'Political chameleons' conform to avoid discomfort

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Around one group of people, he seems to be a Democrat. Around another, a Republican. In yet another, a Libertarian. He's a political chameleon, someone who engages in a type of social shape-shifting in order to blend in with those he is surrounded by, and his behavior is not unusual, according to researchers at William & Mary.

In two recent studies, Taylor Carlson '14 and Jaime Settle, an assistant professor of government, found that individuals do not always express their private political opinions and may conform to different ideals in front of others who disagree. Their findings are detailed in a paper titled "Political Chameleons: An Exploration of Conformity in Political Discussions" published in the journal *Political Behavior* in the spring of 2016.

"The idea behind it is that just as chameleons can change the color of their skin to blend in with their surroundings, individuals can change the political views they share with others to blend in with the group," said Carlson. "In a way, political conformity might serve as a sort of camouflage for navigating political disagreement in social settings. However, the way we think about conformity, individuals still go back to their true political views when they're alone [or] with others who agree or are otherwise comfortable expressing their true opinions."

In the laboratory

In the first of their two-part study, Carlson and Settle presented a vignette about "Sally," who was said to hold the same political affiliation as the participant. Sally is listening to coworkers discuss an upcoming election when one says to her, "Of course you're voting for the [opposite political party] candidate, aren't you?"

The details of the vignette were manipulated to randomly assign participants to one of four different versions to test whether the composition of the group of coworkers and the way they were discussing the candidates affected the subjects' perceptions of what the character's response would be, according to the first study.

All study participants were asked to rate how likely it would be that Sally would express her true opinion to the group, on a scale of one to five.

In the second study, which Carlson designed and executed as part of her Charles Center-sponsored honors thesis in the government department, was intended to move beyond the hypothetical vignette to study people's actual behavior. It included three parts: a pretest, a lab session and a posttest with a total of 70 participants.

"The pretest included 14 questions adapted from the American National Election Studies about political issues, embedded within a large survey," said Carlson. "Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a variety of policies."

In the laboratory, participants entered a small conference room to discuss political issues in a "focus group" with two other "participants," who were actually confederates acting as part of the study and participants were told that they were participating in a focus group, the second study states.

The researchers wanted to see if participants would conform to a group's

political opinion when they heard the confederates state opinions with which they disagreed, said Carlson.

The findings

In the first study, the findings were suggestive that when the character was a "partisan minority," or surrounded by people with whom she disagreed, she was less likely to state her true opinion, said Settle.

In the lab portion of the second, participants in both the control group and treatment group conveyed a wide range of emotions indicating the extent of the differences between people in their emotional response to political discussion, according to Carlson.

"Few participants reported feeling happy or excited, and the most dominant emotions were surprise, frustration, anxiety and confusion," the article states. "Very few people reported feeling scared or angry, but the point still remains that negative emotions were much more prevalent than positive emotions while interacting with people who disagree on a political level. This trend is consistent across both groups, which suggests that engaging with people with whom one disagrees politically is a generally more negative experience, regardless of pressures to conform."

In their questions, Settle, and Carlson also investigated the study participants' previous experiences with social pressure to withhold political opinions.

"Of the participants who answered the question, 63 percent reported having felt pressured to hold a particular political opinion in their daily lives," the article states. "In addition, the two studies show that people both expect others to hide their true political opinions and actually do so themselves, while approximately 33 percent of respondents expect a character to conform in a vignette, approximately two-thirds of

respondents conform their opinions in actual discussions."

Carlson states that the findings of their study may have a number of effects on the public's knowledge regarding political conformity.

"I think 'Political Chameleons' might have two effects," she said. "First, those who have conformed in uncomfortable political discussions in the real world might find it interesting to see that this is a more common behavior than they might have thought. Second, regardless of whether political conformity is normatively good or bad—this is not a debate with which we can engage with the current analysis—our findings might challenge individuals to think about how they engage with others when they discuss important political issues."

Settle also adds, that people may also want to be cognizant of why others are inclined to hide their true feelings.

"We can all be mindful of the tendency for others to 'be chameleons,'" said Settle, "and do what we can to make others feel comfortable when the conversation turns to politics."

More information: Taylor N. Carlson et al. Political Chameleons: An Exploration of Conformity in Political Discussions, *Political Behavior* (2016). DOI: 10.1007/s11109-016-9335-y

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