

**Inconsistency of Americans' Opinions on Free Speech:  
Evidence from Three Survey Experiments**

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## **Abstract**

A conventional wisdom is that Americans strongly support freedom of expression. However, recent studies show that opinions on the specific controversial cases involving freedom of speech can be affected by ideology and partisanship. In this project, we explore how consistent is Americans' support for the general principles of free speech. In three survey-experimental studies that ask questions about different aspects of free expression, we show that Americans' opinions on free speech are inconsistent. First, responses to the free speech questions are strongly affected by their polarity. Second, reliability of the resulting scale is surprisingly low. Third, employing double-barreled questions that contrast free speech to other values (social justice and patriotism) increases the scale's reliability. Our findings have important implications for the measurement of support for free speech in surveys and for the current debate about ideology, partisanship, and free expression in the United States.

*Keywords:* free speech, ideology, partisanship, survey experiment, values

Observers of U.S. politics typically contend that Americans support free speech.<sup>1</sup> According to Pew Research Center, respondents in the United States are more supportive of free expression than those in any other surveyed country in the world.<sup>2</sup> This includes both opposition to government censorship and acceptance of others' ability to make offensive statements. Academic research has supported this view: framing political issues in terms of free speech can boost support even for the most controversial speakers or events (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997).

However, the idea that Americans unconditionally support free expression should be complicated in two ways. First, research shows that respondents are willing to consider restrictions on free speech, especially in the context of threat. Data from shortly after the September 11 attacks show that Americans may be willing to trade civil liberties for security (Davis and Silver 2004). The same phenomenon extends to cases when limitations of civil liberties are justified by a need to address violent crime (Mondak and Hurwitz 2012).

Second, recent experimental evidence suggests that ideology and partisanship drive support for free speech and civil liberties, rather than a principled belief in free expression. For instance, ideological conservatives are less likely to see political protest as legitimate, but this effect is substantially lower when protesters champion conservative causes (Barker, Nalder and Newham 2021). Invoking pro-free expression frames, such as “cancel culture,” with respect to political protest may backfire by decreasing support for ideological outgroups—again, primarily among those on the right (Fahey, Roberts and Utych 2022). In a similar vein, repressive response

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<sup>1</sup> Legally, free speech is defined through absence of government restrictions. However, a popular interpretation sees it as the affirmative right to speak one's mind in public. For further discussion, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/cancel-culture-free-speech-poll.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/12/americans-more-tolerant-of-offensive-speech-than-others-in-the-world/>

toward political protest has a greater level of support when protesters belong to a social or ideological outgroup (Edwards and Arnon 2021).

Overall, Americans' support for free expression seems to be inconsistent and to depend on ideological alignment with the parties involved. However, most evidence for this conjecture comes from experiments that ask respondents about their opinions on particular speakers or events. As a result, it is unclear whether free-expression attitudes are truly malleable, or they only appear to be malleable due to design choices. In this paper, we address this question by asking respondents about their support for free speech as an abstract principle. Across three separate studies, we find that Americans' support for free speech is indeed subject to measurement biases, including potential acquiescence, and is not internally consistent. Experimental components of our studies show that framing the free speech issue in terms of recognizably partisan values make respondents' attitudes more reliable.

Our results provide evidence that Americans' support for free speech is less robust than observers of U.S. politics often assume. Substantively, we show that—in agreement with recent survey-experimental studies—free speech attitudes are sensitive to partisanship. Methodologically, we demonstrate that the dominant experimental designs that focus on specific free speech controversies are a better choice than abstract questions.

### **Measuring Support for Free Speech**

Early measures of free speech attitudes have been based on an index of political tolerance towards social and ideological groups considered “nonconformist.” The corresponding scale asks, for each group, whether its members should be allowed to (1) speak in public, (2) teach in a college or university, and (3) have their books available in a public library. The original scale was used to measure tolerance towards communists and socialists in the United States in 1950s

(Stouffer 1955). Later versions of the scale included other groups like atheists, homosexuals, militarists, and racists. Analysis of the scale's reliability has returned contradicting results. On the one hand, factor analysis shows that tolerance towards left-wing and right-wing groups load on the single dimension strongly correlated with education (Bobo and Licardi 1989). On the other hand, latent class analysis indicates presence of a non-trivial share of respondents who are selectively tolerant towards specific groups (McCutcheon 1985).

Besides these contradictions, the tolerance scale has a number of limitations related to its content. The view of certain groups as non-conformist is context specific and has likely changed from 1950s to 1980s to the present. In addition, groups included in the scale are defined on the basis of different characteristics (political beliefs, non-political beliefs, and social identity), raising concerns about comparability. In an attempt to overcome these limitations, researchers have moved to asking respondents about the "most disliked group" and then about their readiness to extend civil liberties onto that specific group (Gibson 1992; Sullivan et al. 1981). This approach, while measuring individual tolerance, does not allow to assess its consistency (i.e., the degree to which someone treats ideologically congruent and incongruent groups similarly).

Current research on public support for civil liberties and free speech mostly relies on survey-experimental designs. Respondents are usually asked about their opinions about a specific controversy around the principle of free expression, and experimental treatments manipulate various aspects of the controversy. One prominent stream of this literature explores how certain aspects of political protests, such as the protesters' ideology and use of violence, may impact public support (Barker, Nalder, and Newham 2021; Edwards and Arnon 2021). It is important to note, though, that protests represent only a subset of events that implicate free expression. Other experimental designs ask about controversial statements and potential responses to them (Canelo,

Hansford, and Nicholson 2017), or explore respondents' reactions to concept like the "cancel culture" (Fahey, Roberts, and Utych 2022). Some of these experiments also include more general or abstract questions about free speech attitudes, but usually as single items that do not allow analyzing their internal consistency.<sup>3</sup>

Why is it important to study consistency of attitudes toward free speech as an abstract concept in the U.S. public? Prominent works from Converse (1964/2006) to Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) show that Americans' political attitudes are not structured around ideological values, but instead follow people's group attachments. Moreover, there is evidence that political tolerance and opinions on civil liberties also depend on people's affect toward the social groups in question (Chong 1993; Kuklinski et al. 1991). Adherence to the values of free expression among ordinary Americans is sometimes seen as a guardrail against authoritarian tendencies of political elites under current levels of political polarization. However, if this adherence is not as robust and can be weakened by group loyalties and elite cues, there is reason to be concerned about the future of liberal-democratic governance in the United States.

### **Research Design**

We explored distributions and internal consistency of Americans' opinions on free speech in three online survey studies. Information about the studies' timing, recruitment platforms, sample sizes, and respondents' demographics are presented in Table 1.

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Fahey, Roberts, and Utych (2022) ask about agreement with the following statement: "Cancel culture is a big problem in today's society."

**Table 1.** The three studies

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Time	November 2017	November 2018	July 2021
Platform	MTurk	MTurk	Lucid
Sample size	388	964	1,487
Demographics			
Median age category	25–34	35–44	35–44
Male/female ratio	54:46	46:54	49:51
College-educated	46.1%	53.2%	42.2%
Median income	\$40,000 - \$49,999	\$50,000 - \$59,999	\$35,000 - \$39,999
Non-Hispanic white	75.5%	80.5%	69.1%
D/R/I ratio	48:20:32	39:34:27	46:28:26

*Note.* D/R/I = Democrats/Republicans/independents.

In all three studies, respondents were asked about their agreement with a battery of four statements on free speech (see Table 2). Since we were concerned about acquiescence (Krosnick 1999, 552-55), the scale was balanced in terms of polarity. For two items, agreement implied unconditional support for freedom of expression. The other two items were formulated so that agreement indicated skepticism regarding unqualified application of the free speech principle.

**Table 2.** Free speech items

Free speech issues are often in the news these days. Below, you will see several statements that people sometimes make in the discussion about free speech. For each, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree.

- Suppression of free speech is unacceptable. (*Suppression*)
- An absolutist approach to free speech is counter-productive. (*Absolutism*)
- Free speech is a basic constitutional right. (*Basic right*)
- There are values more important than free speech. (*Other values*)

*Note.* Item order randomized in the survey. Item labels in parentheses. Responses given on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree.”

All three studies also included an experimental portion, in which we deliberately conflated the issue of free speech with other political values. In designing these experimental conditions, we followed recent controversies, in which liberals and conservatives offered arguments in favor of limiting freedom of expression for the opposite side. For instance, in 2017

then-president Donald Trump accused NFL players who kneeled during the pre-game performance of the U.S. national anthem to protest police brutality and racism of disrespecting the country.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, American colleges and universities witnessed a number of cases in which students blocked conservative speakers from holding events on campuses, and such efforts were usually justified as protecting marginalized groups.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3.** Free speech items with additional value frames

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Social justice:

- Suppression of free speech is unacceptable, *even when motivated by desire to protect minorities.*
- An absolutist approach to free speech is counter-productive *because it is often used against the most vulnerable groups.*
- Free speech is a basic constitutional right, *and it cannot be restricted by references to “hate speech,” which is not a legally defined concept.*
- There are values more important than free speech, *such as diversity and social equality.*

Patriotism:

- Suppression of free speech is unacceptable, *even when motivated by desire to protect the U.S. flag and the national anthem.*
  - An absolutist approach to free speech is counter-productive *because it is often used to promote divisions within American society.*
  - Free speech is a basic constitutional right, *and it cannot be restricted by references to “respect for the country,” which is not a legally defined concept.*
  - There are values more important than free speech, *such as patriotism and national unity.*
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*Note.* Preamble similar to the condition with no counter-frame. Item order randomized in the survey. Responses given on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree.”

We used these cases to develop two value-based frames against the principle of free expression that were recognizably partisan: social justice and patriotism. Then, we constructed two versions of the question battery that combined the original free speech items with these counter-frames. These items are presented in Table 3. In all three studies, respondents were

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>

<sup>5</sup> A prominent example was an invitation of a right-wing activist Milo Yiannopoulos to speak at the University of California, Berkeley, by College Republicans that led to widespread protests: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/02/us/university-california-berkeley-free-speech-milo-yiannopoulos.html>

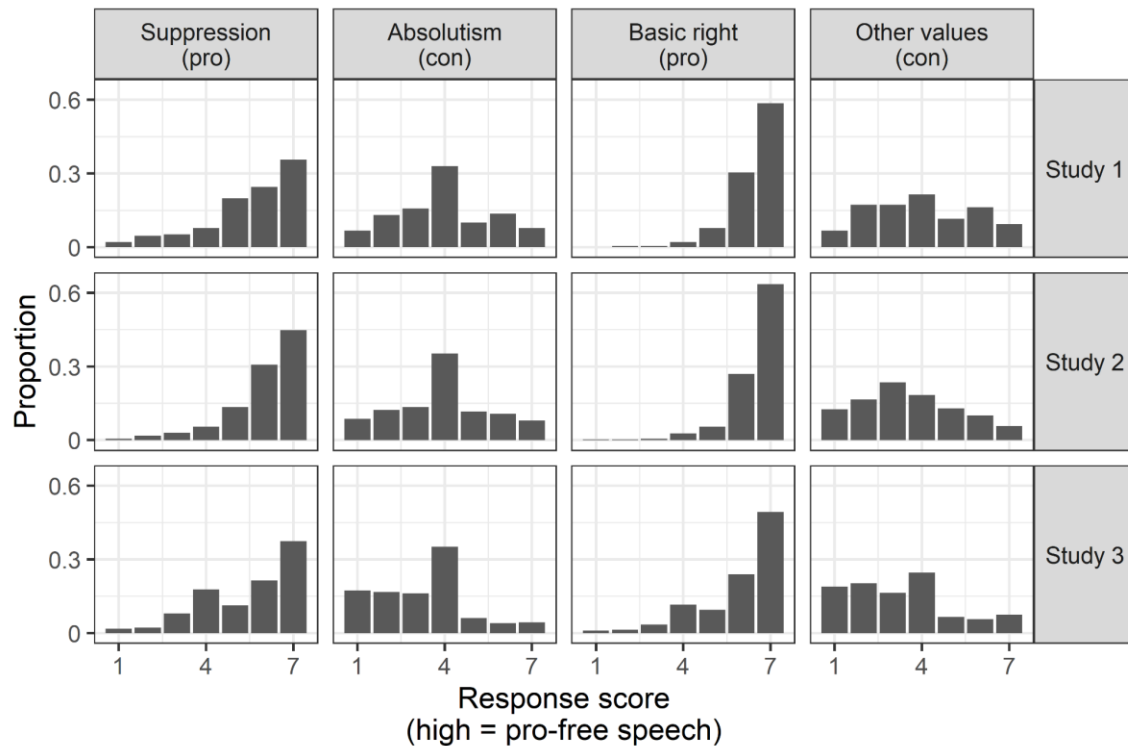


randomly asked one of the three versions of the battery: original battery, social justice frame, and patriotism frame (with the exception that Study 1 did not include the patriotism frame).

## **Results**

We begin by documenting the observed distributions of responses to the four original free speech items (no counter-frames; see Table 2). They are presented in Figure 1. Respondents across all three samples strongly believe that free speech constitutes a basic right and oppose suppressing speech. At the same time, though, respondents are skeptical of an absolutist interpretation of the free speech principle and appear to be willing to consider trade-offs between free speech and other (unnamed) values. Overall, when free speech questions are positively phrased, respondents tend to respond in strong support of free speech. This is especially the case when the language of “rights” is invoked. The support is more tenuous when questions are negatively phrased. As a result, the mean support for free speech depends on the question’s polarity (i.e., whether agreement indicates unconditional endorsement of the free expression principle), suggesting some degree of acquiescence in responses. Methodologically, these results once again demonstrate the importance of using balanced scale in survey measurement. Substantively, this analysis shows that, while generally supporting free speech, Americans are not absolutist: they are willing to consider trade-offs on free speech when other important values are implicated.

The dependence of response distributions on question polarity, however, does not necessarily imply low internal consistency of opinions on free speech. It is possible that mean scores are affected by question polarity whereas individual responses remain consistent across the four questions. To investigate this possibility, we proceed with confirmatory factor analysis. The goal is to understand whether responses to the four specific items reflect respondents’ latent attitudes toward the free expression principle.



**Figure 1.** Distributions of response scores

*Note.* Responses recoded with high scores indicating support for free speech.

Results are presented in Table 4. The conclusions are somewhat different across the three studies. Study 1 shows good overall fit of the factor model as indicated by the comparative fit index or CFI (a common threshold is 0.95; Hu and Bentler 1999). At the same time, factor loading for the “absolutism” item is relatively low (a common threshold is 0.4; Guadagnoli and Velicer 1988). Study 2 shows both poor overall model fit and low factor loadings for two the items with negative polarity. In Study 3, the fit is even worse whereas loading for the “absolutism” item is negative and loading for the “other values” item is effectively zero (both are negative polarity). Overall, the results suggest a low internal consistency of the four items. It seems to be caused primarily by the questions’ polarity: while positively worded items load on the common factor well, this is not the case for the negatively worded items. Once again, we find that Americans’ opinions on free speech seem to depend on how exactly they are asked about it.

**Table 4.** Results of factor analysis

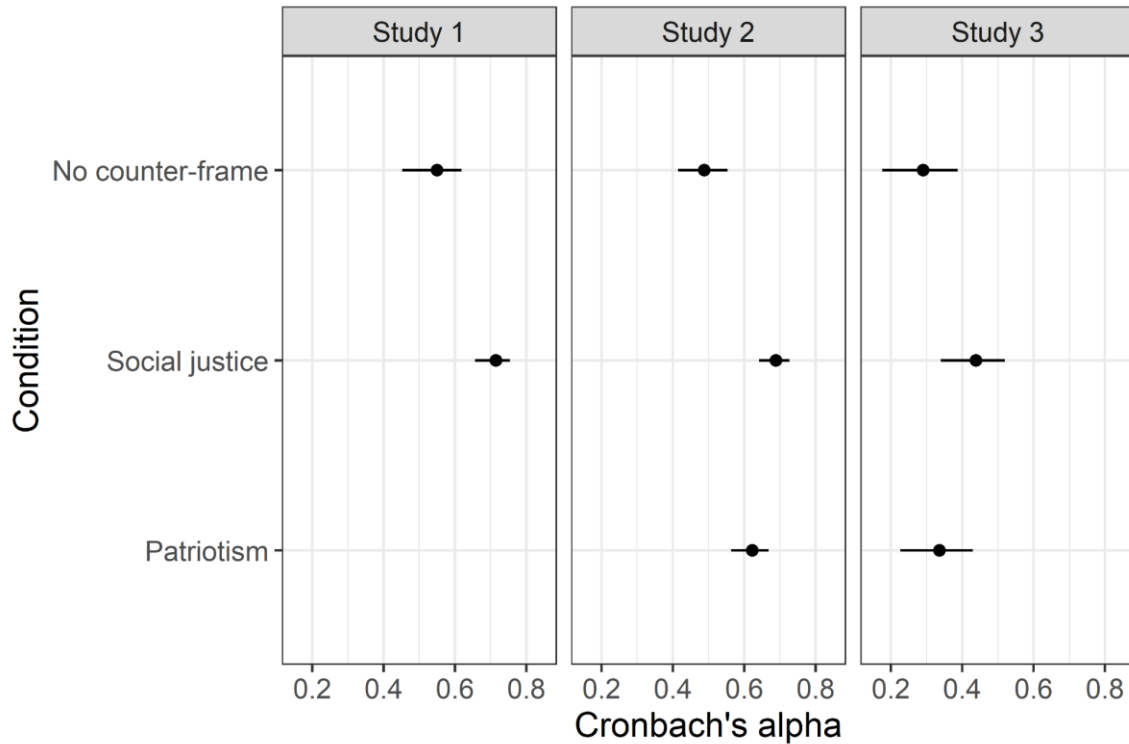
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Suppression (pro)	0.75	0.82	0.78
Absolutism (con)	0.27	0.17	-0.18
Basic right (pro)	0.71	0.69	0.68
Other values (con)	0.53	0.31	0.03
CFI	.965	.827	.744
<i>N</i>	191	326	495

Is it possible to increase consistency of expressed opinions on free speech? Given the importance of ideology and partisanship for assessments of free speech-related controversies, we expect that this can be done by introducing recognizably political frames to the debate on free expression. To test this conjecture, we use data from experimental parts of the three studies, in which respondents are presented with modified versions of the original free speech battery. The modified versions of the scale contrast the free expression principle with other values: protection of marginalized groups (the social justice frame) and national unity (the patriotism frame).

Since the three versions of the scale consist of different questions (see Tables 2 and 3), the means across the three experimental conditions are not comparable. Instead, we compare internal consistency of individual responses in the control condition to the conditions with additional frames. These comparisons allow us to see whether opinions of free speech are more or less consistent than opinions on values like social justice and patriotism. We measure scale reliability using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Since its sampling distribution is unknown, we rely on the bootstrap method to account for uncertainty (i.e., estimate 95% confidence intervals).

Experimental results are presented in Figure 2. They show that in all three studies, reliability is greater whenever a counter frame—either social justice or patriotism—is included. Furthermore, in conditions without counter-frames, scale reliability is below the common acceptability threshold of 0.7 (Cortina 1993). This threshold is achieved only in studies 1 and 2,

and only in the social justice condition. Altogether, these results suggest that, on their own, free speech attitudes are less consistent than attitudes on values that are recognizably partisan in modern U.S. politics, such as social justice.



**Figure 2.** Free speech scale reliability by experimental condition  
*Note.* No patriotism counter-frame in Study 1

### Conclusion

For a long time, conventional wisdom has contended that Americans are supportive of free speech. At the same time, debates around prominent controversies regarding freedom of expression are often dominated by ideological or partisan considerations. In this paper, we have addressed this contradiction by examining Americans' support for free speech as an abstract principle. In three studies, we investigate distributions and internal consistency of respondents' answers to four questions about different aspects of free expression. The studies also include

experimental portions in which we introduce competing frames (social justice and patriotism) to see how the internal consistency of free speech opinions compares to more partisan values.

Across all three studies, we have found that answers to the free speech questions are strongly impacted by polarity: respondents tend to strongly agree with positively worded items (thus showing signs of acquiescence) but choose neutral options in response to negatively worded items. Confirmatory factor analysis shows that individual responses are not internally consistent, and question polarity, again, is the main problem. Finally, experimental results show that scale reliability increases when competing frames are introduced, meaning that respondents' opinions on competing and—given current U.S. political climate—more partisan principles like social justice and patriotism are more consistent than opinions on free speech. Importantly, these results are in line with some previous findings that demonstrate, first, Americans' willingness to limit free speech under some circumstances (Davis and Silver 2004; Mondak and Hurwitz 2012), and, second, the importance of partisan identity in assessment of free speech-related controversies (Edwards and Arnon 2021; Fahey, Roberts, and Utych 2022).

Our findings have important implications for the study of free speech attitudes as well as American public opinion more generally. First, most recent experimental studies do not ask respondents about their general opinions on free expression. Instead, the dependent variable is usually an assessment of a specific speaker, event, or controversy (Canelo, Hansford, and Nicholson 2017; Fahey, Roberts, and Utych 2022). Our results largely validate this design choice by demonstrating that Americans' support for free speech as an abstract principle is inconsistent and, thus, potentially open to partisan framing effects.

Second, scholars of American public opinion from Converse (1964/2006) to Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) have argued that individual attitudes are unstable and often derived from group

loyalties. Our findings suggest that these pessimistic conclusions hold true even when applied to support for free speech—one of the central parts of the American political ethos. Given the importance of free expression for democratic governance, this phenomenon can have important consequences, especially as observers notice increasing authoritarian tendencies in U.S. politics.

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