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# Americans Favor Protecting Information Freedoms Over Government Steps to Restrict False News Online

*But 56% support steps from technology companies, even if it means some limits on publishing and accessing information*

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## Americans Favor Protecting Information Freedoms Over Government Steps to Restrict False News Online

*But 56% support steps by technology companies, even if it means some limits on publishing and accessing information*

The widespread [concerns over misinformation](#) online have created a tension in the United States between taking steps to restrict that information – including [possible government regulation](#) – and protecting the long-held belief in the freedom to access and publish information. A new Pew Research Center survey finds that the majority of Americans are resistant to action by the U.S. government that might also limit those freedoms but are more open to action from technology companies.

When asked to choose between the U.S. government taking action to restrict false news online in ways that could also limit Americans' information freedoms, or protecting those freedoms even if it means false information might be published, Americans fall firmly on the side of protecting freedom. Nearly six-in-ten Americans (58%) say they prefer to protect the public's freedom to access and publish information online, including on social media, even if it means false information can also be published. Roughly four-in-ten (39%) fall the other way, preferring that the U.S. government take steps to restrict false information even if it limits those freedoms, according to a survey conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018, among 4,734 U.S. adults who are members of Pew Research Center's nationally representative [American Trends Panel](#).

When the same question is posed about technology companies taking those steps, however, the balance changes. More U.S. adults (56%) favor technology companies taking steps to restrict false information, even if it limits the public's freedom to access and publish information. By

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### Most Americans resist U.S. government taking steps against misinformation online that could limit freedoms

*% of U.S. adults who say ...*

**U.S. govt. should take steps to restrict false info online, even if it limits freedom of info**

**Freedom of info should be protected, even if it means false info can be published**

39%

58%

### But more are open to tech companies taking action than the government

*% of U.S. adults who say ...*

**Tech companies should take steps to restrict false info online, even if it limits freedom of info**

**Freedom of info should be protected, even if it means false info can be published**

56%

42%

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.

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comparison, 42% prefer to protect those freedoms rather than have tech companies take action, even if it means the presence of some misinformation online.

The resistance to U.S. government action cuts across nearly all demographic groups studied, with strong sentiments among young Americans, the college educated and men, as well as both Democrats and Republicans. The exceptions are those with a high school degree or less and those ages 50 and older, who are about evenly divided between the government taking steps and ensuring the protection of information freedoms.

Additionally, most demographic groups express more support for action by tech companies than by the U.S. government. Yet the degree of support for such companies taking steps varies across groups. Specifically, Democrats express more support for technology companies acting than do Republicans, even if it brings some broader limits on freedom to publish. Older Americans (ages 50 and older) are also more supportive of tech companies taking action than are younger adults.

## Republicans and Democrats equally oppose U.S. government involvement in restricting false information online but are divided when it comes to tech companies

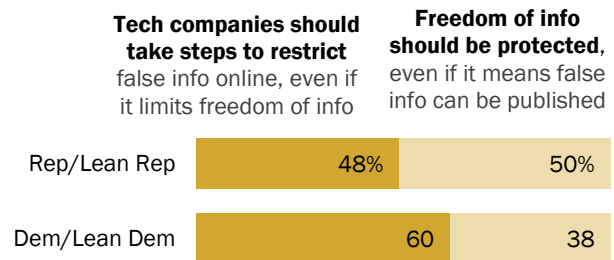
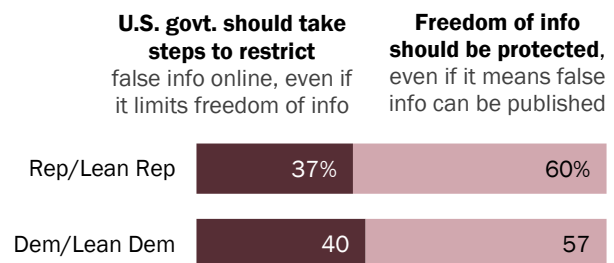
Republicans and Democrats are about equally resistant to steps by the U.S. government to restrict false news and information online, even if it means possibly limiting people's freedom to access and publish information. But a majority of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents favor steps by technology companies, while Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are about equally split on that proposal.

Majorities of both parties agree that people's freedom to access and publish information online is a priority over having the government take action to curtail false information in a way that could limit those freedoms (60% of Republicans and Republican leaners say this, as do 57% of Democrats and Democratic leaners).

There are larger partisan differences when it comes to steps from technology companies. A majority of Democrats (60%) favor action by technology companies to restrict misinformation, even if it includes broader information limits online. Republicans, on the other hand, are about equally divided between the two options: 48% favor technology companies taking steps to control misinformation, and 50% favor protecting freedoms online.

### Democrats and Republicans equally resistant to government action against false news that could limit freedoms

*% of U.S. adults who say ...*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.

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## Younger Americans show greater resistance to action by both the government and tech companies to limit misinformation online

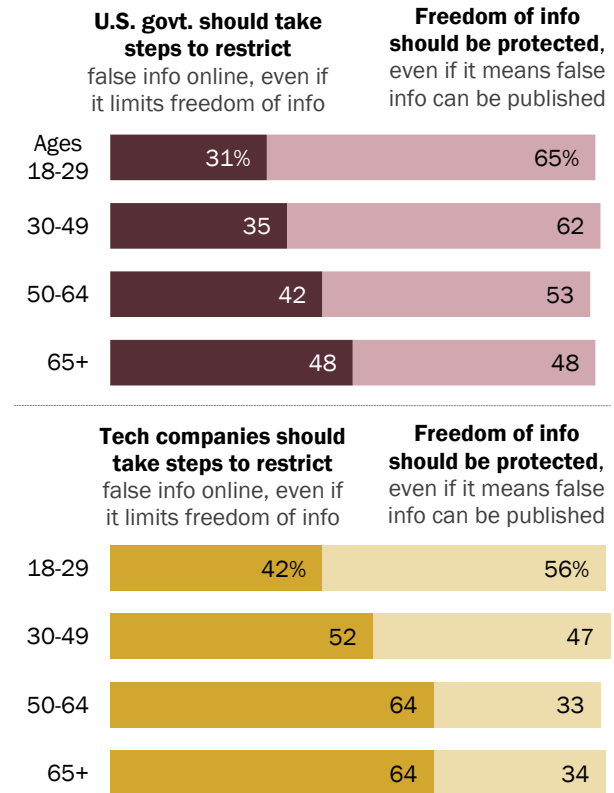
About half or more of adults in each age group studied prefer the freedom to publish and access information online over U.S. government intervention that might restrict such freedoms.

This position is strongest among younger Americans. At least six-in-ten adults ages 18 to 29 (65%) and 30 to 49 (62%) prefer no government restrictions on information flow compared with 53% of those 50 to 64 and 48% of those 65 and older.

The younger age groups are also less willing to support steps from technology companies than adults 50 and older. Among those 50 and older, 64% support having technology companies take steps to restrict false information online. Those in younger age groups, on the other hand, are about evenly split between the two positions.

### Older Americans are more likely than younger to favor restricting false information online

*% of U.S. adults who say ...*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.

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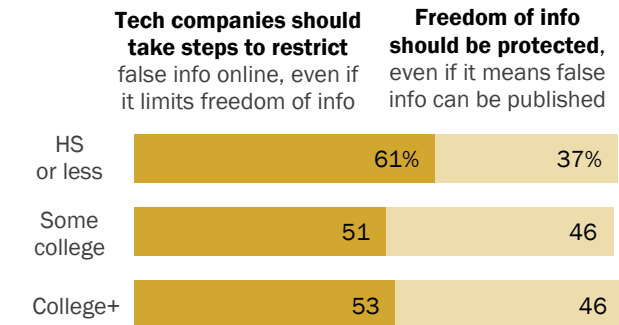
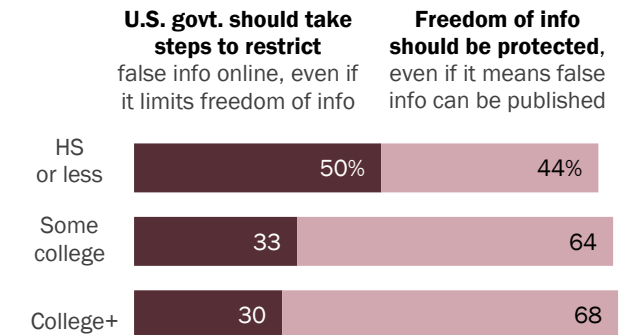
## The less educated are more supportive of action by the U.S. government to restrict false news

Adults with at least some college education are more likely than those with less education to oppose efforts by the U.S. government to curb false information online, even if they impact broader public information freedoms. At least six-in-ten adults with some college education (64%) and a bachelor's degree or more (68%) prefer to accept the presence of false information online as long as the public's freedom to access and publish information remains intact. Adults with no college education, however, are about equally divided between those who support government restrictions (50%) and those who support free access (44%).

At 61%, those with high school education or less are also more likely to support actions by technology companies than those with at least some college education, who are, again, largely divided between the two options.

### Those with more education less likely to support actions to restrict false news

*% of U.S. adults who say ...*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.

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## Both men and women favor protecting freedom of information online over government intervention, but men do so at higher rates

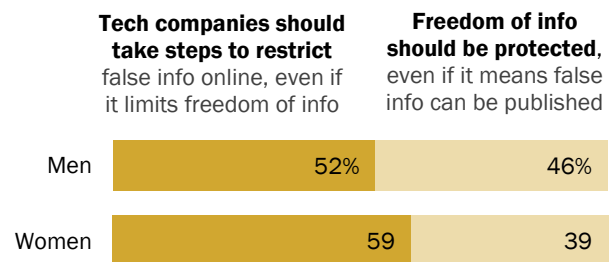
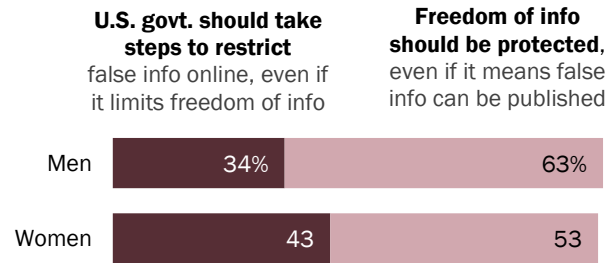
About half or more of men and women support unrestricted access to information online over government intervention. Roughly six-in-ten men (63%) and about half (53%) of women believe people's freedom to publish and access information should be protected rather than having the U.S. government take steps to restrict false information.

When the question is asked about technology companies, however, women prefer that steps be taken while men are divided between the two positions. Nearly six-in-ten women (59%) supported this stance, compared with 39% who prefer protecting the freedom to access and publish online even if it brings false news and information with it. Men, though, are about evenly split, with 52% supporting technology companies' intervention in controlling false information and 46% preferring the companies take no action in order to protect people's freedom to publish and access information.

Overall, both men and women are more likely to support the actions of technology companies than the government to restrict online publishing and information.

### Men somewhat more likely than women to favor information freedoms, even if false news can also be published

% of U.S. adults who say ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.

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## Methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys. Panelists participate via monthly self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by GfK.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018, among 4,734 respondents. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 4,734 respondents is plus or minus 2.4 percentage points.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from several large, national landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate.<sup>1</sup> The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government, conducted Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate.<sup>2</sup> The third group of panelists was recruited from a survey conducted April 25 to June 4, 2017. Of the 5,012 adults interviewed in the survey or pretest, 3,905 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 1,628 agreed to participate.<sup>3</sup>

The ATP data were weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on a number of dimensions. Gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin

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<sup>1</sup> When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they are internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but were no longer permitted to join the panel after Feb. 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

<sup>3</sup> White, non-Hispanic college graduates were subsampled at a rate of 50%.

and region parameters come from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey. The county-level population density parameter (deciles) comes from the 2010 U.S. decennial census. The telephone service benchmark comes from the July-December 2016 National Health Interview Survey and is projected to 2017. The volunteerism benchmark comes from the 2015 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. The party affiliation benchmark is the average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. The internet access benchmark comes from the 2017 ATP Panel Refresh Survey. Respondents who did not previously have internet access are treated as not having internet access for weighting purposes. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Unweighted sample size</b>	<b>Plus or minus ...</b>
Total sample	4,734	2.4 percentage points
Form 1 sample	2,370	3.4 percentage points
Form 2 sample	2,364	3.4 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The February 2018 wave had a response rate of 86% (4,734 responses among 5,497 individuals in the panel). Taking account of the combined, weighted response rate for the recruitment surveys (10.0%) and attrition from panel members who were removed at their request or for inactivity, the cumulative response rate for the wave is 2.4%.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves are removed from the panel. These cases are counted in the denominator of cumulative response rates.

## Topline questionnaire

**2018 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL  
WAVE 32 FEBRUARY  
FINAL TOPLINE  
FEBRUARY 26 – MARCH 11 2018  
TOTAL N=4,734**

**ASK IF ATP SAMPLE AND FORM 1 [N=2,370]:**

MISINFG Thinking about news and information online, including social media...

Which comes closer to your own view – even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Feb 26-  
Mar 11  
2018

39	The U.S. government should take steps to restrict false information online, even if it limits people from freely publishing or accessing information
58	People's freedom to publish and access information should be protected, even if it means false information can also be published
4	No Answer

**ASK IF ATP SAMPLE AND FORM 2 [N=2,364]:**

MISINFT Thinking about news and information online, including social media...

Which comes closer to your own view – even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Feb 26-  
Mar 11  
2018

56	Technology companies should take steps to restrict false information online, even if it limits people from freely publishing or accessing information
42	People's freedom to publish and access information should be protected, even if it means false information can also be published
2	No Answer