

New book explores political secrecy among ordinary Americans in today's divisive culture

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Emily Van Duyn challenges existing theories of political communication in the new book “Democracy Lives in Darkness: How and Why People Keep Their Politics a Secret” (Oxford University Press). Van Duyn is a professor of communication at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

In a rural community in East Texas, a group of women decided to meet in secret to discuss politics, holding its first clandestine gathering in a secluded barn at the end of a dark road. Thereafter, they rotated meeting locations each month, ensuring that the drapes were tightly closed in members' houses before the meetings began. New members signed nondisclosure agreements, promising not to reveal who was present and the topics discussed.

While it may sound like a scene from the anti-communist Red Scare of the 1950s, the Texas group was founded in November 2016, shortly after Republican Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election, according to Emily Van Duyn, the author of a new book.

In "Democracy Lives in Darkness: How and Why People Keep Their Politics a Secret" (Oxford University Press), Van Duyn, a professor of communication at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, explored individuals' decisions to selectively reveal their [political views](#).

Centering on the group in Texas and novel survey data on political secrecy, Van Duyn looked at how much people feel they need to hide their views from others in the current bitter, hyperpartisan culture. Van Duyn also examined the consequences of growing polarization—including the rising trend among Americans to cluster in communities with neighbors whose views mirror our own—and the broader implications for the state of democracy in the U.S.

Referring to the Texas group pseudonymously as the "Community Women's Group" or the CWG in the book, Van Duyn said the group's very existence raises fundamental questions as to whether "politics in the United States happen in a completely liberal, rather than an illiberal, democracy."

Van Duyn, who describes herself as a "proud native Texan" and

conducted the research for her doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas, Austin, was alerted to the CWG's existence by an acquaintance who attended its second meeting. After gaining members' trust, Van Duyn sat in on several of the group's meetings and interviewed and surveyed 22 members.

The author described the CWG as a "strange mix of super-left progressive Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans a little more on the right." Members were not political extremists but grandmothers and average citizens with mainstream beliefs who were deeply concerned about the future of the country under a Trump presidency.

In a county where Trump reaped more than 75% of the votes, CWG members felt so marginalized and fearful of the social, economic and potentially violent repercussions of defying the Republican majority surrounding them—including spouses, friends, neighbors and clients—that they only met at night and communicated through a private listserv and Facebook group.

In rural communities like the one in Texas, where residents routinely mix with their neighbors socially and rely on them for their livelihoods, holding nonmajority political opinions can be particularly isolating, stigmatizing and risky. Yet, few studies on political communication have explored the complex dynamics of these communities and the array of risks that people who live there must weigh in deciding whether to defy the partisan majority, Van Duyn said.

"Much more than social ostracism, they were really afraid of economic retribution," Van Duyn said. "Some of the women were business owners and real estate agents who relied on word-of-mouth and community members patronizing their businesses."

Political violence was a tangible threat. One member told Van Duyn that

a vehicle ran her off the road because she displayed an Obama sticker on her car, while another woman said her animals had been shot after she wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper.

"Is it the case that we're really in a liberal democracy if people feel they can't express their beliefs by putting their candidate's sign in their front yard saying who they voted for? Have we kind of stifled that with the levels of polarization we have created?" Van Duyn said.

Popular theories on political communication suggest that for individuals whose beliefs differ from the majority around them expressing their views is a dichotomy—either they speak out or remain silent to avoid potential rejection and isolation. However, Van Duyn said the actuality is more complex. Politically isolated individuals exercise what she called "networked silence"—they find back channels of like-minded people for political expression and engagement.

"To say that people are only going to express their beliefs or not isn't complex enough for today's contexts where we have this blend of networked communities," she said. "People don't just live in one space—they have online communities, friends thousands of miles away, knitting clubs and church groups. Just because they don't express their beliefs in one space doesn't mean they're silent altogether. It just means they may go somewhere else to do it."

Drawing parallels with the LGBT movement, the book examines political organizing in secret and in private, and the incentives for activists to stay in the shadows. Secret groups such as the CWG can serve as incubators, Van Duyn wrote, giving members the courage and validation to openly express their political beliefs with a sense of safety until they feel prepared "come out" and transfer their activism from private to public networks.

With growing rancor both within and between the dominant Democratic and Republican parties, and some constituencies feeling left behind or ideologically alienated from both groups, it's likely that other such secret groups exist and that people who feel politically isolated will increasingly turn to online and offline back channels, she said.

In her survey research, Van Duyn found that 22% of Americans said they sometimes hide their political beliefs from others.

"Certainly, this book has a lot of sad moments and points to the fact that we have all of these anti-democratic things happening in society that make people feel they can't express their beliefs," Van Duyn said. "But there's also this other side of the coin, which is the fact that this group of women still existed.

"They faced all this opposition and were not in a situation where you'd think they would keep fighting this fight, yet they did. There's some optimism in that for me. In contrast to The Washington Post's slogan, 'democracy dies in darkness,' this book suggests that democracy exists in darkness, but also, more optimistically, that despite this darkness, it keeps going."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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