Self-censorship and political identity on social media

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Extended Abstract

Political self-censorship— or reluctance to share opinions on sensitive topics with others— has been increasing steadily over the past few years [1]–[3]. Political discussions are also impacted, with "six-in-ten (59%)" American adults reporting they find "political conversations with those they disagree with [to be] 'stressful and frustrating' [4]. There is also widespread evidence of self-censorship on social media, in particular. According to a recent study, seventy percent of social media users in the United States say they don't post on social media, mainly out of "concerns that the things they post or share will be used against them and not wanting to be attacked for their views" [5].

One explanation for this rise in self-censorship is the "spiral of silence" [2], [3], [6]–[10]. In this account, people who hold opinions that they consider unpopular may self-censor due to fears of social sanctioning— or, because they assume their opinions are not shared by the majority. This can lead to the amplification of more extreme voices and viewpoints, making it seem like *they* are the majority. This may also contribute to false polarization— or the perception that political polarization is much worse than it really is. Self-censorship may thus play a significant role in the spread of political polarization more broadly.

Though significant research has been conducted on the effects of self-censorship and the spiral of silence on tensions between people from different political parties, much less is known about their impact *within* political parties. Cross-party antagonism can have a detrimental effect on in-party dynamics. As certain beliefs become more closely associated with specific political identities, there may be even more pressure for members of the in-group to adhere to the party's opinions on contentious issues. For example, the assumption that Democrats tend to take on a more pro-choice abortion stance, whereas Republicans tend to take on a more anti-abortion stance, or that Democrats tend to support gun control reforms, whereas Republicans tend to oppose them, and so on, are all stereotypes predicated upon what the "average" Democrat or Republican may believe in.

However, things may not be as straightforward they seem. Two recent reports have found that there are significant factions within each party [11], who do not necessarily agree with everything their party lobbies for. For example, Doherty et al. found nine political subgroups, with "Progressive Left" and "Faith and Flag Conservatives" on the extreme left and right, respectively. These two groups represent just 16% of the population, and yet they are the most politically active across all subgroups [11], [12]. This has lasting implications, as the opinions of those in the middle tend to go unrepresented, thereby reinforcing the spiral of silence. In this article, I examine self-censorship among members of the same party. I ask: When do people disclose opinions that are not in line with prevailing views in their party? Would they disclose their opinions to the in-partisans who disagree with them?

I recruited 420 Democrats and 411 Republicans to participate in a survey experiment with a simulated chat platform where they were asked to discuss a politically contentious subject with two anonymous strangers. After completing a survey about their views on several contentious issues, including defunding the police and allegations of voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election, participants were directed to a simulated chat platform, where they were

asked to discuss their opinions about one of these two issues. The simulated chat partners were designed so that they always expressed the opposite opinion from the participant (this way, the participant always held the minority opinion). Respondents were randomized to one of two conditions. In one, they were put into a chat with two members of their own party, and in the other, they were put into a chat with two members of another party. I manipulated the party affiliation of the chat partners in order to examine whether people were more likely to disclose their unpopular opinions to in-partisans or out-partisans.

I find Democrats are more likely to disclose their true opinions on defunding the police when they were in chats with those who appeared to be Republicans. Yet Republicans were no more likely to express opinions they perceive to be unpopular on their side when they were asked to interact with simulated Democrats. This study thus has important implications for the study of political polarization, social media, and in-group outgroup dynamics. This article also offers a new, behavioral, measure of self-censorship that is particularly important because of widespread concerns that self-reports are not reliable. Finally, my research contributes to the burgeoning field of computational social science by demonstrating how social media platforms can be simulated within survey-experiments that generate large amounts of text-based data.

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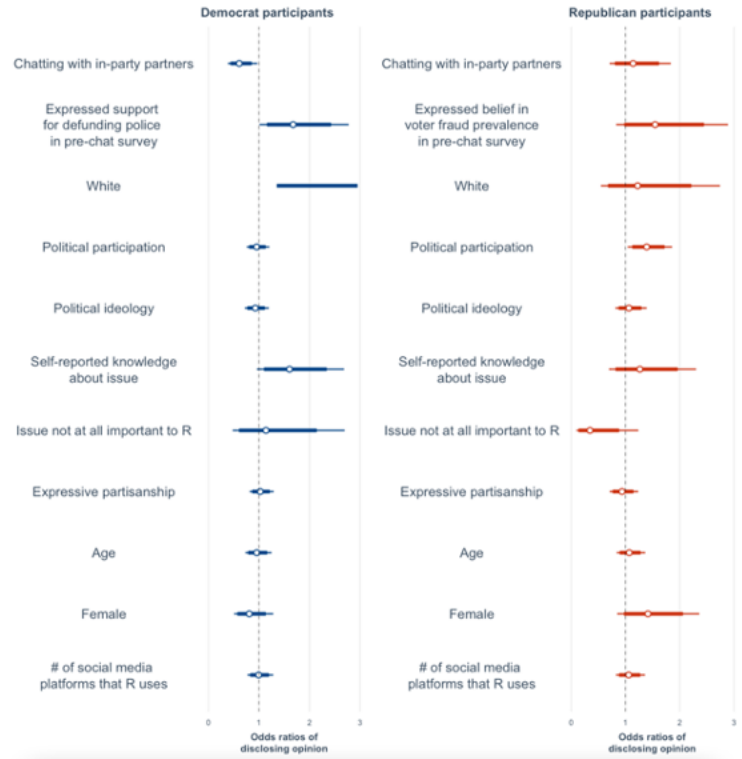

Figure 5: Effect of chatting with in-party partners on whether participants disclosed their opinions in the chat, for experiments with Democrats (n = 420) and Republicans (n = 411). Models control for participant's opinion (e.g. whether they support defunding the police or believe there was voter fraud), race, political participation, self-reported knowledge about the issue, expressive partisanship, political ideology, age, gender, and number of social media participant uses. Circles describe scaled and standardized point estimates, and bars describe 85% and 95% confidence intervals. Regression model tables are reported in Appendix C.[15]