

**Title: Jeff Jones and David Askneazi, Free Expression on American Campuses**  
**Episode: 35**

### **Transcript**

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[Music]

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** Do college students think that freedom of speech is important? Do they think their campus climate supports free expression and do they think First Amendment freedoms are secure in today's America? These are some of the questions addressed in two representative surveys of college students in the United States. These surveys were conducted in 2016 and 2017. So they also reveal how rapidly attitudes changed between these consecutive years.

Today I'm talking to David Askenazi, Director of Learning and Impact at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Jeff Jones, Researcher at Gallup about these survey results.

**Chris Martin:** I would like to start by talking about the theoretical versus practical contrast and attitude toward free speech. If you ask some theoretical questions about support for the right to free speech, but you also ask some practical questions about censorship. Jeff, can you elaborate on that contrast you found there?

**Jeff Jones:** Yeah. So I mean the whole genesis of this research, something that Knight was very interested in doing, is a lot of the incidents that have happened on college campuses in the last few years. So we had the protest of race when they were denying the press access to cover the protest there and then more recently when controversial speakers have tried to speak on campus and students were actively trying to prevent that from happening, including using violence.

So there's definitely some actions that students have taken that really bring in the question how much they value free speech. So one of the key questions there is just at a very basic kind of theoretical level, how committed are they? So the question we ask is designed to see whether they favor a more open campus that exposes students to a lot of different viewpoints including those that might not want to hear, that could be offensive to them or hurtful to them or do they favor more of a positive environment or a safe environment where the college takes steps to try and limit certain types of speech that they would be exposed to including that which is offensive.

So students overwhelmingly favor the open environment. So in the current poll, 70 percent said they favored the open environment where students are exposed to a lot of different types of speech and 29 percent favored the positive environment. That was a question that we asked in the first wave of the survey back in 2016 and the results are pretty similar. So that's kind of high level what they think. But then when you get into it, they are willing – students are willing to

entertain a lot of restrictions on free speech. So maybe the commitment isn't as strong as they indicate it is.

So for example, when we talk about steps that colleges could take to limit offensive speech, students generally favor those steps. So 73 percent said that they favored restrictions on racial slurs or a kind of biased speech. Then 60 percent favored bans on stereotypical costumes, which was a controversy back in 2015.

So there is a bit of a question about how committed they are. We asked too about free speech zones, which they do give students a chance to express themselves, but they do put limits on it. They can only protest or express reviews in certain areas of campus and they usually have to get approval to do that and 83 percent of students are in favor of that. They probably don't see the kind of limitations that those impose on free speech and then speech codes, which are very controversial. Half of students are in favor of those.

So definitely in the abstract, they exhibit a commitment to free speech and wanting to hear different viewpoints. But in certain situations, they're willing to accept limits, practical limitations on speech.

**David Askenazi:** I would echo what Jeff is saying that the reason why this is so interesting and what I find really interesting is that when you ask a student or anybody for that matter if they support free speech, the automatic easy answer is yes. But what this particular research allows us to do, as Jeff said, is look at all these particular situations where there is a potential for there to be some friction between the support for free speech and all these other activities that tend to be at the edges and at the margins of that conversation.

**Chris Martin:** Tell me a bit about what you found with regard to support for violence and shutting down speakers?

**Jeff Jones:** Yeah. So that's kind of some of the more extreme behavior that we see in terms of trying to prevent people from speaking their mind. You know, if they have controversial things to say that people don't want to hear. So the most extreme obviously is using violence, which we have seen in Berkeley and other places. We asked students whether they thought it was ever acceptable to use violence and 10 percent of students – so that's 1 in 10 – said that it was at least sometimes acceptable to use violence. So that seems like kind of a pretty high number. Other polls have found higher and we can maybe talk about that later when we talk about the methods as to why that might be.

So that was one of the key findings there. Another was shouting down speakers, which may be a little less extreme than violence, but also designed to prevent speakers from talking. Thirty-six percent of students thought it was sometimes acceptable to shout down speakers when they are trying to talk.

**Chris Martin:** And was that an increase from the previous year?

**Jeff Jones:** Well, those were new questions. So they weren't asked in the previous one. The previous survey, the 2016, it was kind of more focused on media access because that was after the racial protest and a lot of the violence hadn't really occurred then. So this was kind of one of the new kind of free speech issues that was emerging that we surveyed in the second wave.

**David Askenazi:** To me what's interesting about this is that the small increase – not increase obviously because it's the first time we're asking this question. But to me what's interesting is the fact that there is this small non-negligible number of people that believe that in some cases, these extreme measures are acceptable and it's not to say that a majority of people are advocating for violence to suppress speech. But I do think it's alarming to think that there is a small but non-insignificant number of people that are open to the idea of violence just to prevent somebody from speaking.

**Jeff Jones:** I would just add on that, if I could, that we tried to analyze the data and see who these people were and it wasn't really clear. There weren't any clear patterns by demographic subgroup or attitude or anything. So it's just this group of 1 in 10 people who seem to think violence is OK. But it's really hard to kind of pinpoint exactly who those people are.

**Chris Martin:** But a larger concern is even if it's a small percentage, if those people are concentrated together and plan a protest, then they can successfully shout down a speaker.

**David Askenazi:** Well, especially when you think about the violence question. Yeah, it doesn't take every single student in the university to engage in violence for it to be bad. It takes a small number for violence to be problematic. So even though it's a small number, I think it's a good reason to talk about it and to discuss the potential implications of having a small group of people that are saying that this is acceptable.

**Chris Martin:** So in the second wave of the survey, that's the 2017 wave in contrast to the 2016 wave, you found a pretty sharp drop in the percentage of people who think that the climate on campus is a good climate for free expression. Tell me a bit more about that.

**Jeff Jones:** All right. So we asked in 2016 whether students agreed that the climate on their campus was such that it deterred people from speaking their mind and we found a change in that. So more people are saying that the climate deters speech than...so 61 percent said that; 54 percent did in 2016. So that was one of the bigger changes that we saw between – I guess I would throw another one in there that was big is we asked students if they thought free speech – or actually not just free speech but all First Amendment rights were secure in this country. We saw declines across the board on all those. But the biggest one was in terms of freedom of the press.

**Chris Martin:** That's probably partly related to Donald Trump's tweets, attacking the press.

**Jeff Jones:** Yeah. I think a lot of it is Trump-driven. A lot of what we saw, the change was among students on the left. So I think yeah, Trump and his approach to the media is driving a lot of that. I would say that kind of pretty much duplicates what we saw among national adults in

our polling for the Gallup poll that we see kind of reactions to the media from the left. But the right isn't really changing their views, which are kind of negative to begin with.

**David Askenazi:** The responses to Trump are definitely something that we see in the data. But the truth is, is decline in trust in the media and this declining perspective of what the media can do. It's something that has been happening for a long time and Knight has been supporting the study of media and the trust that people put in it and its role in democracy and how that interacts with the right to free expression and the right to free press. We've seen these trends for quite a long time. I mean Gallup's data shows that pretty clearly.

But to see that decline in just two or three years in between these college student surveys, it's definitely alarming and it's definitely a reason to consider what it means for the future as these students become working adults that are part of the workforce and are part of the greater society in the country.

It's scary to think about that. In just two years, we see this small but again real decline in the perspective of whether or not our right to free speech is secure and in general where we see this decline in the perspective of how good the climate is to be able to have these civil conversations.

**Jeff Jones:** We're seeing more of a divergence now nationally between democrats and republicans. The Democrats' trust in the media is actually going up in the Trump era. Our Republicans was down and it's kind of staying down. So actually in 2017, trust in the media went up but it was all Democrats and probably because they see the media as the main source of opposition to Trump since Republicans have control of congress as well.

**Chris Martin:** That makes sense. So with regard to students and their perspectives on who has to self-censor their views on campus, tell me a bit about what you found there.

**Jeff Jones:** Yeah. So we asked students. So we have the results about the climate not necessarily being one where everyone feels that they can speak freely. So we asked about, "Well, what groups? What groups are there out there? Are all groups basically able to speak their mind freely or are certain groups kind of – more kind of shut off and maybe more reluctant?"

So these are perceptions of how people think the climate is for other groups, not necessarily for themselves. But the biggest difference there was between political conservatives and political liberals. So 69 percent of students say that conservative students aren't able to speak freely on campus. Obviously, there's a lot of kind of – most college campuses are probably more liberal politically and if you're a conservative, you're in the minority and probably would be giving a dissenting view in most cases if you expressed your opinion.

So you contrast that 69 percent, which it's still a majority. So I don't want to make too much out of that. But when you look at some of the other groups, then the natural contrast to conservatives is liberals. Ninety-three percent say that liberals can speak freely on campus. So that's a very big gap. Conservatives are way lower than other groups. We asked about Muslims and LGBT students and blacks and men and women and all of those are 80 percent or higher. A lot of them

are in the 90s. So just conservatives really stand out as a group that people think maybe don't have the same ability to speak freely as other groups on campus.

**Chris Martin:** Now, I would like to talk a bit about the Knight Foundation. I think many people are familiar with Gallup and its polls. But when it comes to the Knight Foundation and its interest in sponsoring this research, David, can you tell me a bit about why the Knight Foundation chose to do this?

**David Askenazi:** Yeah, absolutely. So Knight as a foundation is – has a goal of fostering informed and engaged communities and we do so because we believe that those types of communities are essential for a healthy democracy. So we invest in journalism, the arts and the success of cities and as part of our belief in informed and engaged communities, we believe that the right to free expression and to freedom of the press are essential values to allow for that type of community.

Not only do we want to understand the current state of the First Amendment and the rights that it gives us, but also to be able to know or to be able to predict where our perceptions of that are going, which is why we've invested in trying to understand how college students see their rights to free expression as well as we do similar work around high school students and of course a lot of research around trust in media and how the media play its democratic role in order to again try and understand where we are in terms of having informed and engaged communities and how we can make our – the cities in which we live and the communities that we're a part of be better informed and be better able to share information and gather information about the places where we live.

**Chris Martin:** Can you tell me a bit about how this fits in with other projects that you're pursuing?

**David Askenazi:** Yeah, of course. So we've done quite a bit of research in partnership with Gallup around trust in media. We've looked at trying to understand how people perceive the role that media plays and how they're playing it, looking at accuracy, bias, questions of utmost information, trying to understand how social media companies or large internet companies play a role in disseminating information and in connecting us to each other and in general trying to understand how the changes that exist in the perception of the media affect our democratic process and our ability to live in an engaged society.

I mean the connection between trying to understand trust in media and this conversation around what college students think about First Amendment issues is that the conversation on campus is the future conversation of the country and the same can be said about our work in high school. It's trying to understand similar work, similar perspectives of the future, the First Amendment.

As we understand how these young people perceive what their right to free expression is, we have a better idea of what – where our country is going in terms of this free exchange of ideas.

**Chris Martin:** And do you have outreach projects as well where you try to improve the state of affairs?

**David Askenazi:** Well, we do fund – as part of our journalism program, we fund organizations like the Columbia First Amendment Institute that do legal work to help people that are fighting for First Amendment rights in individual cases.

I think the key here is that as part of our larger work looking at both media as well as free press and free expression, the opportunity here to partner not just with Gallup but with the American Council on Education, the Charles Koch Foundation and the Stanton Foundation. It gives us the opportunity to not only understand this data for ourselves but – and I think that’s the next portion is key.

To also be able to share the data and to share the methodology and to share the way in which we are – we’re getting this information because not only is the analysis we’re doing relevant but the ability for others to do similar analyses and to connect with their own work, to connect that to other trends that we see at a national level and to connect it to other important events that we see happen every day. We think that ability and that feature is pretty critical.

**Chris Martin:** Now I would like to move on to the methods of the study. Some people have done similar studies but there are some unique aspects of the sampling methodology here. Can you elaborate on that?

**Jeff Jones:** Yes. So I will start with the other studies and most of those are I guess what you would just call a convenient sample. A lot of them have used opt-in panels, so they’re not random samples. Just people who were invited to join a panel and did and there’s no kind of random sampling or representative in this area. Some of those just use whatever college students they happen to have in their panel, which might be 1000 or 2000 in the country. So we don’t know where those students are from. You know, if they’re balanced demographically or regionally.

I think they may make some attempts to check that. But just the lack of random selection and the lack of people having an equal chance to get into the sample is problematic because it just creates unknowns in knowing whether it’s a good sample or not.

So you contrast that with our work, which is based on random sampling. So the way we do this, there’s really no directory of college students out there to draw a random sample from. So what we do is we sample colleges and when we did that, we kind of divided the colleges up because we know characteristics of the colleges into certain segments based on enrollment and region and public and private status. Within those, we sampled. So we got a good cross-section of different types of colleges all randomly selected.

Then we approached the colleges and the ones that agreed to participate. We asked for student lists and they provided us those. From those lists, we drew a random sample. So there are really two stages of random sampling in our work and in addition, the colleges that agreed to participate, it was a very good kind of cross-section of colleges across the country. Big ones, little ones, private ones, public ones. So we got a good cross-section that way and then just to be sure, we weighed the sample on the backend just to make sure if some certain types of colleges

or students are overrepresented or underrepresented in the sample and we correct for that. So that the final sample that we have looks like what a true population of college students in the US looks like.

So one of the things, I talked about the difference in methodology between ours and the other surveys and I alluded to some differences here. So there was a study in particular that asked a question about violence and whether that was acceptable and they found a higher estimate, 20 percent. Now that could be because of the sampling methods that I – you know, differences in methodologies that I discussed.

The other thing notable about that and why they're – that might be higher, that survey was conducted shortly after the Charlottesville incidents in 2017. So that was probably fresh in people's minds. So you might expect a higher estimate there because people still have that in mind and depending on how you think about what happened there, you may think it's – you know, that kind of action is justifiable or not justifiable.

So ours was a little bit more removed from that and we definitely had better methodology there. So we think our estimate is probably more solid. You know, not as much tied to events. You know, once that event kind of fades into the future, then you would expect the people holding that attitude to kind of die down a little bit. So it did. So I think our 10 percent is probably a more solid estimate of the percentage of the students who think violence is acceptable to deter or to prevent speakers from speaking.

**Chris Martin:** And I think one of the notable things about the study is that the data are available for download as well and I will put a link to that in the show notes. So would either of you like to tell me, if people are interested in following you on Twitter or other social media, where they can find you?

**David Askenazi:** Yeah, sure. I think the best place to find us is following the Knight Foundation Twitter account which is @knightfdn and you will find not only information on this particular study as more comes up with it, but a lot of our other research and programmatic work as well.

**Jeff Jones:** And for us, [www.Gallup.com](http://www.Gallup.com) would be the place to go. We also have Twitter, @Gallup and other social media, Facebook as well. So lots of places where you can keep up with what Gallup is doing.

**Chris Martin:** Well, Jeff and David, thanks for joining me on the show today.

**David Askenazi:** Great. Thank you for having us.

[Music]

**Chris Martin:** You can find links to the report and the data in the show notes. The data are available in CSV, Excel, SAS, Stata and SPSS. My next guest is Julie Wronski, political science professor at the University of Mississippi. She will be talking about her paper *A Tale of Two Democrats: How Authoritarianism Divides the Democratic Party*.

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