberties.”

The Data

The findings are derived from national polls conducted in various years from 1972 to 2006 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. ACFCL’s secondary analysis included more than 40,000 respondents interviewed in the General Social Survey.¹

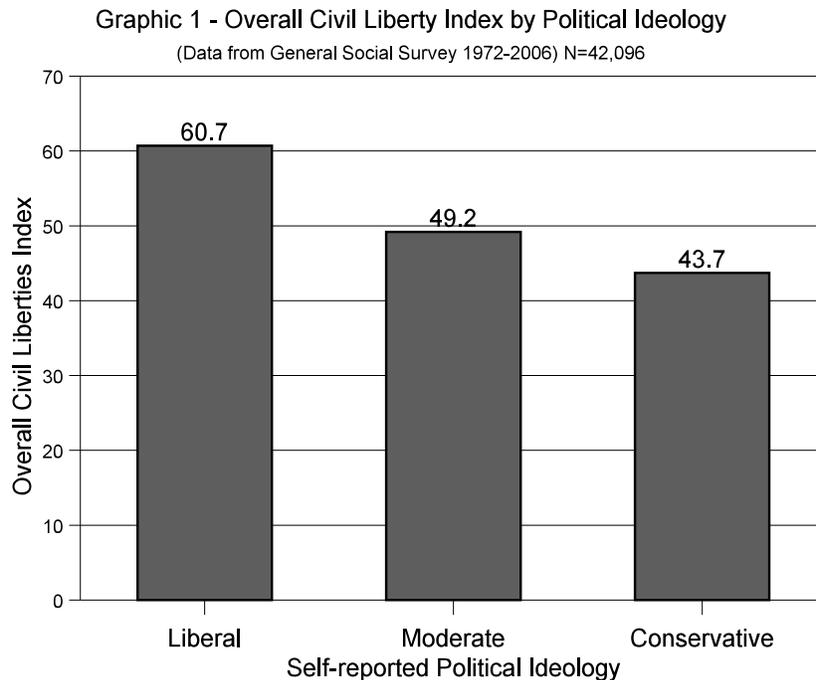
Respondents were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale whether they thought of themselves as a liberal or conservative. Twelve percent identified themselves as “extremely liberal” or “liberal.” Fifteen percent identified themselves as “extremely conservative” or “conservative.” The remaining 56 percent — who identified themselves as “moderate” or “slightly liberal” or “slightly conservative” — were classified as moderates.²

Results

The overall results, obtained by summing percentages across all 40 questions used through the years, showed that 61 percent of the

¹The data are available from <http://www3.norc.org/GSS+Website>. Surveys with fewer than 500 respondents were excluded.

²Combining other categories to classify respondents did not change the overall results.



respondents offered responses that favored civil liberties, versus only 44 percent for conservatives and 49 percent for moderates (see Graphic 1).

The biggest difference between liberals and conservatives emerged on a question that asked respondents how they felt about people protesting government. Fifty-eight percent of liberals said they had favorable or extremely favorable opinions toward protestors, versus 36 percent for conservatives and 46 percent for moderates (see Graphic 2).

Liberals also were more likely than conservatives to tolerate (a) nonmainstream teachers, such as socialists (60% v. 36%); (b) nonmainstream materials, such as anti-religious publications (75% v. 58%); (c) mass media who publish sensitive government data (44% v. 28%); and (d) nonmainstream speakers, such as homosexuals and communists (75% v. 61%). Liberals also were more intolerant of government surveillance or control of citizens and criminals, albeit the difference was slight (53% v. 46%).

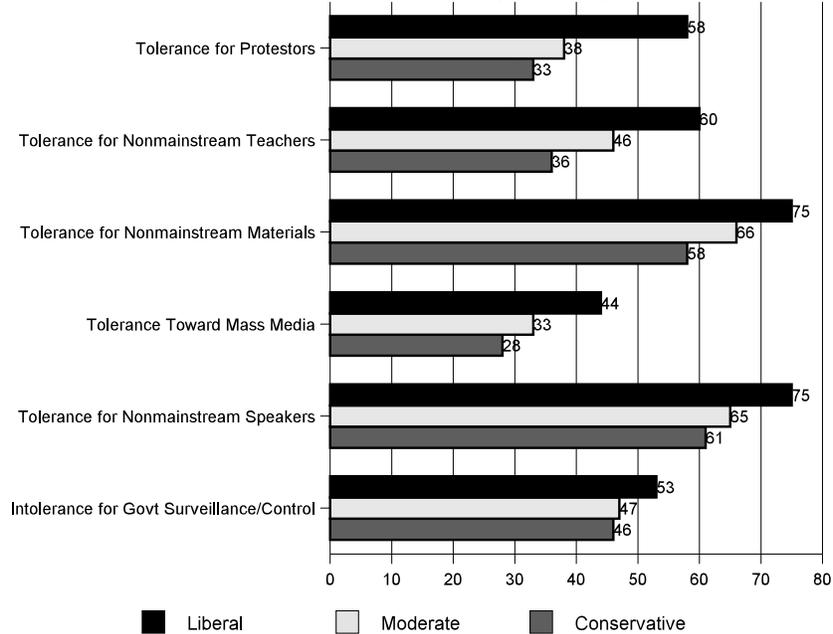
See Graphic 3 for results on each of the 40 individual measures.

The Paradox of Gun Control

The only index in which conservatives appeared to score higher in

Graphic 2 - Individual Civil Liberty Indices by Political Ideology

(Data from General Social Survey 1972-2006)



terms of civil liberties involved questions about gun control (see Graphic 4). But Demers said this may be misleading, as fewer restrictions on owning and buying guns may actually mean less, not more, support for civil liberties.

“Support for the Second Amendment and for fewer controls on gun ownership traditionally has been interpreted as a civil liberty,” Demers said. “But gun rights measures correlate negatively with other measures of civil liberties, meaning that people who support gun control also are more likely to support civil liberties.

“This paradox might explained by the fact that liberals perceive guns as having an adverse impact on personal freedom and liberties, because guns can kill, instantly eliminating a person’s freedom.³ Conservatives, on the other hand, are opposed to controls over gun ownership not because they value freedom or civil liberties, per se, but because they place a higher value on social order, personal security and self-defense. To them, owning a gun protects them from being the

³Civil liberties scholars refer to this a “negative liberty,” or freedom from control. The freedom to own a gun is a “positive liberty.”

Graphic 3 - Support for Civil Liberties by Political Ideology

CIVIL LIBERTIES QUESTIONS General Social Survey Cumulative File 1972-2006 (N=42,096)	Liberal % (n) 11.6 (5,943)	Moderate % (n) 56.3 (28,705)	Conservative % (n) 14.6 (7,448)
Tolerance for Nonmainstream Speakers (Avg)	74.5%	65.2%	60.5%
-Would allow racist to speak	69.3 (3,727)	61.4 (17,507)	59.5 (4,596)
-Would allow homosexual to speak	83.1 (3,940)	77.1 (18,334)	67.0 (4,733)
-Would allow Communist to speak	74.0 (3,943)	64.3 (18,428)	56.6 (4,772)
-Would allow anti-religionist to speak	78.2 (3,979)	71.7 (18,653)	65.6 (4,831)
-Would allow militarist to speak	69.6 (3,743)	61.7 (17,518)	55.5 (4,593)
-Would allow speech offensive to ethnic groups	72.5 (90)	59.9 (487)	63.4 (138)
-Would not ban opinion harmful to other groups	70.3 (101)	54.9 (459)	55.3 (114)
-Would allow racists to hold public meetings	70.0 (223)	59.3 (1,170)	55.9 (322)
-Would allow revolutionary public meetings	72.8 (596)	61.8 (2,918)	58.6 (826)
-Would allow socialist to speak	85.5 (221)	79.5 (963)	67.9 (187)
Intolerance for Government Surveillance/Control	53.1%	47.0%	46.2%
-Disapprove of (government) wiretapping	84.8 (2,181)	79.3 (10,992)	71.6 (2,578)
-Police should not tap phone of suspect	80.3 (71)	78.0 (428)	76.3 (114)
-Police should not open mail of suspect	94.3 (70)	89.6 (424)	93.0 (115)
-Police should not detain a suspect	67.1 (70)	66.1 (419)	63.5 (115)
-Police should not tail a suspect	27.1 (70)	16.4 (440)	15.4 (117)
-Govt should not maintain secrecy/military opertns	14.1 (383)	8.2 (1,738)	7.5 (495)
-Govt should not maintain secrecy/domest. terrorism	16.4 (384)	13.2 (1,723)	13.4 (491)
-Govt should not maintain secrecy/intell. budget	50.9 (381)	40.1 (1,703)	40.2 (482)
-Very concerned about privacy	59.8 (224)	47.7 (1,183)	48.3 (296)
-Very concerned about computer threat to privacy	36.5 (430)	31.0 (2,143)	33.0 (613)
Tolerance for Nonmainstream Teachers	59.8%	46.0%	36.4%
-Communist teacher should not be fired	65.8 (3,826)	53.6 (17,791)	44.6 (4,634)
-Would allow anti-religionist to teach	66.3 (3,913)	52.0 (18,144)	43.7 (4,722)
-Would allow homosexual to teach	78.9 (3,931)	68.2 (18,167)	54.9 (4,697)
-Would allow militarist to teach	57.3 (3,683)	45.6 (17,173)	38.9 (4,517)
-Would allow racists to teach 15-year-olds	37.0 (70)	22.6 (424)	13.5 (111)
-Would allow revolutionaries to teach children	38.1 (63)	19.6 (393)	13.9 (108)
-Would allow socialist to teach	75.5 (220)	60.2 (938)	45.1 (184)
Tolerance for Nonmainstream Materials	75.1%	66.4%	57.8%
-Should allow art to mock or demean religion	70.2 (218)	54.4 (879)	48.4 (252)
-Anti-religious material should not be banned	72.6 (157)	68.3 (791)	57.5 (193)
-Would not remove communist's book in library	73.7 (3,904)	65.7 (18,281)	56.5 (4,700)
-Would not remove anti-religious book in library	76.8 (3,946)	68.6 (18,366)	59.1 (4,743)
-Would not remove homosexual book in library	75.4 (3,933)	67.3 (18,322)	56.1 (4,725)
-Would not remove militarist's book in library	70.8 (3,715)	64.6 (17,354)	56.4 (4,549)
-Would allow racists to publish books	73.1 (223)	62.5 (1,151)	58.7 (317)
-Would allow revolutionaries to publish books	81.0 (589)	71.8 (2,895)	68.9 (817)
-Would not remove socialist's book in library	82.6 (219)	74.7 (944)	59.4 (187)
Tolerance for Protestors			
-Favorable toward people who protest govt.	57.5 (146)	38.1 (712)	33.0 (191)
Tolerance toward the mass media			
-Press should be completely free	44.4% 26.2 (191)	32.5% 20.0 (848)	28.1% 23.4 (261)
-Would allow media to publish defense plans	30.5 (59)	16.8 (394)	6.7 (105)
-Would allow media to publish economic plans	76.6 (64)	60.7 (397)	54.2 (107)

NOTE: Sample sizes vary from question to question because not all questions were included in every poll.

Graphic 4 - Support for Gun Control by Political Ideology

CIVIL LIBERTIES QUESTIONS General Social Survey Cumulative File 1972-2006 (N=42,096)	Liberal % (n) 11.6 (5,943)	Moderate % (n) 56.3 (28,705)	Conservative % (n) 14.6 (7,448)
Support for Gun Control (Avg)	75.8%	66.4%	55.9%
-Should be more restrictions on handguns	86.7 (165)	72.5 (845)	54.2 (271)
-Favor gun permits	82.1 (4,181)	78.2 (19,500)	69.6 (4961)
-Penalty for illegal gun sale should be tougher than drug	66.0 (191)	54.6 (832)	49.8 (277)
-Background checks should be required for private gun sale	72.3 (191)	63.2 (836)	52.7 (277)
-Should gun control law be stricter after 911	83.2 (184)	84.5 (782)	74.4 (258)
-More restrictions on handguns will decrease crime	64.4 (163)	45.3 (835)	34.4 (270)

NOTE: Sample sizes vary from question to question because not all questions were included in every poll.

victim of a crime.”

Demers said the public policy question then revolves around the extent to which one freedom imposes upon the other. “Does the liberty of owning a gun for self-protection or other reasons outweigh the freedom not to be a victim of gunfire?”⁴

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⁴This same logic has been used by the courts and government to restrict ownership of other weapons, such as hand grenades, missiles and atomic bombs.