

## [Some Pundits Say There's No Campus Free Speech 'Crisis.' Here's Why They're Wrong.](#)

"Everything we think about the political correctness debate is wrong," says *Vox*'s Matt Yglesias. Not exactly.

[Robby Soave](#) | Mar. 19, 2018 9:35 am



STEPHEN LAM/REUTERS/NewscomIs the campus free speech "crisis" a

myth? Well, it depends on your definition of *crisis*, but there's plenty of evidence that some kind of problem exists, despite what several recent contrarian takes would have us believe.

Last week, several writers have sought to prove the tales of political-correctness-run-amok that I [routinely cover](#) for *Reason* don't represent a trend. Moreover, they say, the evidence suggests the opposite: Support for free speech is growing, young people like free speech more than other groups, and college is broadly a civilizing experience.

"Everything we think about the political correctness debate is wrong," [wrote](#) *Vox*'s Matt Yglesias. (This isn't exactly a new opinion from Yglesias—I've seen him [previously claim](#) that political correctness is actually a good thing.)

"People always think students are hostile to free speech," says the headline on a *Washington Post* [article](#) by Andrew Hartman, a historian at Illinois State University. "They never really are." The image accompanying the article is of Milo Yiannopoulos, whose attempts to speak at Berkeley were met with violence, both [threatened](#) and [actual](#), some of which I witnessed.

Also at *The Washington Post*, Jeffrey Sachs [makes a statement](#) no less strong than Yglesias's and Hartman's: "The campus free speech 'crisis' is a myth. Here are the facts."

Sachs teaches at Acadia University, where an associate professor of psychology, Rick Mehta, is under investigation for voicing conservative opinions in his classroom. His department head complained that some of his students refuse to come to class because the experience of listening to him talk about [why the gender wage gap is exaggerated](#) produces too much anxiety. A professor of social work [told](#) the *Toronto Star* why she came down on the offended students' side, saying Mehta's opinion "does border on hate speech."

Sachs, Yglesias, and Hartman say we must set aside such anecdotes and dig into the data. But they are doing the exact same thing they accuse the propagators of the crisis narrative of doing: using an incomplete picture to make extreme and unsupported claims. While there's plenty of room to debate the extent of the so-called campus P.C. crisis, its detractors make too much of one part of the data while glossing over evidence that should concern everyone who claims to care about free speech.

Sachs and Yglesias both cite the General Social Survey (GSS), which has measured the public's opinion on a variety of questions—including tolerance for offensive views—since the 1970s. The findings strongly suggest that the public is growing more tolerant, and that young people are the most tolerant of all, according to Sachs:

On almost every question, young people aged 18 to 34 are the most likely to support free speech. Check out the data for yourself. Not only are young people the most likely to express tolerance for offensive speech, but with almost every question posed by the GSS, each generation of young people has been more tolerant than the last.

To his credit, Sachs also mentions the GSS's significant limitations: The data include 18- to 34-year-olds who are *not* students, and it specifically excludes students who live in "group quarters," i.e. dorms. Additionally, the wording of some of the questions is outdated. A much larger proportion of the U.S. population is in favor of letting "homosexuals" and "communists" speak in public today than in 1975. But tolerance of homosexuality is (thankfully) at an all-time high, and communist speech doesn't invoke the same fears as during the Cold War. Put another way: The *kind* of speech people find offensive may have changed, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are more willing to tolerate the kind of speech they *do* find offensive.

Case in point: racist speech. In 1976, 73 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 34 thought a racist should be allowed to make a speech in public, according to the GSS. By 2015, that percentage had fallen to 56 percent. Young people went from being the age group most tolerant of racist speech to the age group *least* tolerant. On the question of "should a racist book be removed from the public library," the findings were similar: Youth support for censoring such a book increased from 25 percent to 39 percent.

Certainly, this finding should be weighed against the GSS's general findings that younger people, and the highly educated, tend to be more tolerant. (People with a college degree are much more likely to say that anti-religious speech should be allowed in public, for instance.) But other surveys paint a somewhat different picture, including one conducted by the polling firm YouGov and published by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. In his piece, Hartman cites the YouGov survey as evidence that "the vast majority of students, including conservatives, feel relatively uninhibited in expressing their views." But 58 percent of students, [according to the survey](#), say they want to be part of a campus where they wouldn't be exposed to "intolerant and offensive ideas." Another 48 percent think the First Amendment should not protect hate speech.

And cutting against the GSS's findings, a massive 2017 [survey](#) conducted by the Cato Institute found evidence that students' attitudes toward free speech might actually be more illiberal than other Americans'. As I [wrote](#) in my summary of the Cato poll:

About half of the country's college students (51 percent) believe disrespectful people should be stripped of their free speech rights, while 55 percent of Americans overall think the opposite—that people are entitled to free speech regardless....

Cato found strong support for keeping hate speech legal among Americans with a college education: 64 percent said the government should not restrict hate speech. But current students were evenly split on the same question. And Americans under the age of 30 were the most likely demographic to say

that hate speech is equivalent to violence: 60 percent believed this, compared with 57 percent of senior citizens and just 49 percent of middle-aged Americans.

To the extent that the Cato and FIRE findings contradict the GSS, I think it's because of the way the questions were worded. Students think gay people, communists, and atheists should be permitted to speak in public because they don't consider these people's views to be hateful, offensive, or intolerant. At the same time, some students think speech that denigrates racial minorities, gay people, women, the trans community, and Muslims is not just unacceptable, but equivalent to violence. The [survey](#) that best captured this result was undertaken by McLaughlin & Associates and published in *New Criterion* in November of 2015: 50 percent of people between the ages of 17 and 30 said a university should ban the publication of a political cartoon that criticized a particular religion or ethnicity.

When I talk to students who are protesting speakers they find offensive, they generally tell me that they support the First Amendment and don't want the government to arrest or punish people for engaging in free speech. They also tell me some combination of the following: Hate speech *isn't* free speech; if marginalized people feel threatened by the speech, the speech is actually violence; neither campus authorities nor mobs of angry students are forms of government force, and thus it's not illegal or unethical when these entities shut down offensive speech.

But let's say Yglesias, Sachs, and Hartman are right: that most young people are more pro-free speech than both older Americans and young people of the past. This still would not necessarily mean there is no campus free speech "crisis." That's because the initiators of campus P.C. incidents are not the entire student body; they're a small subset of left-wing activists. These radicals may be completely outnumbered on campus. Their ranks may not be growing—they may even be shrinking, to judge from the data about college as a [civilizing experience](#) and the increasing tolerance of young people in general. But what matters is whether their *power to enforce* their desire for censorship is increasing.

It's hard to tell for certain whether it is, but at the very least there's reason to be concerned. 2016 saw [twice as many](#) would-be campus speakers being disinvited as 2015, according to FIRE. And in 2017, a record-breaking 900 students and faculty asked FIRE to help [defend](#) their free expression rights. Greg Lukianoff, the president of FIRE, has [said](#) that "the biggest and most noticeable change in campus censorship in recent years has been the shift in student attitudes." While students were previously the campus faction most supportive of free speech, it has become increasingly common over the last few years that the radical students are themselves the censors.

Here we can point to a potential exogenous cause: the federal government's [sexual harassment dictates](#), which hit universities in 2011. This was the year the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights released its infamous "dear colleague" letter on sexual misconduct. According to federal bureaucrats, sexual harassment and sexual violence were forms of gender-based discrimination and thus illegal under Title IX, the statute that mandates equality between the sexes in educational institutions. The Office for Civil Rights defined "sexual harassment" very broadly, extending it to cover sexually suggestive expression that is clearly protected under the First Amendment and in some cases [may even belong in the classroom](#). No judicial body has signed off on these interpretations. Even Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a feminist icon, [thinks they violate certain fundamental rights](#).

The most censorious students have learned to use Title IX for their own purposes, [punishing professors](#) and other students who make statements that offend them. Awareness of Title IX among student-activists spread rapidly over the last few years—the advocacy organization Know Your IX came into being in 2013, for example.

There may be a broader cultural shift too. The political scientist Charles Murray—who is an expert on getting attacked in college campuses, whatever else you may think of him—said [this](#) about the famous student-led shutdown of his lecture at Middlebury College:

In the mid-1990s, I could count on students who had wanted to listen to start yelling at the protesters after a certain point, "Sit down and shut up, we want to hear what he has to say." That kind of pushback had an effect. It reminded the protesters that they were a minority. I am assured by people at Middlebury that their protesters are a minority as well. But they are a minority that has intimidated the majority. The people in the audience who wanted to hear me speak were completely cowed. That cannot be allowed to stand. A campus where a majority of students are fearful to speak openly because they know a minority will jump on them is no longer an intellectually free campus in any meaningful sense.

We shouldn't overgeneralize anecdotes, and some critics of college culture do spin Middlebury-type events into a dubious narrative of constant and increasing censorship. But whether things are getting worse or not, we should agree to condemn the students who physically attacked Murray and his entourage, who [forced Heather Mac Donald to flee](#), who responded to Yiannopoulos by smashing windows and setting fires, who shouted down [Christina Hoff Sommers](#), who no-platformed [the American Civil Liberties Union](#), who invaded [Suzanne Goldberg's classroom](#). Meanwhile, illiberal students' threats of violence have caused colleges to spend prohibitively large amounts of money on security measures—sometimes passing those costs along to the student group sponsoring a controversial speaker. Again, whether this constitute a "crisis" depends upon your definition of the word, and your frame of reference. There's less illiberalism in community colleges and some state schools, and more of it in the most elite liberal arts colleges—Middlebury, Yale, Reed, the Claremont colleges, etc.


All that said, critics of the crisis narrative are right to push back on the most extreme declarations of doom on campus. It's certainly true that there are bigger threats to free speech than illiberal college students. (President Donald Trump is [no defender of free expression](#).) And pundits on the right frequently commit two mistakes related to political correctness: They [overdramatize](#) the danger to their own beliefs and [minimize](#) the danger for everyone else.

In fact, the biggest factor that might have led to the crisis narrative being overhyped is something Yglesias, Sachs, and Hartman all declined to mention in their articles: the amount of media coverage being paid specifically to political correctness on campus. *The College Fix* (where I used to work), *Campus Reform*, and *Red Alert Politics* are just a few of the news websites that came into existence in the last decade to serve the explicit function of calling attention to college free speech debacles. They frequently document real instances of serious abuse on the part of censorious campus entities, filling a role that simply didn't exist until recently. These stories are increasingly discussed on conservative talk radio and Fox News, where *students undermining free speech* has become a [deservedly popular topic](#). Since vastly fewer outlets were reporting on these incidents prior to 2010, it may seem like they are becoming more frequent just because they're getting more attention. In the 2000s, a far-left student group that published a list of insane demands might have received nothing more than token acknowledgment from the campus newspaper. In 2018, the same student group might get wall-to-wall national coverage and criticism.

It can be hard to tell whether an already existing phenomenon is simply being covered more completely, or whether a new phenomenon came into being sometime around 2012. Either way, it shouldn't be so hard to admit that some radicals have resorted to violence and property destruction to prevent other students from hearing a dissident perspective, and that this is not a good thing. If we shouldn't exaggerate how often this happens, we shouldn't write it off entirely either.

Yglesias's piece concludes by noting that a lot of not-totally-related things end up being denounced as political correctness run amok. Sometimes anti-P.C. crusaders are angry about true instances of abject censorship on campus, other times they just want the left to be [more forgiving of wrongthink](#). The latter cases aren't examples of censorship, properly defined. It's certainly true that some anti-P.C. diehards, in their zeal to oppose the left, come out sounding as censorious as the people they're criticizing.

But there's just one group of people who agree, for instance, that violence is justified in order to prevent Nazi sympathizers from speaking: [the far left](#). And relative to the rest of the country, elite liberal arts campuses are havens for far-left thought. So it shouldn't be beyond belief that the hate-speech-isn't-free-speech view has taken root among a group of radical activists who now command more power to shut down debate on campus.

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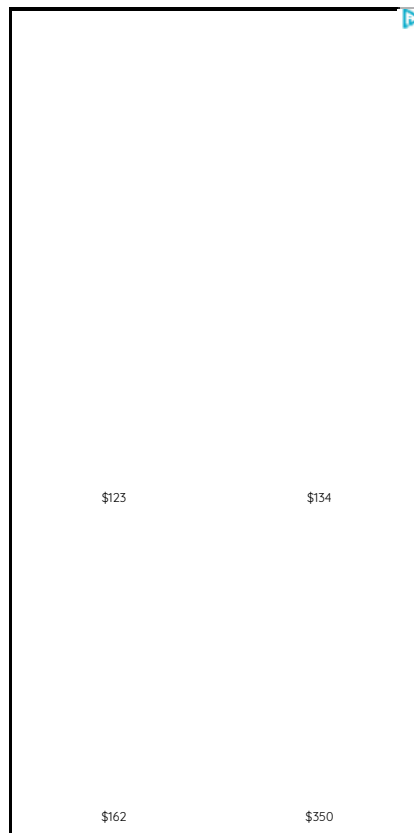
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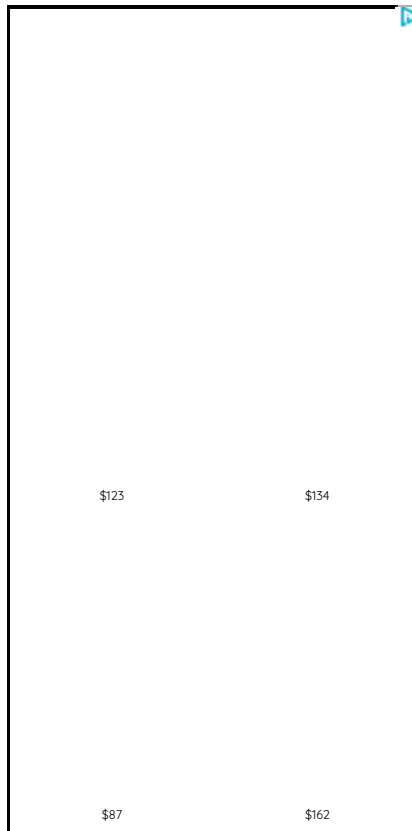
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