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# Conditionally supporting freedom of speech: how cognitive sophistication and social identity affect adolescents' support for freedom of speech and its restrictions

Paula Thijs<sup>a</sup>, Tom van der Meer <sup>b</sup>, Laura Mulder<sup>b</sup>, Frank Wanders<sup>c</sup>,  
Geert ten Dam <sup>c</sup> and Herman van de Werfhorst<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; <sup>c</sup>Department of Educational Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

Democracy requires the socialization of young people into democratic values. Yet, support for these democratic values cannot be unconditional, because they conflict in concrete situations. This paper aims to explain to what extent and why young adolescents support freedom of speech in uncontested and contested situations. We combine insights from moral development, political socialization, and social identity theory as mechanisms behind support for specific types of speech across different groups. We use large-scale, nationally representative data collected among 2355 young adolescents in 42 schools in the Netherlands, at the very start after they tracked into secondary education. We find that young adolescents differentiate between various types of speech. They combine high support for the abstract principle of free speech with lower support for types of speech in conflicted situations. Cognitive sophistication explains why abstract support for free speech is higher among students in pre-academic education than in pre-vocational education, whereas we find the inverse in contested situations. Social identity theory explains why adolescents are more reluctant to support free speech when it challenges their in-group. These findings underpin that adolescents have a fine-grained understanding of democratic values, and the need to focus on democratic trade-offs in scholarly research.

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Democratic values; freedom of speech; political socialization; adolescents; cognitive sophistication; social identity

## 1. Introduction

Freedom of speech is a cornerstone of democratic societies. It ensures that different opinions can be expressed and debated, facilitating peaceful social change. In an increasingly complex and diverse society characterized by rising social media, polarization, and misinformation, freedom of speech has become particularly salient. A resilient democracy

**CONTACT** Paula Thijs  [t.w.g.vandermeer@uva.nl](mailto:t.w.g.vandermeer@uva.nl)

\*Present address: Department of Sociology of the EUI (European University Institute) Florence

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requires that young people learn about the principles of democracy, especially since adolescence is a crucial period for the formation of political and democratic attitudes (Nieuwelink et al. 2018).

Research suggests that the principle of freedom of speech is widely endorsed by the general public, including adolescents. International research showed that the vast majority of 14-year-old students agree that everyone should always have the right to express their opinions freely and that freedom of speech is good for democracy (Schulz et al. 2018). Freedom of speech is, however, neither absolute nor unlimited. It may conflict with other democratic rights and values, such as equality, the right to remain free of discrimination, or national security (Gibson and Bingham 1982; Gibson 2006; Sniderman et al. 1996). Such conflicts between democratic values are inherent to democracy itself. However, because support for democratic values is often theorized and measured in isolation, the conflictual nature is not incorporated in most measures (Van der Brug et al. 2021).

Despite wide endorsement in abstract terms, support for free speech is lower in specific applications. For instance, adolescents give less support to speech by members of disliked or contested groups (Patterson 1979; Wainryb, Shaw, and Maianu 1998; Harrell 2010), and in situations when free speech conflicts with other rights and principles (Helwig, Ruck, and Peterson-Badali 2014). Moreover, they are less likely to extend support for free speech to contested groups than (young) adults (Patterson 1979; Wainryb, Shaw, and Maianu 1998). Nevertheless, we know little about the *types of speech* that find more (or less) support, let alone which *groups of adolescents* are likely to express support for these types of free speech at a young age (but see Steen-Johnsen and Enjolras 2016). Systematic research is needed to explain variation in support for specific types of speech among adolescents.

This study aims to provide insight in the complexity of adolescents' support for freedom of speech by addressing both omissions in the literature. First, we assess young people's support for free speech in unconflicted and in conflicted situations. Second, we aim to explain variation in support for freedom of speech in unconflicted and conflicted situations by simultaneously testing two rivaling explanations on adolescence, both derived from moral development theory (Helwig, Ruck, and Peterson-Badali 2014): cognitive sophistication and group membership. We take into account the social context in which young people get familiarized with the norms and values of the democratic system (Helwig 2018; Nieuwelink et al. 2018). Important socializing agencies include schools and parents (Kent Jennings 2007; Jennings and Niemi 1968; Miklikowska and Hurme 2011) that may contribute to adolescents' democratic development, i.e. their understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality of democratic principles. Third, we analyze whether adolescents differentiate between types of speech depending on their social position. While previous research showed group differences in young people's support for abstract democratic values (Geijsel et al. 2012; Janmaat 2008; Keating et al. 2010; Dijkstra, Ten Dam, and Munniksmas 2021; Schulz et al. 2018), this study also considers such differences across specific types of speech.

We first provide an overview of the relatively scarce research conducted on support for freedom of speech among adolescents, and formulate our hypotheses. To more thoroughly describe and explain patterns of freedom of speech in contemporary youth, we employ nationally representative survey data among 2355 seventh grade students in 42 schools the Netherlands collected in 2018/2019.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Abstract and specific support free speech

A consistent finding in literature is the existence of widespread support for the principle of free speech in abstract terms (e.g. everyone should be free to say what he/she wants) but less support in the face of rivaling principles or specific situations. This pattern exists both among adults (McClosky and Brill 1983) and among children and adolescents (e.g. Helwig 1995; Rutland, Killen, and Abrams 2010; Smetana, Jambon, and Ball 2014; Turiel 2008). Initially, this inconsistency in people's endorsement of freedom of speech led to a concern among scholars that a part of the public fails to truly understand some of the underlying ideas and principles of the democratic political system (McClosky 1964; Prothro and Grigg 1960). Yet, later scholars argue that rights and freedoms are not absolute but multidimensional, and that people balance different (aspects of) values and principles, of which the outcome depends on the specific situation or context that is presented to people (Gibson and Bingham 1982; Gibson 2006; Helwig 1995; Helwig, Ruck, and Peterson-Badali 2014; Wainryb, Shaw, and Maianu 1998).

To understand differences in young people's judgements about freedom and rights in specific situations, moral development scholars have advocated social domain theory (e.g. Helwig 1995; Rutland, Killen, and Abrams 2010; Smetana, Jambon, and Ball 2014; Turiel 2008). Social domain theory states that different types of judgements (domains) can coexist at the same time and in different age groups. In reasoning about moral concepts, these domains are applied in flexible ways across particular situations and contexts (Helwig 1995; Smetana, Jambon, and Ball 2014; Turiel 2008). Empirical studies among adults (Pew Research Center 2015; Steen-Johnsen and Enjolras 2016) and adolescents (Harrell 2010) showed that support for freedom of speech decreases when the speech becomes more threatening or harming to others or to the existing political system.

Yet, studies that systematically analyze variation in young people's support for freedom of speech depending on the type of speech are still lacking. We therefore address their support for types of speech with varying levels of abstraction and conflict with other principles and moral considerations. We hypothesize that:

*H1. Adolescents' support for freedom of speech is highest when stated in abstract terms, lower when presented as an abstract dilemma (free speech vs preventing harm to others) and lowest when presented as specific types of speech that involve conflict with other values.*

### 2.2. Complexity of reasoning and political socialization

Theoretically, differences in support for civil liberties have often been attributed to the process of cognitive sophistication. Democratic values are abstract and complex. They require considerable political knowledge, cognitive competences and flexibility, an ability to process new and complex information, and awareness of alternative viewpoints (McClosky and Brill 1983; Miklikowska and Hurme 2011; Stubager 2008). Various studies investigated the influence of cognitive sophistication on support for civil liberties, mostly by studying educational or age differences to capture the cognitive capacities of individuals. Higher levels of education or knowledge makes adolescents and adults more supportive of civil liberties and more likely to generalize these freedoms to

contested groups, ideas, and practices (Harrell 2010; Inglehart 1997). As young people develop cognitively, their support for free speech is motivated less by instrumental and more by principled arguments (Patterson 1979). As they age, adolescents are more likely to extend support for free speech to dissenting beliefs (Wainryb, Shaw, and Maianu 1998). Yet, the literature focused on (contested) acts and actors that engage in free speech, but not on variations in the content of the speech itself.

Moral development scholars argue that cognitive development does not lead to more 'principled' reasoning as such (i.e. civil rights unequivocally overriding social and personal considerations), but rather to a greater comprehensiveness of the ambiguous elements of conflicting situations and an increased ability to incorporate these aspects in the evaluation of a situation (Helwig 2018; Nucci and Turiel 2009; Nucci, Turiel, and Roded 2018). With age, individuals' reasoning on civil liberties therefore becomes more complex (Helwig 1995; Helwig, Ruck, and Peterson-Badali 2014). Although cognitive sophistication is related to higher support for freedom of speech in abstract unconflicted situations, moral development theory suggests lower support and more variability for types of speech that conflict with other values (Helwig 1995; Wainryb, Shaw, and Maianu 1998; Nucci and Turiel 2009). Note, however, that other studies suggest that rising cognitive sophistication leads to more unidimensional support for free speech, even in contrast to other moral values (e.g. Witenberg, 2004; Nieuwelink, Ten Dam, and Dekker 2019).

Because the literature often emphasizes age groups or school grades as proxies of cognitive sophistication, the underlying theoretical mechanisms behind support for freedom of speech in specific situations are largely untested. Earlier studies paid little attention to the role of political socialization (Helwig 2018). Yet, theories of political socialization argue that adolescents are socialized to understand and internalize the dominant norms, values and practices of the democratic and political system. Families and schools are considered to be particularly important socializing agencies (Kent Jennings 2007; Jennings and Niemi 1968). To the extent that they discuss political and societal issues with their children, parents transmit political knowledge and create political learning opportunities that may increase familiarity with democratic rights and values (Miklikowska and Hurme 2011; Nieuwelink et al. 2018; Zellman and Sears 1971). Schools increase familiarity with democratic principles through the formal curriculum, through a democratic and open classroom climate for discussing controversial issues, and through a participative school culture (Geboers et al. 2013). The resulting political knowledge and understanding of procedural aspects of the democratic political system are related to stronger support for civil liberties (Galston 2007; but Green et al. 2011). Extending this line of reasoning, familiarity with politics and democratic principles may also contribute to a more complex understanding of freedom of speech across different situations. In sum, we expect more complex and nuanced reasoning about different types of free speech among adolescents with more extended forms of political socialization.

We simultaneously analyze the influence of educational track, political knowledge, political socialization by parents, and political efficacy on adolescents' support for specific types of free speech. We formulate the following hypotheses:

H2. *Adolescents (a) in higher educational tracks, (b) who more frequently discuss politics with their parents, (c) with more political knowledge, and (d) with higher levels of political efficacy show more support for freedom of speech in abstract terms than adolescents with lower levels*

*of political socialization (lower educational track, less political discussions with parents, lower political knowledge, lower political efficacy).*

H3. *Adolescents (a) in higher educational tracks, (b) who more frequently discuss politics with their parents, (c) with more political knowledge, and (d) with higher levels of political efficacy show less support for freedom of speech when presented in conflict with other values, than adolescents with lower levels of political socialization (lower educational track, less political discussions with parents, lower political knowledge, lower political efficacy).*

### 2.3. Group membership

While social domain theory predicts *that* there is variation in support for freedom of speech in the face of other democratic values, it holds no a priori assumptions about *which* types of speech are more strongly endorsed or which ‘domain’ is more pronounced in which particular situation, and by *whom* (Helwig 2018). Yet, variation between domains exists, also among adolescents (cf Helwig 1995, who assessed support for free speech in conflict with equality, physical harm, and psychological harm). We argue that such differences between domains may depend on adolescents’ social position or identity. Several scholars have argued that research on moral reasoning should take group membership into account in order to fully understand adolescents’ judgements about tolerance and civil liberties (Rutland, Killen, and Abrams 2010; Verkuyten and Slooter 2008).

Group membership or social identity shapes the social interactions and experiences that people have, which may influence their support for democratic values. According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Verkuyten 2021) people have a fundamental need to belong to a social group, as well as a need for a positive social identity for the members of that group. This positive social identity is obtained by distinguishing between one’s own social group and other groups, which involves a positive evaluation of the in-group and a negative evaluation of the out-groups. When the position of the in-group is (perceived to be) threatened, mechanisms of identification and social distinction may be reinforced (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Group discrimination, stigmatization or (fear of) social exclusion may lead to stronger engagement with the in-group and support for minority rights, as well as lower identification with the political and democratic principles of the majority (Oskooii 2020; Van Bergen, De Ruyter, and Pels 2017). To illustrate, Verkuyten and Slooter (2008) found that Muslim adolescents in the Netherlands more strongly rejected freedom of speech than non-Muslim adolescents when it concerned speech offensive to God, religion and Islam, while their judgements were rather similar to non-Muslim adolescents’ judgements when their group identity was not affected. Similarly, Muslim girls were less accepting of practices that would harm them as females (e.g. female circumcision and differential gender treatment).

We therefore expect that adolescents who belong to a minority or disadvantaged group are more willing to restrict freedom of speech (Harrell 2010), especially speech that explicitly targets their social group (Verkuyten and Slooter 2008), because they are more sensitive to minority rights and to potentially negative implications of such speech for their group.

H4. *Adolescents’ support for freedom of speech is lower (a) among adolescents from minoritized and disadvantaged groups in society, (b) particularly in situations where the speech undermines the position of that social group.*

### 3. Data, measurement, and design

#### 3.1. Data

We use data from the first wave of the Dutch Adolescents Panel on Democratic Values (DAPDV). DAPDV is a panel study focused on gaining insight into the development of democratic values among Dutch adolescents in secondary education. DAPDV aimed to obtaining a representative sample for region, school denomination and educational track (pre-vocational, general or pre-academic education). A stratified sample of 18 Dutch municipalities was drawn based on the size, region and degree of urbanization of the municipality. The five strata consisted of (1) the four largest municipalities, (2) forty next largest municipalities, (3) suburbs, (4) other urban municipalities, and (5) rural municipalities. Within these municipalities, all secondary schools were approached to participate in the survey. Of the 137 schools or school locations, 49 (35.8%) participated.

The first wave was collected in 2018/2019 among 12-year-old adolescents in their first year of secondary education. The students filled out a digital questionnaire on a tablet in the classroom during a regular or tutoring lesson, which took approximately 30 min. A teacher and a research assistant were present to answer questions. We approached parents by letter for their active consent to use the data from their child(ren) for research purposes. About half of the consent forms were returned, of which 86.4% gave permission to use the data of their child(ren). In total, 2500 students with active consent of their parents participated in the survey. To adjust for a slight underrepresentation of Roman-Catholic schools, schools in suburbs and schools offering general secondary education (havo), we included a weighting factor based on the total numbers of first year students per school denomination and educational track in the Netherlands. This study uses information from 2355 students in 215 classes in 42 schools.<sup>1</sup>

The case of the Netherlands is beneficial for isolating the mechanisms for three reasons. First, the Dutch educational system selects young adolescents into different tracks at the relatively young age of 12 (Bol et al. 2014). This allows us to use track as a leverage for cognitive sophistication at that age. Second, the Dutch political context is less partisan than particularly the United States (that most studies in this literature focused on), due to its proportional, multiparty system. While free speech has been a salient theme in Dutch politics since approximately 2002, it is not very salient among young adolescents. Third, democratic support shows relatively large variation in citizenship competences among adolescents in the Netherlands compared to other countries (Dijkstra, Ten Dam, and Munniksmas 2021).

#### 3.2. Dependent variables

First, to measure support for free speech *in abstract terms*, we use the question: 'I think that everyone should be able to say what he or she thinks'. Students could answer on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. 0.8% of the students clicked 'don't know'.

Second, to assess support for the principle of freedom of speech *in conflict* with the principle of not doing harm, we introduced the following dilemma: 'I think that you should be allowed to always say what you think, even if you may hurt other people's feelings' versus 'I think that you should not be allowed to always say what you think, because you may thereby hurt other people's feelings'. This dilemma is abstract, as the 'other

people' remain undefined. Respondents could indicate their position on this dilemma on a four-point scale using a slider. There was no middle category so that respondents had to choose a side. 5.6% of the students reported 'don't know'.

Third, to measure support for specific types of free speech involving different types of conflict, we developed a seven-item question battery. We asked respondents which statements they think should be allowed in a televised talk show. The items ranged from criticizing government to calling for violent action. For each item, the respondents could answer yes, no, or don't know. The percentage of students who didn't know the answer on the specific types of speech ranged from 2.6% (verbally abuse others) to 9.8% (criticize government).

Mokken scale analysis on answer patterns (Van Schuur 2003; Sijtsma and Van den Ark 2017) shows that these seven items tap into three rather distinct dimensions (see Appendix 1). *Vertical free speech* refers to state-citizen relationships such as democratic rights. It includes four items: 'criticize the government', 'say that elections should be abolished', 'say that immigrants should not be allowed to vote', and 'say that only higher educated should be allowed to vote' ( $H$ -coefficient = 0.515; Cronbach's alpha = 0.59). *Horizontal free speech* is about social exclusion. It includes two items: 'make jokes about religion or culture' and 'verbally abuse others' ( $H$ -coefficient = 0.526; Cronbach's alpha = 0.49). Finally, one item does not load on the other scales, namely *call for violence*.

Adolescents who answered 'don't know' on one of the measurements of freedom of speech were coded as missing and excluded from the analyses (21.9%).

### 3.3. Independent variables

To distinguish between *educational tracks* as our most direct measure of cognitive sophistication, we asked the respondents in which track they were enrolled. We recoded the answers into five categories common to the Dutch system: lower prevocational (vmbo basis/kader), upper prevocational (vmbo gl/tl and mavo), intermediate general (havo, and mixed vmbo/havo), pre-academic (vwo, and mixed havo/vwo), and a category of students that have not yet been allocated into a specific track (mixed vmbo/havo/vwo track, or 'brede brugklas'). As schools tend to host students from multiple tracks this is an individual level measure.<sup>2</sup> Because we measured track early after students were tracked into secondary education, differences between educational tracks mainly reflect pre-existing differences in cognitive complexity and earlier socialization.

To measure adolescents' *political socialization*, we used the extent to which adolescents discuss politics with their parents, their level of political knowledge, and their level of internal political efficacy. *Political discussions with parents* was measured by asking the participants how often they talk about politics with their parents on a five point scale ranging from never to daily. Because so few students talked about politics with their parents daily, we collapsed the two most frequent categories (a few times a week; daily) into one. To measure *political knowledge*, participants were asked how many seats there are in the House of Parliament and to name political parties in the Netherlands. Students' who gave a correct answer on the House of Parliament question received a score of 1. Those who gave an incorrect answer or answered 'I don't know' received a score of 0. For each political party that was named correctly, students received an additional 0.5. The scores of students were summed to measure political knowledge.

*Internal political efficacy* refers to people's confidence in their own capacity to understand and effectively participate in politics. This is measured by agreement with four statements: 'I understand a lot of politics', 'I know more about politics than most classmates', 'I can understand most political issues without problems' and 'I am able to work in politics later'. Participants could answer on a five-point scale ranging from Totally disagree to Totally agree. Because the four items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha: 0.844), we averaged student's answers (allowing two missing answers).

We measure *social position* along four measures. *Gender* distinguishes between male (reference category) and female.<sup>3</sup> Students' *socioeconomic class* was measured by the number of books in the students' home and their family's relative wealth, using two questions: (1) Approximately how many reading books are there at your home?<sup>4</sup> and (2) When you compare yourself to other families in the Netherlands, how rich do you think your family is?<sup>5</sup> The number of books in the home is an indicator of cultural capital among children and adolescents, but best in combination with other indicators of socioeconomic standing (Engzell 2021). We therefore combined the answers on the two variables into one scale and we collapsed the categories into low, middle, and high. Participants who indicated that they rather not answered this question were coded as missing.

We measured *migration background* in line with the then salient definition of Dutch government and Statistics Netherlands. We assigned students who themselves and their parents were born in the Netherlands to the reference category (no migration background). Students who themselves or (at least) one of their parents was born in a western country were assigned the label 'western migration background'. Students whose country of birth or that of (at least) one of their parents was a non-western country were categorized as 'non-western migration background'.<sup>6</sup> We do not distinguish between first- and second-generation migrants, due to the small number of first-generation students.

*Religious denomination* is based on students' report of the religious denomination in their household. We recoded an elaborate set of survey questions to four main categories: non-religious, Christian (many Christian students did not distinguish between denomination), Muslim, and other.

We control for students' age (measured in years). Respondents with missing values on the independent variables (3.5%) were excluded from the analyses. Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables can be found in Appendix 2.

### 3.4. Analytical strategy

Because the students in our sample are nested in schools, we performed multilevel regression analyses on the various measures of freedom of speech. The intraclass correlations in the null-models show that most of the total variance in support for freedom of speech is located at the individual level; only 2–3% of the total variance can be attributed to the school level.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Variation across different types of speech

Table 1 presents adolescents' support for freedom of speech in different situations with varying levels of abstraction and conflict. Consistent with previous research, Table 1

**Table 1.** Adolescents' support for freedom of speech ( $N = 1755$ ).

	Percentage (strongly) agree
Abstract ('I think that everyone should be able to say what he or she thinks')	86.7
Dilemma ('I think that you should be allowed to always say what you think, even if you may hurt other people's feelings')	33.7
Specific types of speech ('Do you think that someone in a talk show on television should be allowed to ...')	
... Criticize the government (v)	74.4
... Say that elections should be abolished (v)	33.8
... Make jokes about religion or culture (h)	18.8
... Say that immigrants should not be allowed to vote (v)	16.6
... Say that only higher educated should be allowed to vote (v)	15.8
... Verbally abuse others (h)	8.9
... Call for violence	8.6

shows a widespread support for freedom of speech in abstract terms: 86.7% of the students (strongly) agreed with that everyone should be able to say what he or she thinks.

Yet, adolescents appear less willing to endorse freedom of speech when there is a conflict between the principle of free speech and other considerations. Juxtaposed with the principle to prevent harm to others, the percentage of students who support free speech is markedly lower: 33.8% (strongly) agreed that 'you should always say what you think, even if you may hurt other people's feelings'. This suggests that many adolescents incorporate the consequences of free speech into their judgement.

Adolescents' support for specific types of speech shows large variation. 74.4% of the students endorses speech that criticizes the government, while one third (33.8%) is also willing to allow an anti-democratic statement that elections should be abolished. Support for public expression drops further when it concerns jokes about culture or religion (18.8%), statements that exclude immigrants or lower educated people from voting (16.6% respectively 15.8%), verbal abuse (8.9%) and calls for violence (8.6%).

These results suggest that there is a hierarchy in adolescents' endorsement of freedom of speech, with an increasing willingness to restrict speech in specific conflicted situations with more severe consequences. Hence, our first hypothesis finds support. Freedom of speech is indeed high as an abstract value, lower in abstract dilemmas that involves a conflict between free speech and preventing harm, and lowest in specific situations (except for speech that is critical of government or democracy). Adolescents seem more willing to restrict freedom of speech when the negative consequences of the speech are more pervasive, particularly when they affect social groups.

#### 4.2. The relevance of educational track

Table 2 shows the outcomes of multilevel regression models of variation in support for freedom of speech. The relationship between educational track and support for free speech is complex. On the one hand, students in the upper prevocational track ( $b = 0.18$ ), the intermediate general ( $b = 0.25$ ), the academic ( $b = 0.30$ ), and mixed tracks ( $b = 0.37$ ) are significantly more supportive of the principle of freedom of speech as compared to students in the lower prevocational track (Table 2, first column). This supports hypothesis 2a. On the other hand, but as hypothesized, the educational track effect flips when we present freedom of speech as a dilemma (second column). Students in

the academic track ( $b = -0.22$ ) are less likely to support freedom of speech than students in the prevocational track, when this may harm other people. This supports hypothesis 3a. Adolescents in different educational tracks do not differ with regard to their support for vertical types of free speech v.a.v. government and democratic rights (third column). We do find educational effects on horizontal speech v.a.v. social groups (fourth column) and the call for violence (fifth column). Students in the academic track are more willing to restrict horizontal free speech that conflicts with personal or psychological wellbeing ( $b = -0.58$ ); students in the intermediate general track ( $b = -0.79$ ) and academic tracks ( $b = -1.39$ ) are more willing to restrict speech that calls for violence. This lends further support to H3a.

These findings supports the ‘complexity of reasoning’-hypothesis: Although adolescents in the academic track show higher levels of abstract support for free speech compared to those in the vocational tracks, their support is lower when speech conflicts with other principles. This differentiation plays up particularly in the face of the rivaling principle to prevent harm to others, be it personal, psychological, or (particularly) physical. All in all, H3a finds support.

#### 4.3. Political socialization

Political socialization has at best inconsistent effects. We find no significant effects of political discussion with parents, political knowledge, and political efficacy on support for the abstract principle of freedom of speech. We reject hypotheses 2b–d. In dilemma with the rivaling principle of do no harm, we do not find any significant effects either. While the frequency of political discussions is consistently related to (a lack of) support for violence-inciting speech, the effects on support for vertical and horizontal free speech are at best non-linear. Political knowledge does not contribute significantly to the explanation of support for vertical and horizontal free speech, although we find a negative effect on support for violence-inciting speech ( $b = -0.21$ ). Finally, students with higher levels of internal political efficacy are significantly more supportive of speech that is critical of the government or democratic rights ( $b = 0.10$ ) and speech that may be offensive to certain groups in society ( $b = 0.14$ ), though not of speech that incites violence. This goes against the ‘complexity of reasoning’-hypothesis. Rather, it suggests that efficacious adolescents are more willing to endorse free speech regardless of the implications, except when it comes to illicit speech. All in all, there is at best limited and inconsistent support for hypotheses 3b and 3c and no support for hypothesis 3d.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.4. Minoritized and disadvantaged groups

Finally, Table 2 includes students’ social position as determinants. We hypothesized that support for free speech would be lower among minoritized and disadvantaged groups. We consider variation by gender (girls), social class (low), migration status (non-western migration background), and religious denomination (Christian, Muslim), as these social categories are more likely to receive derogative speech.

We find no difference between boys and girls in support for the abstract principle of freedom of speech. However, girls are significantly more restrictive of free speech that may harm other people ( $b = -0.30$ ), of vertical free speech ( $b = -0.45$ ), horizontal free

**Table 2.** Multilevel regression analysis, support for freedom of speech.

	Abstract principle		Dilemma		Vertical		Horizontal		Violence inciting	
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Intercept	3.16	0.13***	2.49	0.11***	1.71	0.10***	0.10	0.19	-0.87	0.34*
Educational track (ref.:lower prevocational)										
Upper prevocational	0.18	0.08*	0.02	0.09	-0.07	0.07	-0.30	0.23	-0.30	0.29
Intermediate general	0.25	0.09**	-0.08	0.12	0.06	0.08	-0.59	0.31	-0.79	0.29**
Academic	0.30	0.08***	-0.22	0.10*	0.06	0.08	-0.58	0.22**	-1.39	0.27***
Mixed	0.37	0.12***	-0.21	0.17	0.07	0.18	-0.52	0.23*	-1.14	0.57*
Political discussion with parents (ref.:never)										
A few times a year	0.06	0.07	-0.08	0.07	-0.12	0.10	-0.55	0.18**	-0.53	0.22*
A few times per month	0.16	0.10	-0.08	0.08	-0.01	0.09	-0.40	0.16*	-0.77	0.28**
A few times per week or more	0.20	0.11	-0.08	0.12	-0.17	0.12	-0.19	0.24	-0.97	0.42*
Political knowledge	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.09	0.09	-0.21	0.10*
Political efficacy	0.00	0.03	-0.01	0.04	0.10	0.05*	0.14	0.06*	0.21	0.12
Gender (ref: boy)	0.07	0.04	-0.30	0.06***	-0.45	0.06***	-0.84	0.14***	-1.23	0.20***
Socioeconomic background (ref.:low)										
Middle	0.04	0.08	-0.10	0.09	0.01	0.10	-0.06	0.23	0.05	0.34
High	-0.11	0.10	-0.03	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.22	0.24	0.22	0.29
Missing	-0.05	0.12	0.05	0.11	-0.09	0.11	-0.08	0.25	0.18	0.28
Migration background (ref.:no)										
Western	0.03	0.10	0.02	0.13	-0.04	0.13	-0.29	0.25	-0.31	0.32
Non-western	0.00	0.18	0.04	0.12	-0.26	0.11*	-0.81	0.27**	0.30	0.43
Religious denomination (ref.:no)										
Christian	-0.09	0.07	-0.06	0.08	0.03	0.12	-0.43	0.18*	-0.12	0.25
Islam	-0.14	0.17	0.00	0.15	-0.09	0.13	-0.60	0.33	-0.39	0.52
Other religion	-0.24	0.22	-0.04	0.19	0.18	0.14	0.05	0.48	-1.00	0.70*
Age (centered)	0.01	0.05	0.13	0.04***	0.07	0.06	0.16	0.12	0.03	0.22
Random effects										
Individual level	0.82	0.10***	0.90	0.06***	1.12	0.06***	-	-	-	-
School level	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.14	0.09	0.06	0.10
ICC	1%		3%		1%					

Note: \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ ;  $N(I1) = 1755$ ;  $N(I2) = 42$ .

speech ( $b = -0.84$ ), and incitement to violence ( $b = -1.23$ ). This is in line with a.o. Harrell (2010). Socioeconomic background has no significant relationship to any type of support for free speech. For migration background, we only find significant negative effects for non-western students on vertical ( $b = -0.26$ ) and horizontal free speech ( $b = -0.81$ ) compared to students without a migration background. Finally, religious denomination only plays a role for horizontal free speech: Religious students (notably those from a Christian background) are less likely to support horizontal free speech ( $b = -0.43$ ). Thus far, we find mixed support for hypothesis 4a. Girls are clearly less likely to support free speech in specific conflicting situations, social class does not factor in, and the effects of migration background and religious denomination are somewhat inconsistent.

Yet, the more crucial test arises when we split support for vertical and horizontal free speech into its six original components in Table 3. This allows us to specify whether students support freedom of speech that directly targets the social groups they belong to. The relevant interactions between the students' social group and the target of the speech are emphasized in the table. First, let us look at educational track. Table 3 shows more variation in support for vertical speech than Table 2 suggested: Students in the academic track are more likely to support freedom of speech directed at government and democracy in general, but less likely to support speech against the disenfranchisement of immigrants and lower educated people. The latter goes against H4b, but does support the 'complexity of reasoning'-hypothesis (H3a).

Second, we look at students with a migration background. Although Table 2 suggested that they are generally less likely to support horizontal and vertical freedom of speech, Table 3 shows that these effects are driven by the types of speech aimed at their group. Students with a migration background are less likely to support speech calling for the disenfranchisement of immigrants and jokes about other cultures. This supports H4b.

Third, we focus on religious students. The only significant effects of religious background in Table 3 are related to freedom of speech that ridicules religion or culture. Students with a Christian and (particularly) students with an Islamic background are less likely to support such speech. This, too, supports H4b. Although we do not have a measure of speech that is specifically targeted at women as a group, girls are significantly less likely than boys to support each of the six specific conflicted types of speech.

## 5. Conclusion

For the resilience of a democratic society it is important that the young are socialized to support democratic values. Freedom of speech is one of the most salient values in today's liberal democracies. Yet, freedom of speech is neither absolute nor unlimited. It may conflict with other democratic rights and values (Gibson and Bingham 1982; Gibson 2006; Helwig, Ruck, and Peterson-Badali 2014; Sniderman et al. 1996). The need to deal with such tensions is inherent to democracy, but remarkably understudied empirically. This paper aimed to provide in-depth insight in the complexity of multidimensional support for freedom of speech among young adolescents (around age 12) across different contexts, as well as the mechanisms behind this context-specific variation: cognitive sophistication, political socialization, and social identity. Applying multilevel regression analyses, we empirically tested the relationship of adolescents' resources

**Table 3.** Multilevel regression analysis, support for six specific outings of free speech.

	Criticise government		Vertical				Horizontal					
			Disenfranchise immigrants		Disenfranchise lower educated		Do away with elections		Verbal abuse		Joke about religion/culture	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Educational track (ref.:lower prevocational)												
Upper prevocational	0.19	0.16	-0.49	0.23*	-0.40	0.18*	0.07	0.22	-0.54	0.33	-0.12	0.26
Intermediate general	0.28	0.15	-0.42	0.22	-0.04	0.24	0.35	0.18	-0.86	0.29**	-0.30	0.34
Academic	0.50	0.19**	-0.66	0.26**	-0.32	0.21	0.48	0.21*	-0.97	0.30***	-0.38	0.25
Mixed	0.46	0.22*	-0.54	0.24*	-0.19	0.30	0.48	0.50	-1.35	0.96	-0.33	0.24
Migration background (ref.:no)												
Western	0.43	0.33	-0.97	0.34**	-0.46	0.30	0.28	0.38	-0.53	0.39	-0.18	0.27
Non-western	-0.38	0.20	-0.98	0.35**	-0.22	0.37	-0.16	0.21	-0.05	0.37	-0.75	0.34*
Religious denomination (ref.:no)												
Christian	-0.38	0.22	0.41	0.33	0.43	0.52	-0.11	0.15	-0.44	0.26	-0.49	0.20*
Islam	-0.31	0.25	0.06	0.48	-0.05	0.37	-0.26	0.25	-0.69	0.35	-1.38	0.47**
Other religion	0.26	0.36	0.41	0.40	0.17	0.56	0.25	0.30	-0.21	0.74	-0.51	0.52

Note: \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ ;  $N(l1) = 1755$ ;  $N(l2) = 42$ .

Models control for all covariates in Table 2.

(educational track, political discussions, political knowledge, political efficacy) and social group (gender, social class, migration background, religiosity) with support for freedom of speech in unconflicted and conflicted situations.

We reach three main conclusions. First, although support for freedom of speech as an abstract principle is very high among Dutch adolescents, this support is much lower when presented as an abstract dilemma. Moreover, support varies substantially across different situations. Adolescents are more supportive of speech that targets government and democracy than speech targeted at (certain) social groups or individuals, and overwhelmingly reject abusive speech and incitement to violence. These findings support hypothesis 1 and social domain theory (e.g. Smetana, Jambon, and Ball 2014): Support for free speech among adolescents depends on the specific context and the degree of conflict with other democratic or social values (cf. Gibson and Bingham 1982; Gibson 2006; Helwig 1995).

Second, high levels of cognitive sophistication make adolescents more likely to discriminate between support for free speech as an abstract principle from support in specific, conflicted situations. Enrollment in a higher educational track correlates with high support for the abstract principle of free speech, high support for free speech that criticizes government or elections, and relatively low support for free speech that conflicts with the rights of other social groups or that incites violence. This is very much in line with the complexity of reasoning hypothesis (hypotheses 2a and 3a). Yet, we do not find similar effects for political sophistication (political discussion, political knowledge, and political efficacy), rejecting hypotheses 2b–2d and 3b–3d. Rather, political efficacy has the inverse effect: efficacious adolescents tend to be unidimensionally more in favor of free speech than less efficacious adolescents.

Third, adolescents are less likely to support free speech directed against the interests or democratic rights of their social group. Generally there is no difference in the support for free speech between adolescents with or without a migration background or between religious and non-religious adolescents. Yet, adolescents with a migration background and religious adolescents are less likely to support free speech that calls for disenfranchisement or ridicules their group. This supports hypothesis 4 that we derived from social identity theory (cf. Tajfel and Turner 1979), and aligns with empirical findings on Muslim adolescents (Verkuyten and Slooter 2008). Likewise, girls are more willing to restrict free speech when in conflict with other values, while they do not differ from boys in their support for free speech in abstract terms. This corresponds to the finding of Steen-Johnsen and Enjolras (2016) among adults.

We can only speculate about the mixed findings on the effects of political socialization. Although the literature on political socialization often assumes that political discussions are supportive of democratic values, these discussions may also be negative (Van Bergen, De Ruyter, and Pels 2017). We should explore the type and content of the political discussions, not only with parents but also with for instance peers. Moreover, political socialization may also set the norm of a one-dimensional view towards freedom of speech, in line with societal and political discourse that increasingly frames free speech as an absolute right (cf. Nieuwelink, Ten Dam, and Dekker 2019). To the extent that informed and politically efficacious adolescents pick up this frame, it counters the development of complexity of reasoning. Our findings on the effects of political efficacy are suggestive of this potential.

What does this study tell us about the democratic sensibilities of young adolescents? On the one hand, our findings reveal their democratic capabilities. Young adolescents respond to the tensions inherent to liberal democracy. Twelve year olds already differentiate between the principle of freedom of speech (which they support widely) and freedom of speech when it is in conflict with other values (where support is much more conditional). Such differentiation likely strengthens with age (Patterson 1979; Helwig 1995; Wainryb, Shaw, and Maianu 1998). Moreover, adolescents also differentiate by the content of that speech. Answer patterns are structured along three types of speech: speech aimed at government and democracy, speech aimed at social groups, and violence inciting speech. This mode of differentiation by the content of speech is an essential democratic competence. Since comparable research is relatively old, we cannot conclude whether contemporary youth master this better than previous generations.

On the other hand, some groups of adolescents are better equipped to differentiate than others. Cognitive sophistication is related to more support for free speech as an abstract value, and less support for free speech as a moral dilemma, particularly in specific situations. This aligns with moral development scholarship (e.g. Helwig 2018; Nucci and Turiel 2009) and opposes studies that suggest that cognitive sophistication induces more unidimensional support (e.g. Nieuwelink et al. 2018). But it also shows that inequality in the democratic capability to navigate the complexities of liberal democracy exists as early as young adolescence. These differences are unlikely due to socialization at school, as they already exist at the very beginning of secondary education; to what extent these inequalities are moderated by secondary and higher education is still largely unclear (Coopmans et al. 2020).

Finally, the interaction between moral reasoning and group membership has decidedly mixed implications. Positively, adolescents are sensitive to specific situations: they are more reluctant to support free speech when it goes against the values of the in-group. Moral reasoning is an important mechanism (Verkuyten and Slooter 2008; cf. Helwig 2018), even in young adolescence and particularly in specific situations. This reinforces the methodological need to take group membership into account to understand tolerance (cf. Rutland, Killen, and Abrams 2010). Yet, negatively, this finding also tells us that support for free speech hinges on group membership already at an early age. It underpins the need to assess the socialization of support for democratic values as situational dilemmas.

## Notes

1. We excluded schools offering the educational track for adolescents with learning difficulties.
2. This measure also shows variation within classes: 28% of the classes host students from different tracks. We performed a robustness check in which we assigned students post-hoc to the most common track in their class and modeled the effect of track as a Level 2 determinant clustered by class. Effects tend to become a bit weaker, but the overall conclusions on the track effect do not change.
3. The questionnaire did not isolate gender (identification) from sex (assigned).
4. Answer categories: no books, 1–10 books, 11–50 books, 51–100 books, 101–200 books, 201–500 books, more than 500 books.
5. Answer categories: a lot less rich, somewhat less rich, equally rich, somewhat richer, a lot richer, and I do not wish to answer this question.

6. Should both categories apply, children are assigned the category belonging to the country of birth of their mother, except when the mother is born in the Netherlands.
7. We explored to what extent the effects of knowledge and efficacy are conditional on educational track. We only find an effect of knowledge in the mixed track (on conditional, vertical, and horizontal free speech) and not in the specialized tracks. This likely reflects the diversity of students enrolled in the mixed track. The conditional effects of efficacy are mostly non-significant and inconsistent at best.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Data availability statement

A replication package will be made available upon publication. The DAPDV data set will be deposited at data archive DANS within 3 years of completion of the panel study.

## ORCID

Tom van der Meer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6164-2926>

Geert ten Dam  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2929-7920>

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## Appendix 1

Mokken scale analysis is a non-parametric probabilistic scaling technique that is based on item response theory (Van Schuur 2003). It assumes that the items that respondents answered measure a certain underlying concept and that the items are hierarchically ordered by degree of difficulty. The latter means that respondents who gave a particular answer on the most 'difficult' item are assumed to have a higher likelihood to give the same answer on 'easier' items. Hence, this analysis also allows us to assess whether there is a hierarchy in adolescents' answering patterns across the seven items of specific types of free speech: are adolescents who support the item with 'maximal' conflict (calling for violent action) more likely to also support the items with less conflict? Moreover, MSA tests to what extent this hierarchy is consistent across respondents and localizes deviations from this pattern.

We followed the stepwise procedure as suggested by Sijtsma and Van den Ark (2017) using the Mokken package and the Automated Item Selection Procedure (AISP) in *R* (Van den Ark 2007).

First, we examine the scalability of the items as indicated by the *H*-coefficient. *H*-coefficients between 0.30 and 0.40 indicate a weak scale; between 0.40 and 0.50 indicate a medium scale; and *H*-coefficients of 0.5 and higher point to a strong scale. Items for which the *H*-coefficient is lower than 0.3 are considered unscalable (Sijtsma and Van den Ark 2017). The results indicate that the *H*-coefficients of the separate items ( $H_i$ ) range from 0.30 to 0.59 (see Table A1). Including all items in one scale would result in a scale with total-scalability coefficient  $H = 0.389$ . Increasing the lower bound of the scalability coefficient using the scaling criterion (*c*) in a stepwise procedure reveals that the scale is not unidimensional; at  $c \geq 0.40$ , two scales were identified (see Table A1). One item ('call for violence') is unscalable.

Second, we assessed to what extent the items constitute a hierarchical by testing for violations of two assumptions of monotonicity. The monotone homogeneity assumption states that respondents who dominate (i.e., positively answer to) difficult items should have a higher probability to dominate the easier items as well. The double monotonicity assumption implies an invariant ordering of items suggesting that the hierarchy of the scale is consistent across respondents. We found no significant deviations from the monotone homogeneity assumption. There were three violations of the double monotonicity assumption: the item response function of the items of saying that 'immigrants and higher educated should not be allowed to vote' intersects with the item 'make jokes about religion or culture'. This suggests that the ordering of these items is not invariant. Removing the latter item resolves violation of double monotonicity.

Based on the scalability of the seven items as identified in the Mokken scale analysis, we combined the items into two additive scales that also seem theoretically tenable. The first scale includes the items 'criticize the government', 'say that elections should be abolished', 'say that immigrants should not be allowed to vote', and 'say that only higher educated should be allowed to vote' ( $H = 0.515$ ;  $MS = 0.65$ ; *Cronbach's Alpha* = 0.59; *Guttman's lambda* = 0.60). This scale seems to measure support for 'vertical' types of free speech, i.e., speech that aids or conflicts with democratic rights. The second scale consists of the items 'make jokes about religion or culture' and 'verbally abuse others' ( $H = 0.526$ ;  $MS = 0.53$ ; *Cronbach's alpha* = 0.49; *Guttman's lambda* = 0.49), which can be interpreted as a measure of support for 'horizontal' types of free speech, i.e., speech conflicting with other's psychological or physical wellbeing. The third item, 'call for violence', stands on its own and is analyzed separately.

**Table A1.** Results from Mokken scale analysis on the seven items of specific types of free speech.

	Mean score	Scalability coefficient for the individual items ( <i>H</i> )	<i>C</i> = 0.45 Scale		<i>C</i> = 0.50 Scale	
			1	2	1	2
Criticize the government	0.73	0.59	X		X	
Say that elections should be abolished	0.33	0.40	X		X	
	0.20	0.33		X		X

(Continued)

**Table A1.** Continued.

	Mean score	Scalability coefficient for the individual items ( $H$ )	C = 0.45 Scale		C = 0.50 Scale	
			1	2	1	2
Make jokes about religion or culture						
Say that immigrants should not be allowed to vote	0.18	0.38	X		NS	NS
Say that only higher educated should be allowed to vote	0.16	0.39	X		X	
Verbally abuse others	0.09	0.40		X		X
Call for violence	0.09	0.30	NS	NS	NS	NS
$H$ (se)		0.39 (0.02)	0.52 (0.02)	0.53 (0.05)	0.45 (0.03)	0.53 (0.05)
$H_c$		0.66				
MS		0.71	0.65	0.53	0.58	0.53
Cronbach's $\alpha$		0.66	0.59	0.49	0.49	0.49
Guttman's $\lambda$		0.67	0.60	0.49	0.51	0.49

c, criterion value for the Automated Item Selection Procedure (AISP); NS, not scalable.

## References

- Sijtsma, K., & Van den Ark, A. L. (2017). A tutorial on how to do a Mokken scale analysis on your test and questionnaire data. *British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology*, *70*, 137–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bmsp.12078>.
- Van den Ark, L. A. (2007). Mokken Scale Analysis in R. *Journal of Statistical Software*, *20*(11), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v020.i11>.

## Appendix 2

**Table A2.** Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables ( $N = 1755$ ).

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Abstract support	3.45	0.93	0	4
Dilemma	1.84	0.99	0	3
Scale 1	1.41	1.11	0	4
Scale 2	0.28	0.55	0	2
Call for violence	0.09	0.28	0	1
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Lower prevocational track	0.17	0.38	0	1
Upper prevocational track	0.17	0.38	0	1
Intermediate general track	0.26	0.44	0	1
Academic track	0.37	0.48	0	1
Mixed track	0.03	0.16	0	1
<i>Political discussions with parents</i>				
Discuss politics with parents: never	0.25	0.43	0	1
Discuss politics with parents: a few times a year	0.43	0.50	0	1
Discuss politics with parents: a few times per month	0.24	0.42	0	1
Discuss politics with parents: a few times per week or more	0.08	0.28	0	1
Political knowledge (centered)	0.00	1.44	-1.56	7.94
Political efficacy (centered)	0.00	0.97	-1.29	2.71
Sex (girl)	0.54	0.50	0	1
Low socioeconomic background	0.12	0.33	0	1
Middle socioeconomic background	0.38	0.49	0	1
High socioeconomic background	0.34	0.47	0	1
Missing socioeconomic background	0.15	0.36	0	1
No migration background	0.79	0.41	0	1

(Continued)

**Table A2.** Continued.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Western migration background	0.07	0.26	0	1
Non-western migration background	0.14	0.35	0	1
No religious denomination	0.69	0.46	0	1
Christian	0.20	0.40	0	1
Islamic	0.09	0.29	0	1
Other religion	0.02	0.15	0	1
Age (centered)	0.00	0.54	-1.58	2.29

Weighted data.