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First Amendment Gains Support as Post-9/11 Fears Ease

USA TODAY

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Shocked by the 9/11 attacks, many Americans worried afterward that the nation was too free to be safe from terrorists.

Those fears are easing, poll results due to be released today indicate. They show renewed support for the First Amendment of the Constitution and the protections it gives to speech, the media and religion. Support for those rights had flagged in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

"A 'reset' that we first started to see last year continues," said Gene Policinski, executive director of the First Amendment Center, the non-partisan education and information organization that sponsored the survey. Among the highlights from the national survey of 1,003 adults, conducted May 13-23:

*The percentage of people who say the First Amendment "goes too far in the rights it guarantees" has fallen dramatically. In 2002, the year after the terrorist attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people, almost 50% of those polled said the amendment goes too far. This year, just 23% felt that way.

*The number of people who say they want to know more about what the federal government is doing in the war on terrorism continues to rise, from 40% in 2002 to 52% this year. "As the war has gone on and the critics have gotten some traction with their arguments, more people are saying they want more information" and are less concerned about the need for secrecy, Policinski said.

Pollsters David Yalof and Ken Dautrich of the firm New England Survey Research Associates conducted the survey for the center. Each result in the survey has a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points, the pollsters estimate.

Other polls in recent weeks support the notion that for many Americans, the fears caused by the 9/11 attacks have faded. Last week, a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll of 1,006 adults showed just 35% thought it was likely there would be an act of terrorism in the USA within the next several weeks.

In mid-October 2001, 85% of those polled thought another attack was imminent.

A less nervous population hasn't necessarily translated into greater support for the media, however. Today's poll also showed that nearly 40% of Americans think the media have "too much freedom," down from a recent peak of 46% in 2003.

"I think people are inclined to support the idea of a free press but are also very critical of its practices," said Policinski, a former editor at USA TODAY.

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