

People Who Self-Censor Opinions Also Avoid Public Politics

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Americans who are reluctant to openly express their opinions when they believe others disagree also tend to avoid publicly visible political activity, such as working for a political campaign or circulating petitions, a new study shows.

The results suggest that today's divisive political environment may make some citizens unwilling to participate publicly in the democratic process. Although this idea is not by itself new, the study is one of the few that links reduced participation to individual differences such as personality.

“In a polarized, hostile political climate some people decide not to participate because they're afraid of the social ramifications of doing anything that might reveal their opinion to others,” said Andrew Hayes, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

While many studies have examined why citizens do or don't participate in the political process, Hayes said few have connected the decision to people's everyday lives with friends and neighbors.

“Some people may be uncomfortable expressing an opinion, such as putting up a lawn sign for a candidate, when they know or speculate that their neighbors have a different political position,” Hayes said.

“They interact with their neighbors everyday, and don't want to feel awkward, so some decide just to refrain from those types of political

participation that make their opinions visible.”

Hayes conducted the study with Michael Huges, a graduate student at Ohio State, and Dietram Scheufele, professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Wisconsin. They published their results in the September 2006 issue of the journal *Political Behavior*.

Hayes has linked a reluctance to participate in political activities to a concept he calls “willingness to self-censor.” He and several colleagues developed a self-report measure of how likely people are to keep silent about their views if they believe others around them will disagree, research published in the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* last year.

The measure asks people how much they agree with statements like “It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say,” and “There have been many times when I thought others around me were wrong but I didn't let them know.”

How many people are willing to self-censor their views? Hayes said with a measure like the willingness to self-censor scale, there are no neat divisions between those who are willing to self-censor and those who aren't. But based on data available, he estimates about one-quarter of Americans would generally keep silent in situations where they feel others may disagree with their opinions. There are many motivations for such self-censorship, such as fear of social rejection, lack of confidence in one's convictions, avoiding arguments, or simple politeness.

In this new study, Hayes and his colleagues investigated whether people who scored relatively high on willingness to self censor were also less likely to take part in public political activities.

The researchers conducted telephone interviews with 781 people from

around the country. The participants were asked if, during the past two years, they had attended a meeting related to politics, written a letter to a newspaper editor or called into a public affairs radio talk show, circulated a petition for a candidate or issue, worked for a political campaign, contacted a public official, raised funds or contributed money to a political candidate or organization, or persuaded someone to vote for or against a particular political candidate.

Results showed that participants who scored relatively high in a tendency to self-censor were also less likely to engage in these public political activities, Hayes said.

This was true even though the researchers took into account a wide variety of other factors that may affect political participation, including interest in politics, political ideology, attention to political news, shyness, and participants' belief that they had political power.

The researchers also accounted for demographic factors such as age, sex, education and ethnicity.

“People who don't want to express their opinions in a hostile environment also engage in fewer political activities that may open their opinion to public view and scrutiny,” Hayes said.

These days, even political activities that may have once been private are now public – such as donations to political candidates and issues.

“You can go online and find out a lot about how your neighbors have donated to various political causes,” Hayes said.

While this study shows self-censors are less likely to participate publicly in politics, that doesn't mean they are less likely to vote, he said. Because voting is private, there are no significant social costs of voting

differently from those around you.

People who are willing to censor themselves would tend to avoid political participation in many situations, Hayes said. But such avoidance may be particularly strong in today's harsh political climate.

“The more political polarization there is, the greater the potential for conflict, so the risk is higher,” Hayes said. “Self-censors may be particularly reluctant to participate when there's so much disagreement over political issues.”

However, he said the local political climate for individuals may be more important than the national climate. Self-censors probably are more concerned about how their opinions will be viewed by their immediate friends, neighbors and co-workers they see every day.

Hayes said he plans to continue this work by studying how political climates at the community and neighborhood level affect self-censorship through nonparticipation in publicly visible forms of political activity.

Source: Ohio State University

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