

# Republicans who support childhood vaccine mandates often stay silent, research suggests

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Most Republican voters support childhood vaccine mandates, yet may be discouraged from publicly expressing these views, a new study suggests.

To determine the source of this disconnect, researchers conducted a survey that revealed differences between Republican voters who support childhood [vaccine](#) mandates and those who do not.

According to the study, most Republicans surveyed supported immunization requirements for children and held favorable attitudes toward vaccine safety, while those who said they opposed vaccine mandates did not acknowledge this support exists—and expressed a greater willingness to share their vaccine views to others.

In contrast, the Republicans who supported vaccine mandates were largely aware that their views were in the majority, but tended to be less outspoken.

This phenomenon, called the false consensus effect, describes a misperception by people about how widespread their views are and a belief that their opinions are shared by others—when they are not.

These results suggest that conservative supporters of childhood vaccination are not discouraged from speaking out because they assume that they are in the minority, but because external information environments, like social media, are sometimes dominated by minority views, said Graham Dixon, lead author of the study and an associate professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"Those in the majority may simply sit out of the conversation because they see online environments as being dominated by extreme views and don't want to engage in uncivil discourse," said Dixon. "What's significant is that those in the majority may self-silence even when they are aware of their majority status."

[The study](#) was recently published in the journal *Human Communication Research*.

The work is especially notable because it corroborates recent research showing that much of social media content is driven by a minority of users who express more opinionated and politicized views than the typical user, said Dixon.

"Social media has become the new public square, so it's concerning that the overrepresentation of atypical and sometimes [extreme views](#) may discourage people from participating in the conversation," he said.

This overrepresentation, notes the study, can discourage those in the majority from speaking out because they fear that they may experience social conflict from doing so.

For example, when participants who supported immunization requirements were frequently exposed to anti-vaccine content on social media, they were more likely to believe that they would encounter conflict if they publicly voiced their support for vaccines.

This is likely a larger consequence of the online social environment, as [social media](#) can be used to amplify misleading information that represents the views of only a small subset of the population, said Dixon. In this case, such large-scale self-censorship could play a role in hindering public mobilization of important public health policies.

Researchers also found that the study's results reveal more about majority misconceptions about a number of other issues, including how much support there is for climate change mitigation policies. For society to combat these issues, Dixon suggests that helping individuals build more self-confidence when engaging in online discourse and encouraging them to gain greater media literacy to navigate society's fluctuating information environment could be better tools for overcoming self-silencing.

"We need to figure out ways of motivating people to engage in online discourse and to have the self-confidence necessary to be able to present their views," he said. "Instead of telling them that their views are in the majority, efforts should be made to empower people's [self-confidence](#) to participate in online discourse in civil and constructive ways."

**More information:** Graham N Dixon et al, Challenges to correcting pluralistic ignorance: false consensus effects, competing information environments, and anticipated social conflict, *Human Communication Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/hcr/hqae001](https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqae001)

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