

A chilling study shows how hostile college students are toward free speech

By [Catherine Rampell](#)

Columnist

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Here's the problem with suggesting that upsetting speech warrants "safe spaces," or otherwise [conflating](#) mere words with physical assault: If speech is violence, then violence becomes a justifiable response to speech.

Just ask college students. A fifth of undergrads now say it's acceptable to use physical force to silence a speaker who makes "offensive and hurtful statements."

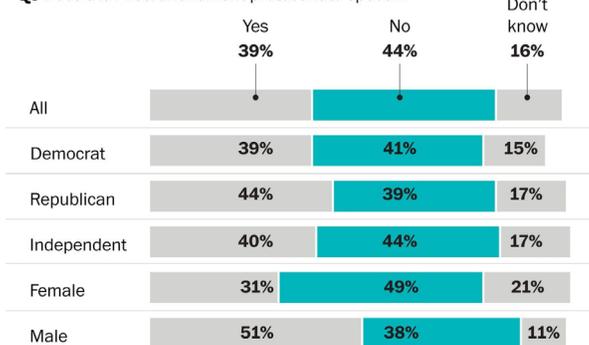
That's one finding from a disturbing [new survey](#) of students conducted by John Villasenor, a Brookings Institution senior fellow and University of California at Los Angeles professor.

In August, motivated by concerns about the "narrowing window of permissible topics" for discussion on campuses, Villasenor conducted a nationwide survey of 1,500 undergraduate students at four-year colleges. Financial support for the survey was provided by the Charles Koch Foundation, which Villasenor said had no involvement in designing, administering or analyzing the questionnaire; as of this writing, the foundation had also not seen his results.

Many of Villasenor's questions were designed to gauge students' understanding of the First Amendment. Colleges, after all, pay a lot of [lip service](#) to "freedom of speech," despite high-profile examples of civil-liberty-squelching on campus. The survey suggests that this might not be due to hypocrisy so much as a misunderstanding of what the First Amendment actually entails.

Women are more likely than men to believe hate speech is not constitutionally protected

Q: Does the First Amendment protect hate speech?



*Numbers may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: John Villasenor, Brookings Institution

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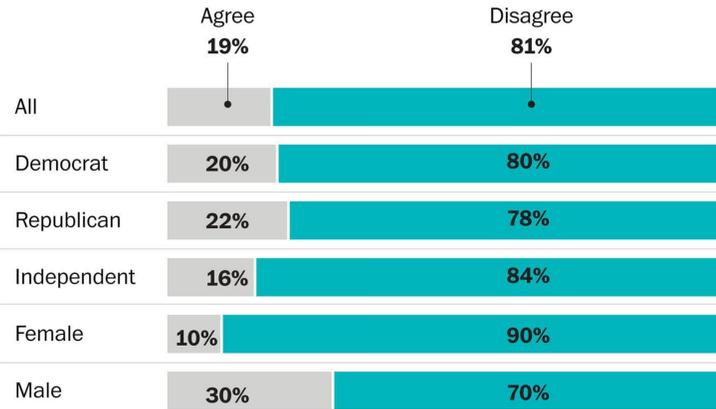
For example, when students were asked whether the First Amendment protects "hate speech," 4 in 10 said no. This is, of course, incorrect. Speech promoting hatred — or at least, speech perceived as promoting hatred — may be abhorrent, but it is nonetheless constitutionally protected.

Results based on online survey of 1,500 undergraduate students at U.S. four-year colleges and universities, all U.S. citizens, conducted Aug. 17-31. For a confidence level of 95 percent, the margin of error is between approximately 2 percent and 6 percent, depending on the group. (Aaron Williams/Aaron Williams)

There were no statistically significant differences in response to this question based on political affiliation. But there were significant differences by gender: Women are more likely than men to believe hate speech is not constitutionally protected (49 percent vs. 38 percent, respectively).

One in five respondents say using violence to disrupt a controversial speaker is acceptable

Q: A public university invites a very controversial speaker to an on-campus event. The speaker is known for making offensive and hurtful statements. A student group opposed to the speaker uses violence to prevent the speaker from speaking. Do you agree or disagree that the student group's actions are acceptable?



*Numbers may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: John Villasenor, Brookings Institution

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Students were asked whether the First Amendment requires that an offensive speaker at a public university be matched with one with an opposing view. Here, 6 in 10 (mistakenly) said that, yes, the First Amendment requires balance.

The most chilling findings, however, involved how students think repugnant speech should be dealt with.

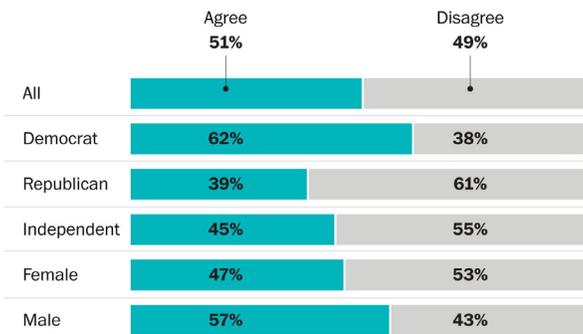
Villasenor offered a hypothetical that may sound familiar to those who recall recent fracasas at [California State University at Los Angeles](#), [Middlebury College](#), [Claremont McKenna College](#) and other institutions:

Let's say a public university hosts a "very controversial speaker," one "known for making offensive and hurtful statements." Would it be acceptable for a student group to disrupt the

speech "by loudly and repeatedly shouting so that the audience cannot hear the speaker"?

Democrats more likely to agree with shouting over controversial speakers so they can't be heard

Q: A public university invites a very controversial speaker to an on-campus event. The speaker is known for making offensive and hurtful statements. A student group opposed to the speaker disrupts the speech by loudly and repeatedly shouting so that the audience cannot hear the speaker. Do you agree or disagree that the student group's actions are acceptable?



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It gets even worse.

Respondents were also asked if it would be acceptable for a student group to use violence to prevent that same controversial speaker from talking. Here, 19 percent said yes.

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There were no statistically significant differences in response by political party affiliation. Men, however, were three times as likely as women to endorse using physical force to silence controversial views (30 percent of men vs. 10 percent of women).

None of this bodes well for the alt-right's Berkeley Free Speech Week events next week.

Judging from the lineup — which includes professional troll Milo Yiannopoulos and Pizzagate conspiracy theorist [Mike Cernovich](#) — the apparent goal of this event is not to help students face hard truths or grapple with thoughtful conservative viewpoints. It's to say disgusting things in an attempt to provoke liberals into doing something stupid, surrendering any claim to moral high ground. If that happens, President Trump's "both sides" comments will ring a little truer, while liberals and colleges are further cemented as whataboutist bogeymen for the right.

In truth, lefties can do more to call out threats to civil liberties perpetrated by their ideological allies. And colleges can do more to promote freer debate. But many of Villasenor's results — like those from [other data sources](#) — show that the right is also astonishingly open to shutting down speech.

What's more, colleges alone are not to blame for these findings. Other data [suggest](#) that freshmen are *arriving* on campus with more intolerant attitudes toward free speech than their predecessors did, and that Americans of all ages have become [strikingly hostile](#) toward basic civil and political liberties.

Colleges provide a crucible for America's increasingly strained attitudes toward free discourse. But they are just the canaries in the coal mine.

Example Research Questionnaire Written in APA style

Rampell, C. (2017, Sept. 18). "A chilling study shows how hostile college students are toward free speech." *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

Analysis questions

1. Which research question(s) does this source answer?

This source helps me to get a sense of current concerns about the state of free speech on college campuses. It also provides statistical information that helps me to answer questions about how gender, political affiliation, and academic status might influence student attitudes about campus free speech.

2. Describe the source and the author's purpose. Is this a study, an editorial, a magazine article, etc.?

This is an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*. The author's purpose is to warn readers that attitudes about free speech on college campuses are becoming more polarized and that we should be very concerned. She concludes that these attitudes are not unique to colleges and that we should pay more attention to the larger trend of hostility and partisan acrimony in the US toward civil rights.

3. Evaluate the credibility of this source (author, publisher, currency, quality of sources etc.).

The Washington Post is an established and respected major newspaper with millions of readers. Its editorial standards for fact-checking and vetting of stories can be found on the American Society of News Editors website ASNE.org. However, editorials do not receive the same sorts of scrutiny that journalistic pieces must undergo, so it's important to cross verify evidence that's provided in opinion pieces like this. The study she refers to was conducted by a reputable firm and has a relatively large sample size. The author, Catherine Rampell, is an award-winning journalist who specializes in data-driven stories. The source is from this year

and refers to a recent study by the Brookings Institution, a well-known thinktank. The Brookings Institution describes itself as “non-partisan,” and is commonly referenced by conservative and liberal politicians.

4. Provide an objective one-paragraph summary of this source.

Responding to the growing trend of “safe spaces” on US college campuses, Rampell explains the inherent risk of equating speech to violence. She argues that this potentially justifies responding to offensive speech with violence. To support her assertion, Rampell refers to a recent national survey of college students by the Brookings Institution about their attitudes on campus free speech. Rampell suggests that the findings paint a “chilling” picture of hostility toward free speech that might result from a misunderstanding of the First Amendment. Rampell is most concerned about students’ responses to how they feel offensive speech should be dealt with on campus. Half of respondents supported disrupting speech they consider offensive, and about 20% support violence as a response. Rampell concludes that universities play an important and conspicuous role in free speech and public discourse, but there’s a larger national problem with attitudes toward free speech and civil liberties that plays out at universities.

5. Write down one quote or specific piece of evidence that you think will be useful. Explain why.

One finding sparked my interest when I was reading this article: “There were no statistically significant differences in response by political party affiliation. Men, however, were three times as likely as women to endorse using physical force to silence controversial views (30 percent of men vs. 10 percent of women).” I think this data is interesting for thinking about how violence is gendered. It might also be useful for devising ways to anticipate and prevent campus violence.

6. List any new vocabulary and/or concepts you learned from this source.

I didn’t encounter any unfamiliar concepts in this article, but the term “whataboutist” was new (and funny). I do intend to read the study it’s based on as another source for my assignment.

7. How does this source address its own limitations (or opposing views) related to the topic?

Rampell acknowledges that inconsistencies between “lip service” about free speech by colleges and their tendency to quash speech they don’t like might be partially attributable to factors outside of their control and not simply their “hypocrisy.” Ultimately, she says that universities are not alone to blame in this problem, meaning there is a larger discussion that she thinks informs her topic.

8. What new questions do you have after reading this source?

Rampell made an interesting point about certain controversial speakers like Milo Yiannopoulos purposely seeking to provoke acrimony and violence to gain political leverage and forward their political narratives. If this is the case, it begs the question, why should universities be hosting speakers without legitimate credentials and ethical standards as campus speakers? I’m curious to learn more about how universities determine which individuals they invite to speak on campus and what merit standards, if any, exist.