



Most Americans are now self-censoring. We're regressing.

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July 23rd, 2020

It's common to hear anecdotes about friends or family who just don't feel comfortable discussing politics anymore. It's not that most of these people are bomb-throwing radicals, but many seem to think the country is so polarized that nothing good can come from voicing their own opinion.

A new poll from the Cato Institute and YouGov suggests that this fear is widespread. It found that 62 percent of Americans say they have political views they are afraid to share.

This sentiment is most common among Republicans, with 77 percent agreeing that they are fearful of sharing some of their political views, but majorities of Democrats (52 percent) and independents (59 percent) share the same view.

In fact, nearly every ideological grouping believes they have to self-censor, with 52 percent of liberals, 64 percent of moderates and 77 percent of conservatives agreeing that the current political climate prevents them from saying things they believe.

Interestingly, the only group where a majority of people do not hold that view is among strong liberals – the most left-wing segment of the public. And still, 42 percent of them say that they self-censor in the same fashion.

This suggests that self-censorship is now the norm for much of the American public, across ideological lines, with perhaps the most liberal American citizens having a little less fear of speaking their minds than the rest of us.

That last bit of information may be no surprise if you're familiar with some statistics about how liberal-leaning some American institutions have become. One survey found that by 2014, for instance, the ratio of liberals to conservatives at American colleges and universities was six to one; among New England's institutions of higher education, it's 28 to one.

It's hardly a surprise that when corners of American society become dominated by one ideological group, they start to see dissenters from orthodoxy with deep suspicion. We can, for instance, witness hundreds of professors and graduate students signing a letter denouncing the liberal psychologist Steven Pinker for some mild dissents from some of the assertions common in the Black Lives Matter movement (namely that race is the variable most strongly correlated with police shootings).

Pinker is a rich and famous man who will likely escape any attempt at censorship thrown at him, but what should worry us more is the lowly graduate assistant or professor without tenure who worries that publishing an objective research finding will get them in hot water with their university if its results don't confirm the ideological priors of whatever group happens to be hegemonic in the culture.

Even more worrying than the general climate of fear are the lengths with which some Americans are willing to go to punish their political opponents. The survey found that 50 percent of strong liberals support firing a business executive who, in their personal capacity, donated to Donald Trump's re-election campaign. 36 percent of strong conservatives, on the other hand, supported firing executives who donated to former vice president Joe Biden's current presidential campaign.

Meanwhile, 32 percent of Americans, about a third of the country, worries that their political views could harm their employment. That would be a reasonable enough worry if you're part of the tiny sliver of Americans who works in explicitly political organizations, like a think tank or a campaign, but the number suggests that people who work jobs totally unrelated to politics still fear that their views could cost them their employment. This includes a quarter of Democrats and a whopping 60 percent of Republicans.

Taken together, the implication of these results is that America is a place where most people are deeply worried about honestly engaging in the political process, something that could over time do real damage to our democracy.

We could, for example, see widespread "pluralistic ignorance." Pluralistic ignorance is a situation where members of a group may privately reject an idea, but they believe most of the other members of the group believe that idea, so they decide to accept it. This phenomenon is quite common on social media channels, where you're rewarded for conforming to group trends and punished for stepping outside the bounds of your cohort.

Running an entire country on pluralistic ignorance would prevent us from addressing the actual concerns members of the public have. If our ancestors were paralyzed from speaking in favor of causes that were unpopular, we wouldn't have all kinds of advances from women's suffrage to civil rights.

In order to address this climate of fear, we have to stop being afraid. Yes, sometimes people will say things that upset or outrage us, and sometimes we will upset or outrage others. But that's the price of living in a messy but beautiful society with all kinds of people who disagree. In order to make things a little easier, it would be wise to heed the counsel of psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who says we should "give less offense" by being more polite and "take less offense" by charitably interpreting other's statements and offering forgiveness when we screw up.

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