

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Free speech on campus? The impact of political congruence and fear of sanctions on perceptions of freedom of speech and willingness to speak out among German university students

Freie Rede auf dem Campus? Einflüsse von politischer Kongruenz und Sanktionsängsten auf die Meinungsfreiheitswahrnehmung und Redebereitschaft deutscher Studierender

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1. Theoretical framework, research questions and hypotheses

Freedom of speech is not only a fundamental human right but also an indispensable precondition for functioning liberal democracies (Garton Ash, 2016; Reinemann & Sacher, 2025). However, growing segments of the German population perceive their freedom of expression as increasingly constrained (Menzner & Traunmüller, 2023; Rothut et al., 2023). Although universities are normatively conceived as sites of free intellectual exchange and tolerance of opposing views (Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021; Zhou & Barbaro, 2023), campuses around the world and in Germany as well have become arenas of contested debate around “political correctness”, “wokeness, and “cancel culture”, with positions ranging from concerns about a narrowing of acceptable discourse to dismissals of such concerns as media-amplified anecdotes (Norris, 2023; Revers & Traunmüller, 2020; Traunmüller, 2023).

Previous studies of German academia have predominantly focused on perceptions and experiences of faculty members (Petersen, 2020, 2021; ZEIT-Stiftung, 2024). This has started to change only recently (Diehl et al., 2025). This study contributes to further closing this research gap by providing the first broader empirical account of free speech perceptions and participation in controversial classroom discussions among German university students across disciplines and regions. Notably, the present study is based on data collected in summer 2023, and it thus predates the events and developments following the Hamas attacks on Israel of October 7, 2023, and the war in Gaza that sparked discussions and protests at several German universities.

The study conceptualizes perceived freedom of speech as a reality perception (Rothut et al., 2023; Sacher & Reinemann, 2025) and mainly builds upon the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). It therefore focuses on the potential effects of political congruence, i.e., the degree to which students perceive their own political orientation as aligned with that of their peers and instructors, respectively. The study hypothesizes that anticipated sanctions (e.g., expected social exclusion from peers or negative academic consequences from instructors) will be negatively associated with both free-speech perceptions and willingness to speak out in controversial classroom discussions (Neubaum & Krämer, 2018; Rothut et al., 2023).

1.1 Research questions

(FF1) How do German students perceive freedom of speech at their universities?

(FF2) How do German students in different subject areas differ in their perception of freedom of speech at their universities?

(FF3) *How frequent are classroom discussions about current controversial issues at German universities, and how often do students participate in them?*

(FF4) *How do different subject areas differ in terms of the frequency of discussions on controversial current issues and in students' participation in them?*

1.2 Hypotheses

(H1) *Higher political congruence with (a) peers and (b) instructors is associated with more positive perceptions of campus free speech.*

(H2) *Higher political congruence with (a) peers and (b) instructors is associated with greater willingness to speak out in classroom discussions.*

(H3) *Greater anticipated sanctions from (a) peers and (b) instructors are associated with more negative free-speech perceptions.*

(H4) *Greater anticipated sanctions from (a) peers and (b) instructors are associated with lower willingness to speak out.*

2. Method

Data were collected via a standardized online survey in July–August 2023 (by commercial access panel Bilendi & Respondi). After quality screening, the final weighted sample comprised $N = 897$ students from 16 German federal states and over 99 universities. Post-stratification weighting was applied to correct for the overrepresentation of humanities students and women relative to official statistics, considering gender distribution within six disciplinary clusters. To account for potential effects of weighting procedures and imputation of missing values, comprehensive robustness checks were performed with various model specifications.

Perceptions of campus free speech were captured via an eight-item scale ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.21$) adapted from Rothut et al. (2023), covering unwritten norms and taboos, the costs of honest expression, political correctness, and equal access to voice (higher values indicate more negative perceptions). Willingness to speak out was assessed via a single item on self-reported frequency of participation in controversial class discussions ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.00$; $N = 670$; those reporting no controversial discussions in class were excluded). Political congruence with peers and instructors was operationalized as the absolute difference between students' own left-right orientation and their estimates of peers'/instructors' political orientations. Fear of sanctions from peers (5 items, $\alpha = .75$) and instructors (6 items, $\alpha = .77$) was measured as summed dichotomous indices. Additional predictors were political orientation (1 = left, 11 = right), party preference (dummy-coded), political disaffection (composite index, $\alpha = .66$), satisfaction with democracy, political interest ($\alpha = .94$), age, and gender.

3. Results, discussion and implications

The findings challenge too alarmist narratives: Most students perceive free speech as largely intact: 71% agree (at least somewhat) that they are not excessively criticized for honest opinions, 73% agree that all have equal opportunities to be heard, and 63% note that political correctness does not suppress important discussions. However, 43% of students acknowledge “unwritten laws” about what opinions are acceptable in the courses of their main subject. No significant differences in free-speech perceptions are found across subject area clusters ($F = 1.02$, $p = .41$), suggesting that fields with more political debate are not necessarily perceived as more restrictive.

Despite universities’ normative self-image as arenas of open debate, controversial discussions are rare, and student participation is low: 23% of students report they have never encountered such discussions in class; only 12% report they occur often. Disciplinary differences are significant and substantial ($\eta^2 = .08$): Social sciences and humanities report more frequent controversy than STEM and law/economics fields. Among the 75% of students who have experienced controversial discussions, willingness to speak out is also low: 48% say they rarely or never participate; only 18% often or always engage. Participation rates do not differ significantly across disciplines, indicating that although the frequency of controversy varies, students’ willingness to speak up is similar across fields.

The regression model for free speech perceptions ($R^2 = .30$) captures political orientation as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$): Right-leaning students perceive significantly more restrictions. Fear of sanctions from instructors is the second strongest predictor ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$), followed by fear of sanctions from peers ($\beta = .11$, $p = .01$), confirming H3a and H3b. Political congruence with peers emerges as a significant though modest negative predictor ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .004$), partially supporting H1a. No effect is found for congruence with instructors (H1b not supported). Dissatisfaction with democracy is associated with more negative perceptions ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .02$), as in prior general population research. Among party preferences, only Green Party supporters perceive fewer restrictions ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .001$). No significant effect from supporting the right-wing populist AfD is found, in contrast to studies of the general population. Also, political disaffection is not significant in this student sample, suggesting university-specific dynamics. Finally, higher political interest ($\beta = .16$) and male gender ($\beta = -.08$) are associated with more negative free-speech perceptions.

The regression model for willingness to speak out ($R^2 = .17$) suggests that stable individual characteristics not captured here (e.g., extraversion or confidence) play a larger role in its explanation. Political disaffection appears as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .001$): Students more disaffected participate less, possibly reflecting resignation. Political interest is positively associated with participation ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$). Neither political congruence with peers nor with instructors plays a significant role (H2a/b not supported). In contrast, fear of sanctions from peers is a robust negative predictor ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .005$; H4a supported), while the effect of instructor sanctions is not robust across model specifications (H4b not consistently supported). Counterintuitively, supporters of the AfD show signifi-

cantly higher willingness to speak out ($\beta = .14, p = .003$), as do, less robustly, SPD and Die Linke supporters – consistent with a corrective action dynamic among perceived minorities (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Wintterlin et al., 2021). However, these effects are small and should not be overinterpreted.

Results show that the determinants of free-speech perceptions and willingness to speak out clearly are distinct phenomena: What shapes how students evaluate campus free speech is largely different from what drives their decision to speak. The partial support for spiral-of-silence mechanisms – particularly through peer-based sanction fears and, for free-speech perceptions, through political congruence with peers – extends this theoretical framework to the campus context. However, the absence of a robust political congruence effect on actual speaking behavior suggests that subjective climate perceptions matter more for evaluative judgments than for behavioral outcomes, where individual dispositions dominate. The absence of a political disaffection effect on free-speech perceptions and its negative effect on speaking behavior point to a distinct student-specific dynamic: Disaffected students may be disengaged rather than silenced.

Several limitations must be noted: Despite weighting, the non-probability sample may still contain biases, particularly with respect to politically disaffected or extreme students who may be less represented in commercial panels. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. The focus on classroom settings excludes broader campus life. The sanction indices are coarse, and the study does not examine the relationship between free-speech perceptions and willingness to speak out as sequentially linked constructs. Future research should (1) employ longitudinal designs, (2) incorporate personality predictors, (3) examine meso-level (institutional culture, departmental norms) and macro-level factors (media framing, political climate), and (4) illuminate the subjective meaning of free speech for students and the reasons behind their silence. Practically, the findings support calls for active cultivation of constructive debate cultures at German universities (Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021).

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