

Religious Freedom in America:

American Attitudes and Support for
Protecting Religious Freedom

Matthew Streit
Vice President, Strategic Communications
The Heritage Foundation
August 2015

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Methodology.....	2
Part I: General Landscape	
Awareness and Influence.....	3
Deeper Engagement.....	5
Part II: Potential for Action	
Perception of a Threat.....	7
Support for Action.....	8
Part III: Building Support for Protecting Religious Freedom	
The Power of Scenarios.....	10
Messages that Work.....	13
Conclusion and Implications.....	15

Religious Freedom in America: American Attitudes and Support for Protecting Religious Freedom

Matthew Streit

Executive Summary

With the recent landmark Supreme Court decision imposing a redefinition of marriage on all 50 states, immediate attention is now turning to protecting the freedom of individuals and groups who believe marriage is the union of a man and a woman to continue to live their lives, work and run their businesses, or serve their communities based on their beliefs without fear of discrimination, punishment, fines, or penalties from government.

The majority of registered voters (53%) say religious freedom is influential in their political participation. Conversely, only two out of five Americans (39%) say the same of same-sex marriage. While religious freedom falls below issues such as health care and jobs, it is well ahead of same-sex marriage in motivating political participation (+14 points).

Religious freedom has a reasonable degree of top-of-mind awareness, 47% report having heard, read or seen something recently about it, but overall, few voters consider themselves both active followers and informed, leaving the large majority open to information and messages.

Nine out of 10 Americans see challenges to religious freedom in America, and because of that, over half say there is cause for concern. When given examples of how religious freedom might come into conflict with the government's redefinition, almost seven out of 10 Americans support a religious institution's right to act according to their beliefs or an ordained minister declining to marry same-sex couples because it violates his or her beliefs (66%). It is also clear a majority of voters are opposed to the federal government taking actions that would restrict religious freedom for schools, churches, and even faith-based charities.

These concerns translate into a desire for action. A majority of Americans (56%) support religious

freedom legislation (similar to the proposed Freedom Against Discrimination Act—FADA) that would protect individuals and groups from punitive action by the federal government for believing marriage is the union of one man and one woman. A majority of Americans also say they would take other actions to defend religious freedom such as speaking out on social media, making donations to organizations fighting to protect religious freedom, and even calling their elected representative or voting against a candidate for not protecting religious freedom.

It is clear though that **bringing attention to the threats on religious freedom and individual liberty is essential to building additional support for protecting religious freedom.** Conservative messaging proved to be impactful and garnered broad agreement. In addition, **sharing real-world stories illustrating how religious freedom is threatened is the best way to inform voters about the real threats facing ordinary Americans.**

In particular, **messages which emphasize the need to treat everyone with respect and dignity, recognize the concerns on both sides, highlight the inappropriate role the government is playing enforcing one set of beliefs over another, and point out the coercion people of faith sometimes face are among the most effective.**

This paper highlights key findings from a national study about voter attitudes toward religious freedom. Fielded in early June 2015 and designed with a possible decision in favor of same-sex marriage in mind, this study begins by gauging basic voter attitudes and awareness about religious freedom. It measures support and opposition to key policy approaches and the strength of different language and messaging.

Methodology

The American Perceptions Initiative, a project of The Heritage Foundation, conducted a market research study of voters' familiarity, attitudes, and perspectives on religious freedom in America. The market research also gauged their level of support for various policy approaches and their level of support and agreement with different scenarios and messages.

The American Perceptions Initiative's research is conducted in partnership with Vision Critical and Heart+Mind Strategies, and is fielded online with the Springboard America platform. Vision Critical is a well-respected research firm based in North America, with research specialists that cover subjects including public opinion, health, technology, consumer goods, media, and travel. They work with household brands, government bodies, not-for-profit

organizations, and the media to help them better understand their customers and stakeholders. Heart+Mind Strategies is an experienced and award-winning consulting firm specializing in winning the hearts and minds of the people that matter most to their clients' success.

The American Perceptions Initiative's study on religious freedom was conducted online from June 2–8, 2015 among over 1,000 registered voters. In addition, personal interviews with small groups of voters (triads) conducted July 21, 2015 and July 23, 2015 in Cincinnati and Denver provide additional insights.

Note: Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Part I: General Landscape

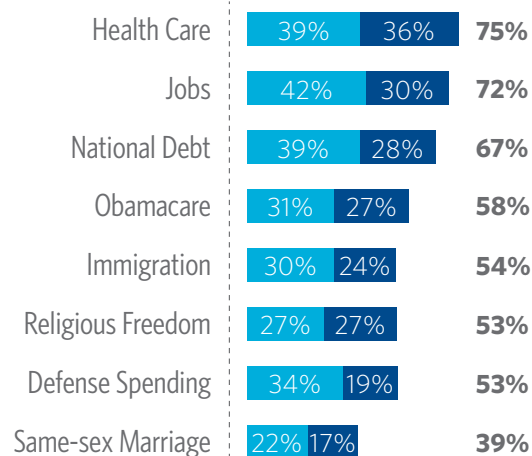
Awareness and Influence

While religious freedom falls below issues such as health care (75%) and jobs (72%) in motivating political participation, it is well ahead of same-sex marriage (39%). Over half (53%) of respondents find it to be ‘very’ or ‘one of the most’ influential issues in motivating their political participation. In fact, it provides more intense motivation to voters than

comparable issues like immigration or defense spending, with a larger proportion saying it is ‘one of the most influential’ issues (27%).

Religious freedom has a reasonable degree of top of mind awareness, as almost half (47%) of voters report having heard, read, or seen something recently about it. Over half (56%) of those who have

Religious Freedom Moderately Motivating of Political Participation, and Higher than Same-Sex Marriage



■ Very influential ■ One of the most influential

Thinking about the following issues, how influential is each issue to you personally in motivating you and your political participation...



Have you heard, read, or seen anything recently having to do with religious freedom, the ability of people or groups to live according to their beliefs, or actions being taken to limit religious practices and observances?

recently seen, read, or heard something about religious freedom believe that what they heard is hurtful to the cause of religious freedom, 27% feel it is neutral, and 17% think it helps religious freedom.

Voters recall a variety of news stories that highlight some of the current threats facing religious freedom. Recent examples of what voters see hurting religious freedom include:

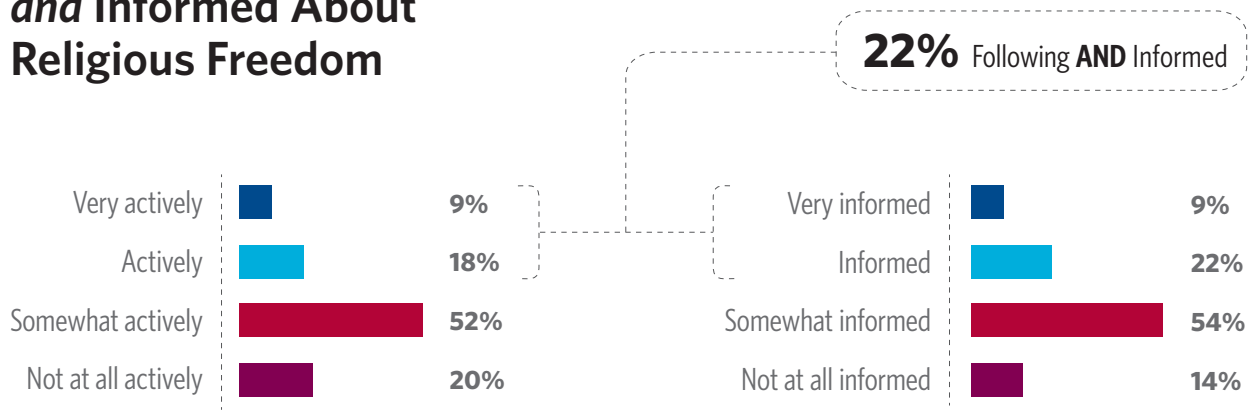
- businesses being punished when owners exercise their religious beliefs in the business,
- government persecution of Christians, and
- cases where religion is being forced out of public schools and society.

Deeper Engagement

While almost half of registered voters are aware of issues related to religious freedom and are somewhat following and informed about them, fewer are actively following it and informed themselves. 28% of voters actively follow issues related to religious

freedom, while 31% consider themselves to be informed on the subject. However, in-depth qualitative research suggests the depth and scope of their knowledge may be less extensive.

One In Five Are Following and Informed About Religious Freedom



Follow Issues related to Religious Freedom

There are a lot of issues in the news, and it can be hard to keep track of all of them. How actively do you follow issues related to religious freedom?

Informed Issues related to Religious Freedom

How informed do you consider yourself to be regarding the issues related to religious freedom?

During personal conversations in triad focus groups, voters identified nationally-covered stories about business owners expressing their religious beliefs, but had difficulty thinking of other cases or situations where they have heard, read, or seen people of faith facing discrimination. They perceive that discrimination against gays and lesbians is widespread, but when pressed to specify the nature of the discrimination they pointed to bullying, gossip, and social exclusion.

Interestingly, when pressed to identify LGBT discrimination that demands government intervention,

people bring up denial of visitation rights in hospitals or inheritance rights—issues which have long been legally resolved. For example, the Affordable Care Act made it clear that anyone can be next of kin and have power of attorney for hospital visitation and decision making.

Only one in five (22%) both closely follow and are informed on religious freedom issues. While few voters consider themselves both active followers and informed, it is clear there is a large majority open to information and messages.

Part II: Potential for Action

Perception of a Threat

87% of Americans see challenges to religious freedom. While the data is mixed on whether voters are eager for action to protect religious freedom, there is some sense of it being imperative to protect this right.



A plurality of voters (46%) believe religious freedom is protected enough, while more than a third (37%) believe it needs more protection and only 16% feel it is protected too much. Evangelicals (69%), Conservatives (57%), and weekly churchgoers (56%) are among those more likely to feel religious freedom is not protected enough.

The widespread belief that there are challenges facing religious freedom in America leaves voters mixed on how to respond. 33% believe these challenges will work out okay, but a majority of voters (53%) see these challenges as a cause for concern.

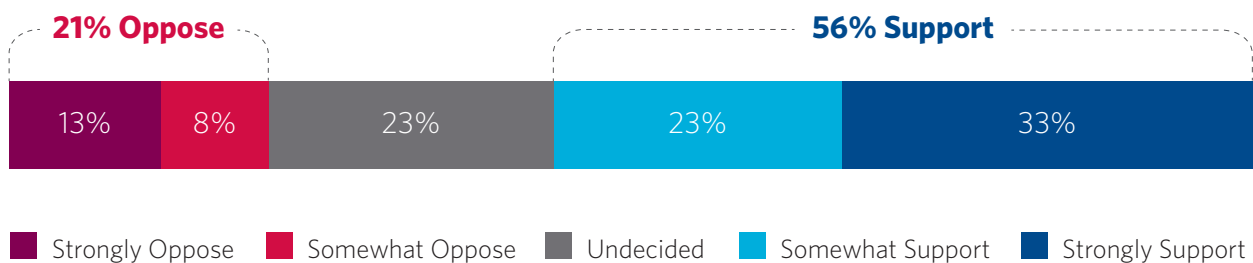
Support for Action

When asked about potential actions to take in the wake of a Supreme Court ruling recognizing same-sex marriage throughout the country, two-thirds of American voters (65%) agree that “we should pass new legislation preventing the Federal Government from discriminating against people that support traditional marriage.”

When presented with more details of possible legislation, over half (56%) of all American voters would support legislation prohibiting the U.S. government from discriminating against any individual or group based on their belief that marriage is the union of a man and woman or that sexual relations are reserved for marriage.

Majority Support Legislation Prohibiting Government Discrimination for Views on Marriage

The U.S. Congress is considering legislation that will prohibit the government from discriminating against any individual or group based on their beliefs that marriage is the union of a man and woman or that sexual relations are reserved for marriage. The legislation would specifically prohibit the government from discriminating against such groups and individuals in tax policy, employment, licensing, accreditation, or contracting



Based on what you have heard, read, or seen, would you support or oppose this legislation being passed?

Additionally, a majority of voters support the following:

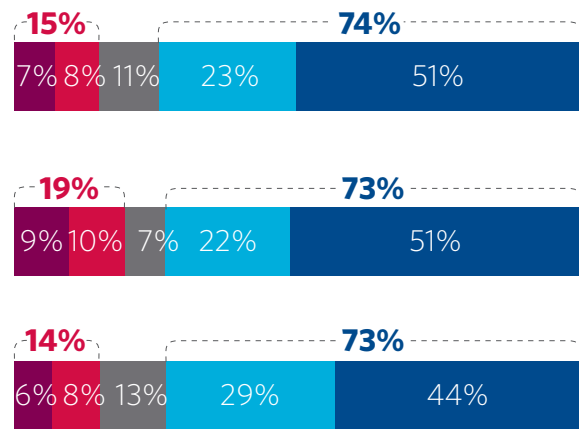
- Churches and religious charities should not lose any religious freedom—74% support
- Churches and religious charities should not lose their tax exemption—73%
- We should all have as much religious freedom as before the ruling—73%

Most Support Upholding Religious Freedom After the Supreme Court Ruling

Churches and religious charities should not lose any religious freedom for believing that marriage is the union of one man and one woman or performing only marriages between a man and a woman.

Churches and religious charities should not lose their tax exemption for continuing to believe marriage is the union of one man and one woman or performing only marriages between a man and a woman.

Religious freedom for all is the law in every state. If same-sex marriage is recognized, we should make sure we all end up with just as much religious freedom as we had before.



■ Strongly Oppose
 ■ Somewhat Oppose
 ■ Undecided
 ■ Somewhat Support
 ■ Strongly Support

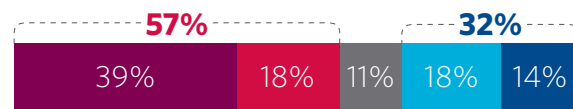
Consider each of the following and indicate whether you support or oppose what the statement proposes in the wake of a Supreme Court ruling that legalizes same-sex marriage for the entire country.

Other forms of government action aimed at responding to the decision rather than protecting religious freedom received lower support. A slight plurality, for example, support amending the Constitution to define marriage as the union between one man and one woman (47% support versus 44% oppose).

Americans are split on these issues, but galvanized in opposition to government action that would

penalize those with a traditional view of marriage. The majority of voters would oppose President Obama signing an executive order that would require all government agencies, departments, and employers to cut ties with citizens, companies, institutions, or groups that do not accept same-sex marriage (57% oppose, 32% support).

President Obama should sign an executive order requiring all government agencies, departments and employers to terminate any contracts, employment, accreditations, or regulatory approvals with citizens, companies, institutions, or groups that do not accept same-sex marriage.



■ Strongly Oppose
 ■ Somewhat Oppose
 ■ Undecided
 ■ Somewhat Support
 ■ Strongly Support

Part III: Building Support for Protecting Religious Freedom

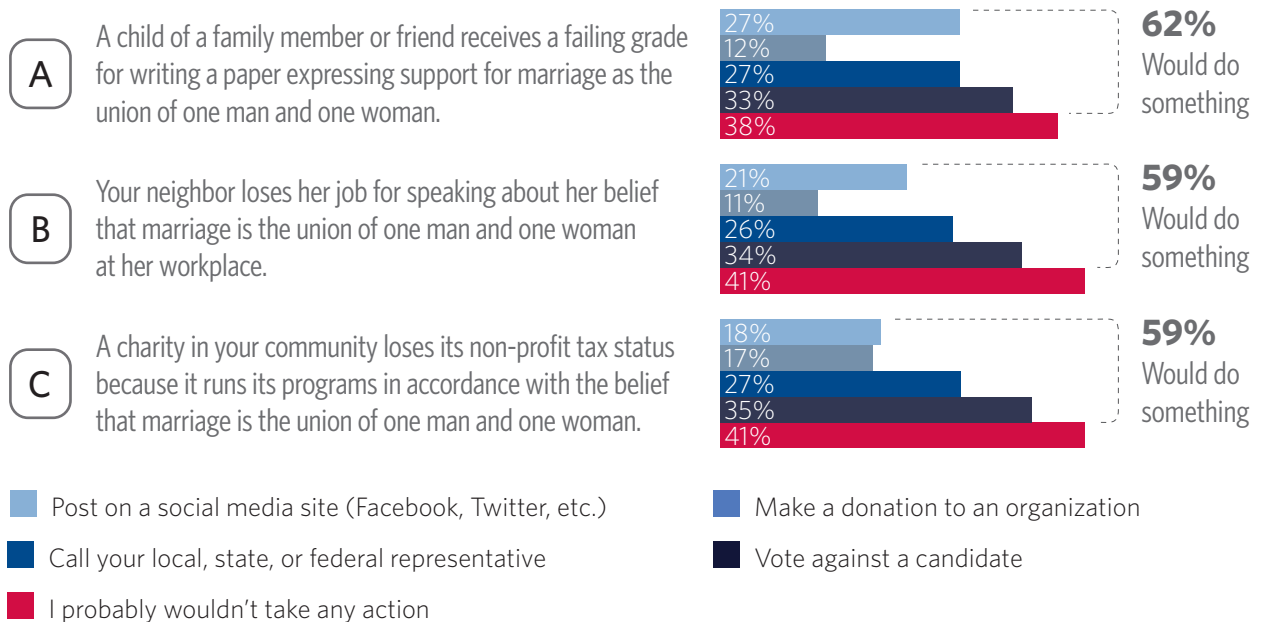
The Power of Scenarios

One way to inform voters and get them engaged with this issue is to present real life scenarios illustrating how religious liberty is being denied. Such scenarios and other related messages serve to galvanize voters to take action.

When presented with three different hypothetical scenarios, about 6 in ten voters indicate that they

would take some form of action. Importantly, voters tend to favor taking a more anonymous form of action, voting against a candidate with an objectionable position, followed by more public actions such as calling a local, state, or federal representative, or posting about it on social media, with making a donation to an organization the least likely action.

Voting Against a Candidate Is the Most Likely Action When Encountering Discrimination



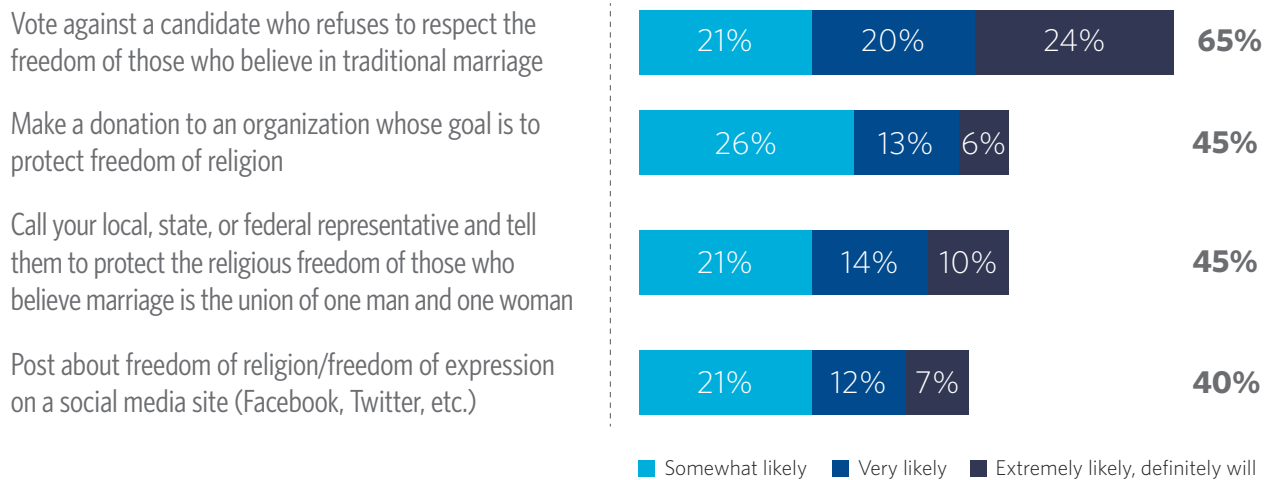
Below are three situations. For each situation, please indicate whether you would take a specific action in response.

More importantly, after exposure to messaging there is even greater propensity for action. Two-thirds (65%) of voters would vote against a candidate who refuses to respect the freedom of those who believe in traditional marriage, 45% would donate to an organization or call their local, state, or federal representative, and 40% would make a post to social media about the issue.

The reticence to publicly comment is not necessarily indicative of voter apathy toward protecting religious liberty. Fear of consequences, such as harassment or being called a bigot, was the most commonly mentioned barrier to defending the right to religious freedom.

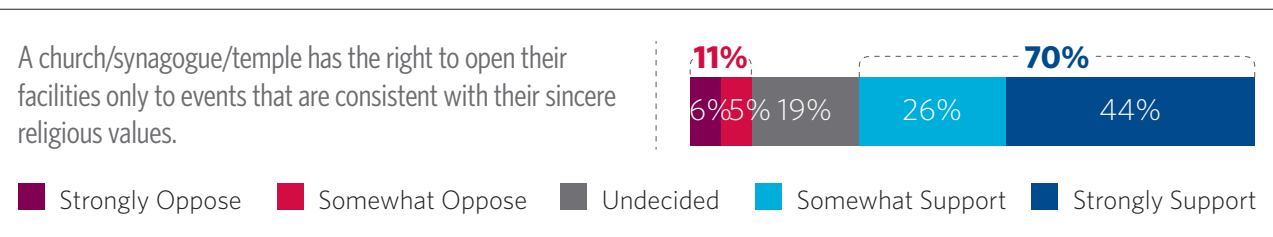
Exposure to Messaging Increases Likelihood to Take Action

Based on what you have learned about religious freedom, how likely are you to do any of the following activities?



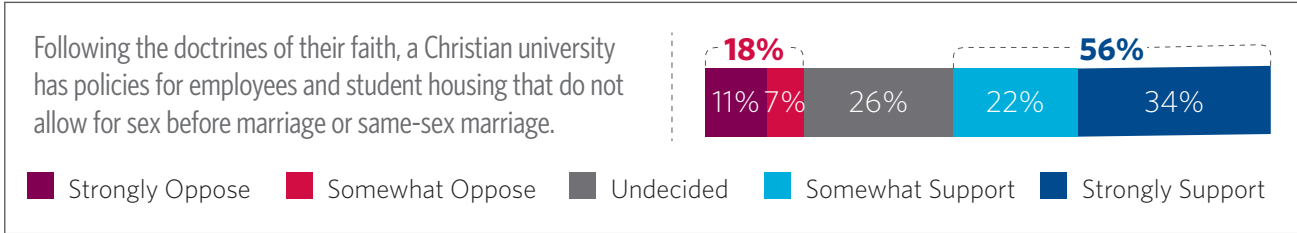
Not all scenarios are created equal, and there are elements in play that impact the degree of support or opposition to the events described in a particular story. When presented with a series of situations concerning religious freedom and asked whether they support or oppose each, several themes emerge in voters' responses:

1. Scenarios involving houses of worship or members of the clergy asserting their right to religious freedom win the most support from voters.



2. There is also majority support and low opposition for groups not directly tied to a church. Over or about half of voters support the rights of a Christian university (56%), a florist (53%), or

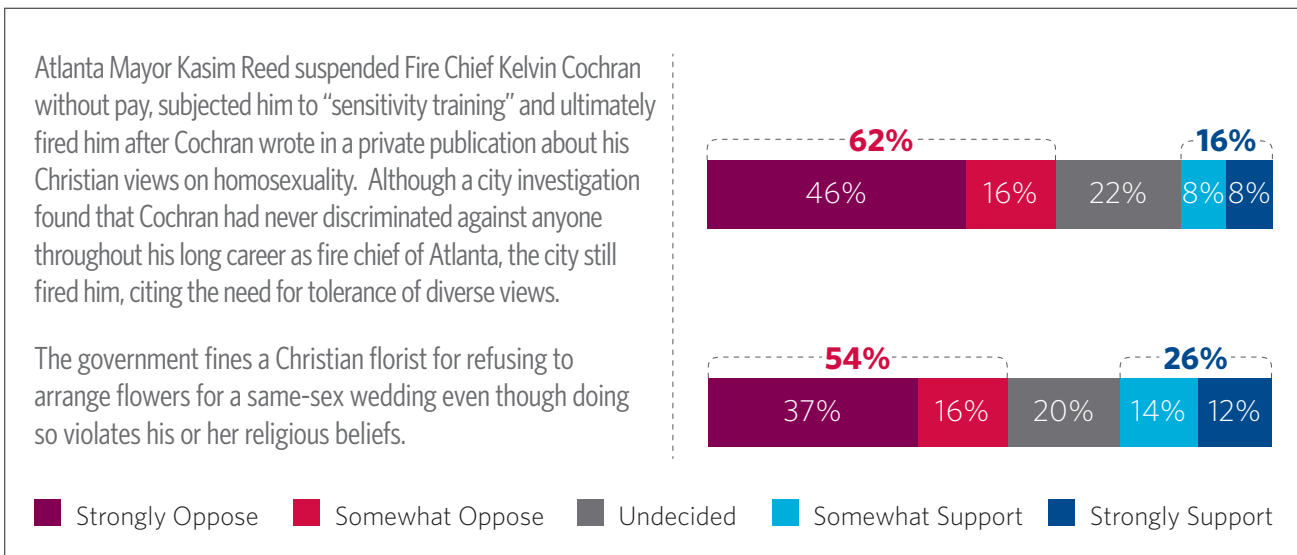
owners of a commercial wedding chapel/reception center (49%) whose sincere religious beliefs prevent them from hosting same-sex marriage events.



3. There is strong opposition to scenarios which show religious freedom being quashed either by the Federal Government, a private company such as GoFundMe, or a city government such as Atlanta.

private publication was discussed more extensively in small group research, most people were upset that Mr. Cochran lost his livelihood for something unrelated to his work, particularly when there was not evidence of discrimination in his long career.

When a scenario involving the dismissal of an Atlanta fire chief for sharing his views in a



It is important to recognize that while some people do not support business owners like the florist’s decision to refuse to provide services, they

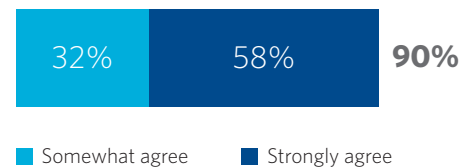
would defend his or her right to do so and oppose any government action enforcing its view of what is right or wrong.

Messages that Work

This study tested a battery of messages by asking voters to read each one and indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree. All of the messages tested received agreement from the majority of voters surveyed. The following types of messages received the highest support:

1. Religious freedom is a complex issue, with valid points and concerns being made on both sides, and many Americans are undecided on the issue. Messages that begin with a short statement of understanding for the opposition's side before expressing an opinion supporting religious freedom received high support.

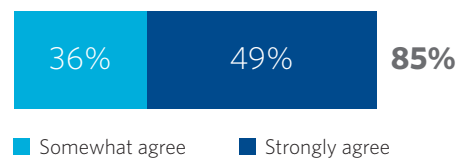
LGBT members of the community have the right to be able to express their views and convictions about sexuality and deserve to be respected for their position without hate or discrimination, but Christians also have a right to express their belief regarding their faith and beliefs about marriage without hate or discrimination.



2. Americans have a highly negative view of bullying (79% strongly/somewhat negative) and government coercion (65%). Messages that focus on the government forcing Americans to

do something against their beliefs strongly stir opposition to the government action and support for religious freedom.

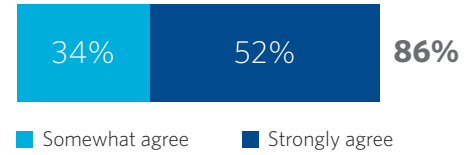
While Americans are free to live as they choose, no one should demand that government coerce others into celebrating their relationship. All Americans should remain free to believe and act in the public square based on their beliefs about marriage without fear of government penalty.



3. Messages that highlight reverse discrimination, threats, and intimidation taking place are also highly effective—clearly painting the picture of the costs of backlash against those

seeking to exercise their right to religious freedom such as death threats or threats against a person's business.

When you start getting threats on your life or threats to destroy your business, because you have a religious conviction about marriage, then something is terribly wrong with our perspective on individual freedom.



Conclusion and Implications

Religious freedom is influential as an issue motivating political participation, ranking higher than same-sex marriage, though lower than issues with widespread impact like jobs or healthcare. While many American voters believe religious freedom is “protected enough” in America, they do see growing challenges to this right and are in support of adding safeguards to protect against them.

While about half of all American voters have heard, read, or seen something recently on this

subject, fewer than one in four consider themselves informed, active followers of issues related to religious freedom. Research demonstrates that in order to galvanize support for protecting this right, it is necessary to educate voters using descriptive scenarios and persuasive messages that highlight the threats and consequences of government excess enforcing its same-sex marriage point of view on religious organizations and people of faith.