

Is Free Speech in Danger on University Campus? Evidence from a Most Likely Case

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Abstract

While universities play a key role in questions of free speech and political viewpoint diversity, they are often associated with the opposite of a free exchange of ideas: a proliferation of restrictive campus speech codes, violent protests against controversial speakers, and even the firing of inconvenient professors. For some observers these trends on university campuses are a clear indicator of the dire future for freedom of speech. Others view these incidents as scandalized singular events and regard the campus intolerance as a mere myth. We take an empirical look at some of the claims in the debate and present original survey evidence from a most likely case: the leftist social science studentship at the University of Frankfurt. Our results show that taking offense is a common experience and that a sizable share of students is in favour of restricting free speech on campus. We also find evidence for conformity pressures on campus and that both, the desire to restrict speech and the reluctance to speak openly differ significantly across political ideology. Students on the left are less likely to tolerate controversial viewpoints and students on the right are more likely to self-censor on politically sensitive issues such as gender, immigration or sexual and ethnic minorities. The implications of our findings extend beyond the realms of academia and speak to more general problems in public discourse today.

Keywords: Free Speech, Freedom of Expression, Viewpoint Diversity, University, Higher Education, Political Ideology, Tolerance

Word Count: 9'139

Introduction

Democracy requires diversity. This not only means the acceptance of different social groups, but first and foremost the free exchange of political opinions and viewpoints (Dahl 1973, Mutz 2002, 2006, Sullivan et al. 1993, Gross and Kinder 1998). While this should be a matter of course in liberal democracies, it seems to be too easily forgotten in our polarized political times (Hetherington 2009, Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Denying political opponents their democratic legitimacy, declaring their political views out of bounds or even silencing them by narrowing the limits of acceptable public discourse are clear signs of such oblivion. Thus, current debates over ‘hate speech’ on the one hand and ‘political correctness’ on the other point to a deeper question of democratic significance: Is there an increasing ideological pressure to conform and does it threaten unfettered political debate?

Universities play a key role in the question of free speech and political viewpoint diversity (Chong 2006, Lea 2009, Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). Not only are universities central places for the intellectual exchange of ideas and the debate of issues of societal relevance, they are also laboratories for new standards and norms of speech that eventually diffuse into the wider public. In addition to research and teaching, universities are also responsible for the civic education of students. Students must learn to form well-founded opinions and to defend them with factual arguments in open debates. A requirement of this is that they are exposed to a variety of opposing views and compelled to wrestle with a range of counter-arguments.

For these reasons, it is all the more puzzling and alarming that universities have recently received public attention for the exact opposite of a free exchange of ideas. Issues which caught the attention of news media range from a proliferation of increasingly intricate campus speech codes to fight discrimination, disinvitations and protests against controversial speakers, and even the resignation, demotion and firing of professors for perceived speech norm

transgressions. And, as we will show further below, these developments are by no means restricted to the English-speaking world.

For some observers these trends on university campuses are a clear indicator of the dire future for freedom of speech. Others view these incidents as scandalized singular events and regard the campus intolerance as a mere myth. What unites both positions, however, is a relative lack of systematic empirical evidence to support their claims about the current state of free speech and viewpoint diversity on university campus (but see Stevens and Haidt 2018).

In this paper we aim to contribute to this debate by examining the state of freedom of speech and political viewpoint diversity at the university through empirical evidence. In particular, we are interested in answering the following questions: What do students think about the issue of free speech and how tolerant are they of different, even controversial viewpoints? Is there evidence for social pressure to conform to ‘political correctness’ and does this restrict free discussion on university campus? Are students on the left really more sensitive to offensive speech and more willing to restrict what can be said on campus? And are right-leaning or conservative students more reluctant to speak openly than their left-leaning or liberal peers?

Our empirical analysis is based on original survey data collected from social science students at Goethe University Frankfurt. We are certainly not under the impression that our sample is representative of university students in general (or the wider public, for the matter). Quite to the contrary, we purposefully consider the social science studentship at Frankfurt as a *most likely case* (George and Bennett 2005, Gerring 2007). Firstly, the University of Frankfurt became a focal point of the leftist student movement in the 1960s and still has the reputation of a training ground for the political left. Secondly, as the birthplace of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, the university is traditionally associated with the activist more than the scientific impetus of the social sciences. Thirdly, teaching and research at Frankfurt puts great emphasis on ideas that directly relate to the control of undesired speech: a critical conception of cultural

recognition as a means of redistributive justice; to treat speech as a type of action (speech act theory); standpoint theory, which seeks to amplify oppressed voices; and intersectionality which evaluates discrimination according to the cumulative disadvantage of overlapping identities.¹ Finally, even students take note of the idiosyncratic discussion culture at Frankfurt.² Thus, our reasoning is simple: If we are unable to detect tendencies for the restriction of speech in our sample, we are unlikely to find such evidence anywhere else. If this turned out to be the case, we would be in a good position to dismiss claims of a repressive discursive climate on university campuses. If, however, we were to uncover empirical evidence for the suppression of free speech and self-censorship in our sample, the hypothesis would have to be upheld and scrutinized in other university contexts. In addition, and importantly, a broader discussion over viewpoint diversity in our disciplines would be in order.

Our results give few reasons to be optimistic. We show that taking offense is a common experience and that a sizable share of students is in favour of restricting free speech on university campus. Depending on the topic of discussion, between a third and half of the students would not allow a controversial speaker on campus and even higher shares think that such individuals should not be allowed to teach at the university. Roughly a third of students is also in favour of banning controversial books from their university library. We also find evidence for conformity pressures on campus. A quarter of all students reports personal attacks for voicing an unpopular opinion and a third feels reluctant to openly give their view on controversial political topics in class discussions. Both, the desire to restrict speech and the reluctance to speak openly differ significantly across political ideologies. Students on the left

¹ We do not intend to disparage these theories but expose how they are employed in campus discussions, including as justification to silence voices.

² As one of them put it in our survey, “this is only in Frankfurt. In Augsburg, you could explore whatever you thought and discuss it with other students and the professor. Frankfurt has horrible people when it comes to sensitive topics.”

are less likely to tolerate controversial speakers, teachers or books at the university and students on the right are more likely to self-censor on politically sensitive issues such as gender, immigration or sexual and ethnic minorities. These findings have implications beyond the realm of academia and relate to more general and problematic tendencies in public discourse.

Free Speech Controversies on University Campuses: Background

In the 1980s and 1990s American universities witnessed lively debates about political correctness, speech codes and the restriction of hate speech which also caught the attention of the wider public (Lea 2009, Hughes 2010). These debates laid the foundation of divisions which still hold today: Critics of speech codes bemoaned an increasingly repressive intellectual climate on university campuses, the pressure to conform to PC culture and a growing intolerance toward dissenting views (Bloom 1987, D'Souza 1991). Defenders argued that speech codes protect minority students from discrimination and pushed back by framing the concern with 'chilling effects' on free speech as mere conservative hysteria (Williams 1995, Wilson 1995).

More recently, a renewed debate over political correctness and free speech revolved about so-called 'trigger warnings', 'micro-aggressions', 'cultural appropriation' and 'safe spaces' (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). These concepts can be interpreted as expressions of a *culture of victimhood* on university campus, which combines the predisposition to be highly sensitive to offense with the tendency to outsource conflict resolution to authorities (Campbell and Manning 2018). It is based on a conflation of physical and emotional harm and on highlighting rather than downplaying victimhood status.

Considerable attention has also focused on student protests that have led to the deinvitation of controversial speakers and the cancelling of university events hosting prominent guests due to security threats. Recent concerns about 'no platforming' at universities motivated the UK

parliament to prepare a report on “Freedom of Speech at Universities” (Joint Committee of Human Rights 2018). While concluding that speech restrictions at UK universities was “not a pervasive problem,” the report was critical of incidences of student protest against disagreeable speakers, regulations (university codes) and the implication of the governments’ counter-terrorism strategy on free expression, especially of Muslim students.

A series of prominent cases in Germany suggests that this trend is not restricted to the English speaking university context: In 2015 a group of anonymous social science students at Humboldt-University in Berlin set up a watchblog documenting allegedly „sexist, racist and militarist“ views by Herfried Münkler, a professor of political theory and well-known public intellectual. Münkler was further criticized for his „Euro-centrist“ selection of thinkers in his lecture on the history of political ideas. In 2016 the university president of the University of Marburg yielded to the pressure of the university’s women’s affairs officer and uninvited evolutionary biologist Ulrich Kutschera from a lecture series because of his critical views on gender ideology. Again at Humboldt-University in 2016, students protested and publicly accused migration expert and sociology professor Ruud Koopmans of furthering „anti-Muslim racism“ and „conceptual nationalism“ because of his research on the labour market integration, cultural assimilation, and fundamentalist attitudes of Muslim immigrants. Later in 2016, a talk by historian Jörg Barberowski organized by a conservative student group (the RCDS, i.e. the youth organization of the CDU) was cancelled at the University of Bremen. Student representatives had successfully mobilized against the talk which had to be relocated because of security concerns. Barberowski, an expert on Stalinism and the history of Eastern Europe who had already been the target of attacks by leftist students in the past, was accused of spreading „right-wing extremist ideology“ for his critical views on the German refugee policy.

It is the following two incidents that hit too close to home and that prompted us into researching the state of free speech and political viewpoint diversity on university campus. In fall 2017 a

talk by Rainer Wendt, head of the police union, was cancelled at Goethe-University in Frankfurt yielding to the pressure of leftist groups and an open letter demanding his deinvitation which was signed by several members of the social science faculty. Wendt who had been invited to talk about immigration from the practical perspective of police experience was criticized for his view on the refugee crisis and accused of furthering “racist modes of thinking”. Later, in April 2019 students at Goethe University demanded that ethnographer Susanne Schröter, an expert on Islam, be fired from her position as university professor. Schröter was accused of “anti-Muslim racism” because of organizing a critical panel discussion on the Muslim headscarf.

And if any more examples were indeed necessary, at the time of writing in October 2019, the German public is vividly discussing the newest addition to the list. At the University of Hamburg, leftist student activists repeatedly prevented university professor Bernd Lucke from giving his introductory lecture on macroeconomics. As a former founding member of the right-wing party AfD, the students accused Lucke of xenophobia, called him a “Nazi pig”, and even physically attacked him.

Although the critique of these recent trends and developments on university campuses is not limited to conservative voices as it was in the 1990s (e.g. Etzioni 2014, Lilla 2016, Lukianoff and Haidt 2018), a common thread that runs through the debate is a political divide: For one side, universities have become places dominated by left-leaning students and faculty who, supported by university administrations, attempt to shut down speech in the name of anti-discrimination, who are intolerant of dissenting views, most notably those considered right-wing or conservative, and thereby threaten the free exchange of ideas. For them, conservative students act as the defenders of speech rights and academic freedom (Dow and Lendler 2002: 549).

Opponents of this view perceive the lamented PC culture as a myth constructed by the political right (Wilson 1995) and as much about a clash between multiculturalism and neoconservatism as a discursive strategy by the latter (Feldstein 1997). For these observers, the main purpose of the PC debate was to discredit attempts to fight discrimination of minority groups and make the university a safer learning environment for an increasingly diverse student body.

Unfortunately, both perspectives mostly rely on anecdotal evidence on singular events to support their claims. And the little data that exists yields mixed results. A recent survey in the UK, for instance, does “not find any evidence that students are more hostile to free speech than the general population” (YouGov 2018). A survey conducted in the US, on the other hand, found that a) students tend to value inclusion and diversity more than free expression, b) that discussion culture on campus prevents conservative students from expressing their opinions, and c) that ten percent deem violence and 37% shouting down as acceptable measures to prevent someone from speaking (Gallup/Knight Foundation 2018). In what follows we will present our own empirical evidence.

Data and Methods

The Sample

The target population of our study are all current social science students at Goethe University of Frankfurt. According to the university’s most recent student statistics (Göhring and Götz 2018), a total of $N = 6'674$ students was enrolled in one of the social science programs in 2017/2018. We sent out an online questionnaire constructed using the survey software Qualtrics to all students in the department. Participation was voluntary and incentivized with a lottery of three Amazon gift vouchers in the worth of 50 euros each. We were able to collect a total of $N = 932$ responses in the period from May 16 to July 2 2018. However, the actual net response rate drops from 14 percent to 7.5 percent when we consider only those who completed at least

80 percent of the survey (N=501). All analyses will be based on pair-wise deletion of missing values.

To get a sense of the representativeness of the survey, table 1 compares the composition of our sample to official university statistics. In the student population 54.7 percent are female and 45.3 male. This is very close to our sample where 54.1 percent identify as female and 42.2 as male. We should note that the missing percentage is due to students that identify as “other” gender or preferred not to say. The sample includes more first year students (32.7 percent) as compared to the true student body (25.8 percent). The distribution across the two main study programs at the department is again well captured by our data (compare 36.2 to 33.5 percent for political science and 43.3 to 40.6 percent for sociology). The remaining percentage refers to students in either one of the specialized master programs or in the teacher’s track. The sample also matches well the gender distribution and first year students within political science and sociology, with only male sociology students slightly underrepresented by -4.3 percentage points. All in all, the sample gives a good representation of the social science students at the university.

Table 1: Comparison of Sample to Official University Statistics

	Official Statistics		Sample		Difference
	N	%	N	%	
Total	6'674	100	-- ^a	-- ^a	
Total Female	3'653	54.7	265	54.1 ^b	-0.6
Total Male	3'021	45.3	207	42.2 ^b	-3.1
Total First Year	1'724	25.8	153	32.7	+6.9
Political Science	2'415	36.2	155	33.5	-2.7
Political Science Female	1'115	16.7	69	14.9	-1.8
Political Science Male	1'300	19.5	84	18.1	-1.4
Political Science First Year	695	10.4	55	11.8	+1.4
Sociology	2'893	43.3	188	40.6	-2.7
Sociology Female	1'797	26.9	121	26.1	-0.8
Sociology Male	1'096	16.4	56	12.1	-4.3
Sociology First Year	730	10.9	61	13.1	+2.2

Note: ^a Number of observations and percentages are based on pair-wise deletion of missing values.

^b Shares of female and male does not add to hundred because of respondents who reported “other” or “prefer not to say”.

Operationalization of Variables

We will structure the empirical analysis along several outcome measures tapping into students' experiences with and attitudes toward free expression on university campus. For the sake of better readability, we will present the operationalization of these outcome variables as they come up in the analysis further below. Here, we only briefly describe the covariates of interest.

Given the prominent role of political ideology in debates about free speech on university campus we consider several measures of students' political orientations as key predictors of

their views and experiences. Next to the *ideological self-placement* on a 11-point left-right scale, we directly asked the students how they *identify politically*. Six percent or N=28 students preferred not to say. Among the remainder, 51 percent identify as „left-wing“ (N=245) and 24 percent as „liberal“ (N=118). Only four percent stated they see themselves as „conservative“ (N=18) and „libertarian“ (N=17), respectively. One percent identified as „right-wing“ (N=4) and eleven students as „other“ (N=53). Finally, we also asked students *which party they had voted* for in the 2017 federal election. While seven percent (N=35) preferred not to say, another six percent (N=27) were not eligible to vote and four percent (N=18) did not turn out to vote. Among the students who did vote, 38 percent voted for Die Linke (N=152), 24 percent for Grüne (N=98), 16 percent for SPD (N=63), eight percent each for CDU/CSU and FDP (N=33 and 31, respectively), and two percent for the AfD (N=9). Five percent or N=19 students voted for another party. So, taken together, three-quarters of the students (78 percent) voted for a party on the left. In the regression analyses below, we standardize left-right-ideology scale dividing by two standard deviations to make it roughly comparable to the dummy variables left-wing identity and voted for left party (Gelman 2007).

We include several additional variables in our analyses. We created a dummy variable for students that were born after 1995. A central claim in the current debate about the free speech crisis on university campus is that these members of *Generation Z* (or IGen which stands for “Internet Generation”) have a distinct and restrictive opinion on free speech because digital social media made them overly sensitive and emotionally fragile. As a result, they are more likely to feel offended and to demand measures such as speech codes, trigger warnings or safe spaces (Stevens and Haidt 2018). Relatedly, we constructed another dummy variable for students who began their university education before 2015. This year marks a key transition when important concepts and arguments for restricting what students should be allowed to say or even wear (e.g. ‘microaggressions’, ‘cultural appropriation’, etc.) were widely popularized on university campuses (Stevens and Haidt 2018). We reason that students who were already

socialized earlier would be less likely to adopt these ideas than students that start their socialization with these concepts already in place and thus be more tolerant (Chong 2006). Finally, we include categorical variables for students' gender and ethnic minority status. Since debates about restricting speech on campus are intimately related with questions of equal treatment and non-discrimination, we are interested in any differences along these identity variables. 20 percent (N=96) of the students in our sample identify as belonging to an ethnic minority (3 percent or N=16 students preferred not to say).³

Open Questions and Focus Groups

We also included two open questions in the survey for a more detailed understanding of the content of students' experience with offensive statements and conformity pressures (see further below). Responses to these open questions were coded in terms the political-ideological thrust of the (perceived and committed) 'offense'. Based on a classification of statements typically associated with left-wing or right-wing political positions, we distinguished two directions of offense: 'right offense' and 'left offense.' Some examples, especially those which involved two or more political topics, could not be clearly politically assigned in the German context.⁴ Both authors coded all examples of respondents' experiences with offensive statements and being personally dismissed for their views on campus and reached a satisfactory degree of intercoder reliability. Cohen's Kappa was .80 for left offenses and .79 for right offenses which suggests strong agreement.

³ We also asked for students' sexual orientation. But since only 3 percent (N=16) identified as homosexual we decided against including sexual minority status in our models below.

⁴ A frequent example of this are statements about anti-Semitism in combination with the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians: "A student gave a public speech about the conflict between Israel and Palestine. In his speech he used anti-Semitic language which was far [beyond of] just a critical statement against the political agenda of the Israeli state." (open question)

We applied linguistic pre-processing and data cleaning to the open responses. This involved spelling correction as well as removing punctuation, numeric information and English and German stop words. We also used word stemming to standardise different inflections and derivatives of terms by reducing them to their root form. To provide an overview of thematic emphases in open questions, we use word clouds and illustrative examples, sorted by the direction of offense and political ideology of respondents.

At the end of the survey we asked students if they were interested in participating in a focus group. Two focus group interviews with four participants in each were conducted on the 11th of July, 2018. Because of the small sample, these interviews were not subjected to a systematic analysis but instead supported the interpretation of survey results and illustration of points made in this paper.

Results

Who is Offended by What on University Campus?

We start our analysis by establishing students' sensitivity to potentially offensive acts of speech or viewpoints. We asked students the following question: „Have you ever felt offended or intimidated by a statement that another person made on campus?“⁵ Although using this question does not allow us to separate students' sensitivities from actual incidences it gives us a sense of the subjective experiences students make on university campus. One in three students or 35 percent (N=165) of our sample answered affirmatively to the question.

Table 2 presents linear probability models that relate students' experience with offensive statements to their individual characteristics. While ideological self-placement and voting for a left party is not associated with experiencing offensive statements, students who identify as left-wing tend to be more sensitive to speech on campus and have a nine percent higher probability of reporting an experience ($\beta = 0.09, SE = 0.04$). We also find that students that were already enrolled in the university before 2015 are more likely to have encountered offensive or intimidating comments, which may be due to the simple fact that they have already spend more time on campus ($\beta = 0.17, SE = 0.05$). Male students are generally less likely to feel offended or intimidated by comments and remarks ($\beta = -0.11, SE = 0.05$) and students that identify as 'other gender' are more likely, albeit only in one equation and only on a very lenient level of significance ($\beta = 0.28, SE = 0.17$). Interestingly, neither Generation Z students nor students with an ethnic minority background stand out with regards to their experience with offensive statements.

⁵ This question wording was taken from the *Campus Expression Survey* (Stevens et al. 2017).

Table 2: Linear probability models of political ideology and experience of feeling offended or intimidated by a statement on campus

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Left-Right-Ideology	-0.07 (0.05)		
Identifies as left-wing		0.09** (0.04)	
Voted for left party			-0.04 (0.05)
Generation Z	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
Studied before 2015	0.17*** (0.05)	0.16*** (0.05)	0.16*** (0.05)
Male gender	-0.11** (0.05)	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.11** (0.05)
Other gender	0.24 (0.17)	0.25 (0.17)	0.28* (0.17)
Prefer not to say gender	0.17 (0.21)	0.13 (0.21)	0.20 (0.21)
Ethnic minority	0.05 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)
Prefer not to say ethnicity	0.21 (0.15)	0.23 (0.15)	0.19 (0.15)
Constant	0.33*** (0.05)	0.29*** (0.05)	0.37*** (0.06)
N	451	451	454
R ²	0.06	0.07	0.06

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A) All Students



B) Students on the left



C) Students on the right



Figure 1: Word clouds of students' experience with offensive or intimidating statements on university campus.

To get a better sense of the content of the speech that students found troubling, we asked them to describe their experience in an open question: „Do you remember the gist of the statement that offended or intimidated you?“ While respondents right of centre provided only few examples, the vast majority of responses (75%) come from left-leaning students being offended by statements they deemed as too conservative, as violating or insufficiently adhering to speech norms. This is, of course, mainly due to the skewed distribution of political ideology in the sample.⁶

The word clouds in figure 1 give a rough sense of the content and topics students found offensive. By far the most prominent subject of scenarios was gender and sexuality (half of all responses). The few students right of centre were offended by students and lecturers arguing that gender is merely a social construct, whereas students left of centre were offended by the opposite argument: “Elderly male professor denying any social influence in gender creation. It is all biological, he said,” to give an example. Left-leaning students were further offended by (purportedly) homophobic, misogynist, sexist comments and ‘mansplaining.’ Many responses did not describe specific scenarios but were general, as in: “sexist comments by fellow students and professors.” There was some overlap between male students on both sides of the political spectrum taking offense about feeling dismissed as men (see Table 3).

⁶ The median value of the left-right-scale (which runs from 0 to 10) is 3. For this reason and to ensure a minimum of responses to the open questions on both sides of the ideological spectrum, we decided to code the neutral scale midpoint of 5 as ‘right-leaning.’ Thus students with scores 0-4 are considered ‘left’ and students with scores 5-10 as ‘right.’

Table 3 Students' experience with offensive statements on university campus by direction of offense and students' political ideology

	Student on the Left	Student on the Right
Offensive to the Left	<p>86 % (N=55)</p> <p>“When a prof said he is able to prove philosophically that women cannot think.”</p> <p>“Students claiming that Muslims are not compatible with the Western culture because of their different values. ‘Muslims are too aggressive and violent.’ etc.”</p> <p>“In another class the topic was reproductive rights and a female student argued against free access to the (contraceptive) morning-after pill by equating it with abortion.”</p> <p>“All people reading Marx would be Communists, or did not understand how economics really work in our society.</p>	<p>4% (N=3)</p> <p>“In a discussion about the Trump election someone tried to play down Trumps "grab them by the pussy statement" as normal behaviour for men”</p> <p>“Someone said that all overweight persons are just lazy, inconsequent, unable to set and reach goals. It was not possible to discuss with this person and the real problem was, that this person was not able to accept different view and became very insulting (no objective discussion was possible)”</p> <p>“A student said that all people who suffer from mental illnesses and or depression are weak and unbearable.”</p>
Offensive to the Right	<p>14% (N=9)</p> <p>“The statement was about me being a dick because I was white, male and heterosexual (therefore I logically must be an asshole)”</p> <p>„A fellow student in a seminar compared consuming animal products to the holocaust.”</p> <p>“I dislike it if people are calling for violence or vandalism to push through political agendas. It regularly happens during campus (AStA) election campaigns and frequently in private discussions, sometimes even in classes and lectures.”</p>	<p>14 % (N=9)</p> <p>“A female professor frequently made public comments in a big class about how bad men generally are.”</p> <p>“When I criticized social media restrictions in Germany due to the ‘Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz’, the Professor said, that I would not understand what hate speech is. I asked her to define hate speech. She got angry, pointed her finger at me and said: ‘I know what to think about your views now.’”</p> <p>“That gender is made up and conservatives are racist”</p>

Are Left-wing Students Really More Willing to Restrict Free Speech on University Campus?

In this section we explore whether and how students' sensitivities translate into intolerance and the restriction of controversial topics on university campus. The empirical study of free expression has a long tradition in the social sciences and dates back to the work of Stouffer (1955), who studied citizens' willingness to allow nonconformists – in his time and context this meant communists, atheists, and homosexuals – to publicly speak, teach at universities and have their books in public libraries (see also Mondak & Sanders 2003 and Chong 2006). We adapted Stouffer's method to elicit tolerance toward viewpoints that focus on controversial ideas about gender equality, sexual identity, immigration and Islam. Thus, it should be stressed that these measures do not capture tolerance *in general* (see the classical critique by Sullivan et al. 1979) but only concerning these very *specific targets*. However, these targets are central in current free speech free on university campuses because arguments in favor of restricting speech have for the most part focused on expressions involving minorities and historically disadvantaged groups (Gross and Kinder 1998). We will return to this point in the discussion.

The four targets were described as follows: „Somebody who thinks that there are biological differences in talents between men and women“, „A person who is against all forms of immigration to this country“, „A person who believes that Islam is incompatible with the Western way of life“, and finally „A person who thinks that homosexuality is immoral and dangerous“. For each target we asked whether they „should be allowed to speak at the university“, whether they „should be allowed to teach at the university“, and whether students favoured „removing their book from the university library“.

Figure 2 presents the descriptive results to these questions. Overall, majorities of between 60 and 80 percent of the students think that controversial speakers should be able to speak at the university and that books with controversial content should be available at the university library. While this seems to point to comfortable levels of tolerance, it also means that 20 to 30 percent favor the restriction of free expression. In addition, clear majorities also state that persons who hold controversial views should not be allowed to teach at the university. In more detail, 69 percent would allow a speaker who is critical of Islam on campus (78 percent would allow their book in the library), 67 percent a speaker who thinks there are biological skill differences between the men and women (81 percent the book), and 59 percent someone who is opposed to immigration (74 percent the book). Only 44 percent of the students would tolerate a speaker who thinks homosexuality is a sin and 66 percent have their book in the university library.

When it comes to the question who should be allowed to teach at the university, only a third of the students think that this should be the case for someone who believes in biological differences in talents between the sexes (36 percent) or who views Islam as incompatible with Western society (32 percent). Only a quarter of the students would accept a university teacher that is strictly opposed to immigration (23 percent) and even less a person who believes that homosexuality is immoral (17 percent). While we were initially shocked by these numbers, our in-depth conversation with students revealed that a common motivation behind this attitude is that students fear that university teachers will not be able to separate their opinion from their professional role as supervisors. In other words, the concern is that female, Muslim, immigrant or homosexual students might be treated unfairly.

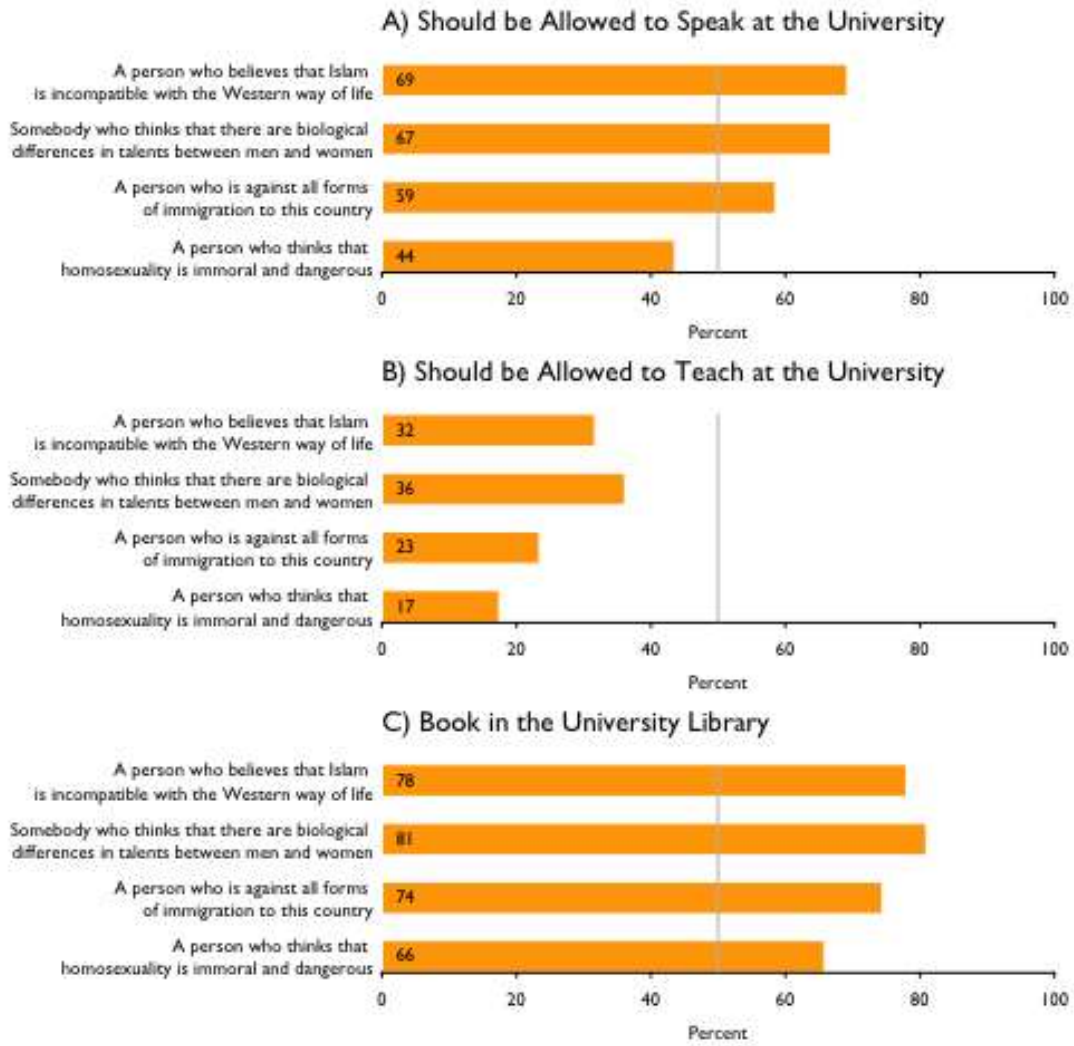


Figure 2: Description of students' tolerance for controversial topics on university campus.

In the following analysis, we add up all items to construct a simple tolerance of non-conformism scale which runs from 0 to 12 (with a mean of 6.5 and a standard deviation of 3.3). Table 4 presents the results of OLS regressions that regress the tolerance score on the left-right self-placement, left-wing self-identification, and voting for left parties, along with indicators of whether students belong to generation Z, whether they had studied before 2015 as well as their gender and ethnic minority status. We indeed find that the left-right ideology is clearly and significantly related to preferences for restricting free expression on campus ($\beta = 2.56, SE =$

0.29). Conservative students are more tolerant of controversial opinions and expressions than their progressive counterparts. Students that explicitly self-identify as left-wing are significantly less tolerant of controversial views and speakers ($\beta = -2.23, SE = 0.29$). Students that voted for Die Linke, Grüne or SPD are also significantly less tolerant of controversial ideas on university campus ($\beta = -1.28, SE = 0.32$). In addition, we find that members of generation Z and students that started in 2015 or later are less tolerant, whereas male students hold more liberal in terms of free speech on campus. Ethnic minority status is not related to preferences for speech regulation.

Table 4: Regression models on political ideology and tolerance to non-conformist speech

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Left-Right-Ideology	2.56*** (0.29)		
Identifies as left-wing		-2.23*** (0.29)	
Voted for left party			-1.28*** (0.32)
Generation Z	-0.70** (0.30)	-0.63** (0.31)	-0.58* (0.32)
Studied before 2015	0.83** (0.34)	0.83** (0.34)	0.74** (0.36)
Male gender	2.07*** (0.29)	2.28*** (0.29)	2.10*** (0.31)
Other gender	1.60 (1.21)	1.11 (1.23)	0.53 (1.28)
Prefer not to say gender	1.37 (1.29)	1.74 (1.32)	0.53 (1.37)
Ethnic minority	-0.28 (0.36)	-0.47 (0.37)	-0.42 (0.39)
Prefer not to say ethnicity	-0.47 (0.91)	-0.93 (0.93)	-0.83 (0.98)
Constant	5.81*** (0.30)	6.86*** (0.34)	6.61*** (0.40)
N	436	435	438
R ²	0.27	0.24	0.17

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Are Students Really Reluctant to Speak Openly at the University?

What students think about free speech and its limits is important because changing social norms gradually find their way out of academia and into policy. But even more important than speech norms' impact on legislation and public policy is their direct impact on the peoples' thoughts and expressions. Indeed, the true significance of limiting free speech may lie in its contribution to a culture of conformity and thus the constraints that people impose on each other (Gibson 1992, 2006). PC debates on campus may have „created a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse“ (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015: np). A possible result of this culture is self-censorship: „although political correctness is often spoken of as a threat to free speech on the campuses [...], the more subtle threat is the voluntary limitation on speech that a climate of social conformity encourages. Is not the iron fist of repression, but the velvet glove of seduction that is the real problem“ (Loury 1994: 430).

To gauge whether there is indeed evidence for the pressure to conform or the reluctance to speak openly at the university, we looked at three measures: the reluctance to speak openly about controversial political issues during a class discussion, concern over the consequences when speaking up about a controversial political issue, and whether students had ever been personally criticized for their view on a controversial political issue.⁷

The first survey question read: “Next, we are interested in how you would feel about expressing your personal opinions in class discussions at your university. Think of a class with about 20-30 students. Consider the following scenario: Think about being at your university in a class that was discussing a *controversial political issue*. How comfortable or reluctant would you feel about speaking up and giving your views on this topic?” Students could answer on a 4-point scale. Our data suggests that a clear majority of two-thirds of students would feel

⁷ The wording of these questions was taken from the *Campus Expression Survey* (Stevens et al. 2017).

“somewhat” (42 percent) or “entirely” comfortable (24 percent) discussing controversial topics in class. However, one in three students report they would be “somewhat” (24 percent) or even “entirely” (11 percent) reluctant to openly express their opinion at the university.

Table 5 presents the results of models that regress students’ reluctance to openly give their political views in class discussions on their individual characteristics.⁸ We find that right leaning students are significantly more likely to withhold their political views during class discussions ($\beta = 0.29, SE = 0.09$). Conversely, students who self-identify as politically left-wing are generally more comfortable in speaking up on controversial political issues ($\beta = -0.32, SE = 0.09$). And the same holds for students who had voted for Die Linke, Grüne or SPD in the last election ($\beta = -0.27, SE = 0.09$). These results are thus consistent with the well-known idea that members of the political minority in a given context will be less vocal about their opinion (Noelle-Neumann 1974). Apart from political ideology, male students are generally more comfortable giving their view than female students. We find no differences across either student generations or ethnic identity.

⁸ For the sake of simplicity and ease of interpretation, we ran OLS models instead of Ordered Logit or Ordered Probit models. The substantive interpretation is unlikely to be affected.

Table 5: OLS regression models of political ideology and reluctance to speak political views openly in class

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Left-Right-Ideology	0.29*** (0.09)		
Identifies as left-wing		-0.32*** (0.09)	
Voted for left party			-0.27*** (0.09)
Generation Z	0.03 (0.09)	0.03 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)
Studied before 2015	-0.00 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.10)
Male gender	-0.32*** (0.09)	-0.29*** (0.09)	-0.33*** (0.09)
Other gender	0.06 (0.33)	-0.01 (0.33)	-0.09 (0.33)
Prefer not to say gender	0.20 (0.40)	0.28 (0.40)	0.12 (0.40)
Ethnic minority	0.06 (0.11)	0.03 (0.11)	0.03 (0.11)
Prefer not to say ethnicity	0.16 (0.27)	0.09 (0.27)	0.07 (0.28)
Constant	2.32*** (0.09)	2.48*** (0.10)	2.50*** (0.11)
Observations	454	454	457
R ²	0.05	0.06	0.05

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Although we did not gather systematic evidence on this issue, our respondents varied in terms of their resilience against being dismissed by their fellow students. Statements ranged from feeling intimidated to being unaffected by pushback. As one survey respondent said: “I made an incorrect statement. Someone disagreed harshly, had the better ideas and I changed my opinion over the topic (that’s how discussions work btw). No safe space for universities!” On the question about situations in which he was offended by what other students said, he said: “I can't remember but it’s alright. That shit happens. I’m not a baby.” But this level of resilience was unique among our respondents. More commonly, students expressed a reluctance to speak up following dismissal or did not specify the effect it had on them.

In one of the focus groups we conducted after the survey, we explored students’ anxiety of discussing certain subjects. It seems to be mainly rooted in the fear of being labelled or pigeonholed, as one participant explained: “No matter how I position myself, I’m either a right-wing nutcase or a left-wing do-gooder“ (male student, 24). Students also told us about the implicit pressure to use a certain terminology when discussing issues like gender. In some instances, linguistic conformity is directly enforced. As a focus group participant told us, in one course a student reacted to one of her colleagues’ use of the word “race” by saying “that ‘we’re here in a safe space’ ... ‘We don't want to hear those kind of words. If you want to talk to us, you should talk appropriately; you should talk in a certain way’”(female student, 24). After this confrontation some students expressed their dismissal of using the word race in class in emails to the lecturer. Her colleague apologized and never spoke again in that class. Migrant students told us about instances in which they self-censored and about non-migrant students who censor themselves when speaking about racism.

Table 6 presents the results of an OLS regression that regresses students' concern of consequences if they give their political view on their characteristics.⁹ Right or conservative leaning students are significantly more concerned that giving their political views will result in disapproval ($\beta = 2.10, SE = 0.42$). Those who explicitly identify as left-wing are significantly less likely to feel concerned ($\beta = -1.89, SE = 0.41$) as are the students that voted for a left party ($\beta = -0.98, SE = 0.44$). In addition, we find that students that had started their studies before 2015 and males are less worried about consequences when giving their political views in the class room. Those students who did not want to disclose their ethnic identity are significantly more concerned about potential consequences.

⁹ The outcome variable is a simple additive scale of four items addressing students' concerns with the likely consequences if they gave their view on a controversial issue: „The professor would criticize my views as offensive“, “Other students would criticize my views as offensive”, “Someone would file a complaint claiming that my views violated a campus harassment policy”, “Someone would post critical comments about my views on social media”. For each item respondents could answer on a 5-point scale from 1 “not at all concerned” to 5 “Extremely concerned”. The additive scale ranges from 0 to 20 with a mean of 9.4 and a standard deviation of 4.4.

Table 6: OLS regression models of political ideology and concern of consequences for giving political view

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Left-Right-Ideology	2.10*** (0.42)		
Identifies as left-wing		-1.89*** (0.41)	
Voted for left party			-0.98** (0.44)
Generation Z	0.03 (0.44)	0.01 (0.44)	0.09 (0.44)
Studied before 2015	-0.77 (0.49)	-0.85* (0.49)	-0.89* (0.49)
Male gender	-0.95** (0.42)	-0.74* (0.42)	-0.90** (0.43)
Other gender	0.42 (1.56)	-0.21 (1.55)	-0.67 (1.57)
Prefer not to say gender	0.45 (1.88)	0.79 (1.90)	-0.23 (1.92)
Ethnic minority	0.15 (0.53)	-0.01 (0.53)	0.01 (0.54)
Prefer not to say ethnicity	2.84** (1.28)	2.46* (1.29)	2.51* (1.32)
Constant	9.93*** (0.44)	10.85*** (0.49)	10.57*** (0.55)
N	449	450	452
R ²	0.08	0.07	0.04

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Table 7: Linear probability models of political ideology and experience of being dismissed or personally criticized for political views

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Left-Right-Ideology	0.15*** (0.04)		
Identifies as left-wing		-0.14*** (0.04)	
Voted for left party			-0.20*** (0.04)
Generation Z	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Studied before 2015	0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)
Male gender	0.09** (0.04)	0.11*** (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)
Other gender	0.25 (0.16)	0.21 (0.15)	0.18 (0.15)
Prefer not to say gender	-0.10 (0.19)	-0.07 (0.19)	-0.12 (0.19)
Ethnic minority	0.12** (0.05)	0.11** (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)
Prefer not to say ethnicity	0.20 (0.13)	0.17 (0.13)	0.13 (0.13)
Constant	0.20*** (0.04)	0.25*** (0.05)	0.34*** (0.05)
N	452	452	455
R ²	0.06	0.06	0.07

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A) All students



B) Students on the left



C) Students on the right



Figure 3: Word clouds of students' experience of being dismissed or criticized for their views on a controversial political issue in class discussion.

Overall, one in four or 25 percent (N=126) of the students answered „yes“ when we asked „Have you ever felt that your opinion was dismissed or you were personally criticized because you shared your views on a controversial political issue in a class discussion?“ Table 7 shows differences across student characteristics. Students that are more right or conservative than the average have a significant and 15 percent higher probability of having experienced that their opinions were dismissed in a class discussion. This happened significantly less often to left-wing students and students who had voted for left parties. Males are significantly more likely to be personally criticized for their political opinion than female students and so are (at least in two of the three models) students with an ethnic minority background.

To learn more about which opinions were dismissed during class discussions, we asked students in an open question to describe what they had said in that situation (see figure 3 and table 8). Many examples are in line with the findings mentioned above: (conservative) students being dismissed by others for making critical, insensitive or merely empirically qualifying remarks about discrimination of women, ethnic or sexual minorities as well as (to a far lesser extent, interestingly) arguments critical of immigration. Being labelled as ‘homophobe’, as a ‘racist’ or ‘sexist’ is often the consequence. This also happens to faculty members. One focus group participant told us that one of her male professors who refused to use gender neutral language was immediately labelled as sexist by students. She also described a situation in a class discussion where one student made a comment which others took as apologetic of a homophobic catchphrase:

“He said ‘I just meant it as a joke. I’m not homophobic’ and then everybody ganged up on him and said ‘How can you? What an intolerant opinion!’ No matter what my position is in this matter; I also don’t think it is ok to say that, but yet he wasn’t taken seriously. He was immediately portrayed as a homophobic person somehow“ (female student, 27).

What was remarkable, furthermore, is that even statements of left-leaning students were subject to speech policing on the part of (presumably even more left-wing) students. To illustrate, compare the following two examples: “I said that feminism can be a kind of extremism if it’s going too far” and “I claimed, that left-extremis is as bad as right-extremis or Islamism, because all these three want to violate the life and health of people.” The first scenario involved a student who classified herself as left-wing (with a score of 2 on the left-right scale and vote for Die Linke), the second a conservative male student (with a score of 7 on and vote for CDU/CSU). Both believe, however, that most of their fellow students are more left than them.

Other left-leaning students were reprimanded for using the word ‘*Rasse*’ (German for ‘race’) or for arguing that immigrants should be deported if they were denied asylum and their home country is not at war. A female left leaning student rubbed her fellow students the wrong way when she spoke out against gender quotas in companies and a left-leaning male student “got aggressively approached by a female person sitting next to me for saying that I liked an egalitarian use if gender-specific speech where sometimes the author uses a male and a female version of a word.” She accused him of “violating women’s rights” for not using the ‘*’ convention of gender-neutral language.

Students on both sides of the ideological spectrum were also dismissed for their views on free speech itself. One centrist student (left-right score of 6, FDP voter) argued in a discussion on the 2016 US presidential election that freedom of expression included all political opinions. The lecturer rebuked this statement by saying that “some opinion aren’t opinions.” When the student asked the lecturer what constituted an opinion in his opinion, a historical exegesis of the term followed. Instead of enhancing his understanding, the student felt “this rhetorical figure, in the manner it was presented, had the goal to silence me.” Though most situations described involve students’ opinions dismissed by other students, there were several instances in which professors and lecturers restricted speech. This also came up frequently in our focus

groups. As one participant (female, 27) told us, “I have one lecturer who, I would say, is on one political side and ... there are restrictions in what you can say. Because the boss in the room has a very clear opinion.”

Students were not only criticized for violating or not adhering (sufficiently) to speech norms but also for overly demanding conformism and making too progressive arguments, though to a lesser extent (less than one third of responses). These statements were in favour or abortion, on admitting European guilt for the situation in African countries and for refugee deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, against an overly punitive penal system, and for condemning statements as racist. One female student was dismissed for arguing that it was cultural appropriation when white people wear dread locks without reflecting on their historical meaning. Coincidentally, another left-leaning male student felt equally dismissed for making the opposite argument against the inflationary use of the term cultural appropriation in a discussion about dread locks (possibly in the same debate).

Table 8 Students' experience of being dismissed or criticized for their views in class discussion by direction of offense and students' political ideology

	Student on the Left	Student on the Right
Offensive to the Left	<p>38% (N=23)</p> <p>“We talked about the custom in a Latin-American country to bury inadvertent children alive. My opinion is, that this should be prohibited, because human rights are more worth than customs ... My fellow students started arguing and offending me with the Eurocentric argument ‘People from the western world can’t force others to do what they think is the right.’”</p> <p>“I once argued that unions were bad for the unemployed and nowadays also rather bad for economic growth and therefore should enjoy less rights and privileges than they do in France today.”</p> <p>“I said that honour killings happen in Germany”</p>	<p>37% (N=22)</p> <p>“I made the point that an institution in itself is not discriminating against some groups but rather individuals in the institution that set up rules that might be discriminating or make decisions that are discriminating ... Prof and some students insisted on it without tackling my concerns. They were very satisfied when I did not want to continue the discussion.”</p> <p>“While discussing the last American election in class I made the statement that freedom of expression involves all opinions in the political spectrum which got dismissed (by the lecturer) because “some opinions aren't opinions” ... After asking what constitutes an opinion in the lecturer’s opinion I was pointed to the long history of the word. This rhetorical figure, in the manner it was presented, had the goal to silence me.”</p>
Offensive to the Right	<p>23% (N=14)</p> <p>“Every kind of immigrant should be allowed to live in this country”</p> <p>“I said that the border regime of the European Union is responsible for the deaths of refugees on the Mediterranean Sea.”</p> <p>“I defended the idea that girls/women wearing a headscarf in Germany were not always repressed in their opinion and forced to do so, but might themselves prefer to wear one.”</p>	<p>2% (N=1)</p> <p>“I denounced religion”</p>

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study has shed some light on the state of free speech and political viewpoint diversity on university campus by focusing on a most likely case for PC culture: social science students at Goethe University of Frankfurt. Our reasoning was simple: If we cannot find evidence for a restrictive ideological discussion climate and social pressures to conform here, we are unlikely to find these tendencies in other places. It would then be safe to declare the new campus intolerance a mere myth.

Our results contradict this optimism and may be succinctly summarized in three main points. *First*, while taking offense and feeling intimidated by statements made on campus is a common experience made by a third of all students, a clear majority is tolerant of different, even controversial viewpoints. But this should not hide the fact that a considerable segment of students is in favour of restricting speech. Depending on the controversial topic, between 30 percent (“Islam is incompatible with the West”) and 54 percent (“homosexuality is immoral”) of the students would not allow a speaker to speak on campus. And even higher shares, ranging from 64 percent (“there are biological differences in talents between men and women”) to 83 percent (“homosexuality is immoral”), think that individuals holding such controversial views should not be allowed to teach at the university. Roughly a third of students would also favour a banning of their books from the university library.

Second, a quarter of all students has experienced personal dismissal for voicing their opinion and a third feels at least somewhat inhibited to give their view on controversial issues in a class discussion. Thus, our findings resonate with well-known theories of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann 1974) in that students choose to remain silent out of fear of being socially isolated and stigmatized. Our findings further suggest that students are concerned with the reactions of both, fellow students and professors, although slightly less for the latter. Whereas 31 percent

are ‘moderately’ or ‘extremely’ concerned that other students would criticize their views as offensive, only 20 percent fear that their professors will criticize them for their views.

Third, both the intolerance of controversial views and the reluctance to speak openly on university campus are clearly structured along students’ political ideology. Students who place themselves on the left of the ideological spectrum are significantly less likely to tolerate controversial speakers, teachers or books at the university. Feeling pressure to conform is especially true for right-of-centre students who, in the face of an overwhelming majority of leftist opinions, are reluctant to speak their mind on politically sensitive issues, such as gender, sexuality and immigration. But even students who are mostly siding with majority opinions are cautious and/or have experienced pushback for speaking out about such issues.

Given that the impetus of proponents of campus speech codes and the restriction of ‘hate speech’ stems from their desire to fight discrimination and to foster an inclusive learning environment, it is instructive to also summarize our findings from a gendered perspective as well as from the perspective of ethnic minority students. We find that the issue of free speech and conformity is significantly structured by students’ gender. Indeed, gender rivals political ideology in terms of its effect sizes. Male students are significantly less likely to feel offended, more tolerant of controversial speech, more likely to openly give their opinion, and less likely to be concerned with the consequences of their statements. At the same time, however, they are also significantly more likely to experience personal dismissals or criticism for their views.

Contrast this with the experiences and attitudes of university students with ethnic minority status. Students with ethnic minority background do not differ from majority background students in any of the measures of tolerance or conformity pressures that we have considered in this analysis. Maybe ironically, the only exception to this pattern is experiencing personal criticism for their political views. Ethnic minority students are significantly more likely to

report that they were dismissed for their political views, and this difference is comparable in size to the difference based on political ideology.

Several points of qualification and limitation of our analysis are in order. *First*, due the cross-sectional nature of our survey data we are only able to present a snapshot of the current climate on university campus. We cannot say whether the current situation is new or whether it has gotten worse over the last years. Yet we believe the topic is relevant and our findings interesting enough to consider repeating the survey at a future time point.

Second, and relatedly, we cannot say much about the prevalence of ideological pressures to conform at other universities in Germany or even internationally. Again, we view our evidence as suggestive and meriting further study in alternative contexts. Our hunch is that the tendencies discovered in our data may well apply more broadly.

Third, one could argue that our measure of tolerance for controversial topics is unfairly stacked against sensitivities of the left (i.e. by referring to gender equality, sexual minorities, Islam and immigration). While this choice of controversial topics was driven by the actual content of current debates over free speech on campus, it would be interesting to also test some hot button issues on the right (e.g. abortion, calls to violence against the police or the abolition of the nation state). As a first step in this direction we also replicated the *Pew Freedom of Expression Scale* (Wike and Simmons 2015) in our student sample. This scale asks whether people should be able to say certain things publicly or whether the government should be able to prevent them from speaking freely. Regressing the ideological left-right-placement separately on each of the five items, we found no significant ideological differences for statements criticizing the government, statements that are offensive to religious beliefs or statements that are sexually explicit. However, we found that students on the right are more willing to allow statements that are offensive of minorities than their peers on the left ($\beta=0.12$, $p=.01$), but markedly less willing to tolerate statements that call for violent protests ($\beta=-0.33$, $p=.01$).

Fourth, it is important to understand that we are not saying that *extreme* right-wing views are illegitimately shut down on university campus. While the acceptance of extremist views on campus is an important debate in itself, we are concerned with the silencing of fully legitimate and moderate political views which simply deviate from leftist orthodoxy. It is students who place themselves right of centre, who identify as conservative or classical liberal, or who vote for parties like CDU or FDP who are reluctant to speak openly about political issues.

Taken together, the empirical tendencies we have uncovered suggest that we cannot simply dismiss concerns about a restrictive discursive climate on university campus. Instead, we should take their implications seriously. A recent study about conservative students in the US suggests that being in the political minority on campus does not only entail isolation but also social resilience through “honing one’s argument” (Binder and Wood 2013: 154-6). Thus, aside from excluding and silencing dissenting voices, the narrowing of viewpoint diversity may be an even greater problem for students who agree with dominant views: they fail to learn how to assert their positions argumentatively against objections. This, of course, just echoes what John Stuart Mill had already realized more than a century ago. The bitter irony that this tendency pervades the intellectual birthplace of critical theory has not escaped participants in our study:

“I actually found the point ... amusing, about this university [being] known for critical thinking, so left-wing people come here so that they can critically think among themselves ...” (focus group, male, 19).

Despite the obvious distinctiveness of the university context, our findings also speak to the problems of public discourse and political polarization more broadly. The instant dismissal of opposing viewpoints not only fosters frustration and hostility among political opponents. Thinking oneself in a safe and superior position may also promote ignorance. Neither is likely to bridge the deepening political divides we are facing today.

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