

THE DAILY UNIVERSE

Is political self-censorship on the rise?

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A number of recent nationwide surveys suggest political self-censorship may be on the rise in America, particularly among young adults.

Data from a [July 2020 survey from the libertarian Cato Institute](#) showed 62% of Americans say the current political climate prevents them from sharing their views in fear of causing offense, up from 58% in 2017. Additionally, 37% of responders under 30 admitted they were worried their political opinions could hurt their career paths, compared to 30% of 30-54 year-olds and 24% of 55-64 year-olds.

Similarly, a [fall 2019 Heterodox Academy survey](#) found 55% of college students in the United States are reluctant to share political views with their peers.

With the 2020 presidential election just days away, some BYU students acknowledged their hesitancy to share political views and attributed it to a variety of fears, including confrontation, losing friends and “cancel culture.”

In a social media survey on The Daily Universe Instagram account, 51% of responders said they do not generally feel comfortable sharing political opinions while 22% said it depends on the situation. Just 27% of responders noted their willingness to express political views regardless of the circumstance.

One student admitted they generally feel comfortable talking politics in one-on-one conversations, but “over social media or in public, heck no.” Another student said they also choose to steer clear of addressing political topics on social media because “people are much more tactless behind a screen.”

One student responder said “it seems when you share them people view it as an attack on their views and get upset.” While another said, “people are incredibly rude if you have an opinion different than theirs.”

Malia Vick, a freshman from Fayetteville, Georgia, acknowledged her willingness to share political opinions “depends on how intense people are.”

“I won’t deny my beliefs,” Vick said. “But some people just want to fight.”

BYU political science professor Lisa Argyle, who is currently doing research on political self-censorship, has found talking politics can bring a high level of anxiety to some.

“Political conversations can create tension, confrontation, put you on the spot for things you are not very confident about or challenge your view of yourself and the world,” Argyle said. “All of these things create what psychologists call ‘self-threat,’ which manifests as anxiety. The easiest way to avoid the discomfort and anxiety is to not talk politics at all.”

Fellow BYU political science professor Ethan Busby agreed with Argyle, noting that many people want to avoid the tense conflict that can come from political discussions. Busby pointed to uncomfortable family gatherings, workplaces and certain marriages as common settings where political self-censorship can take place.

With regard to younger, college-aged adults, Busby feels some might be hesitant to talk politics because they think they don’t know as much or haven’t been involved in politics for very long.

“It could also be that younger people feel that they’re generally less-established and have more to lose from controversy and disagreement,” Busby said.

Jeremy Pope, another BYU political science professor, noted some college-aged adults might refrain from talking politics to appear more socially acceptable. He also acknowledged some can be nervous about how an authority figure might react to their political opinions.

According to Pope, the difficulty in analyzing political self-censorship among young adults is “determining whether or not this behavior is really problematic or just social interaction as it normally unfolds.”

While Argyle noted talking politics can seem threatening to some college students, she has found that younger people are generally more likely to share political views than older people. She mentioned college can be a formative environment where students are exposed to a wide range of new ideas and beliefs.

“This leads to more political discussion and changing attitudes than people typically have later in their lives,” Argyle said.

As the 2020 presidential election nears, Busby said some people choose to remain silent about politics simply because they are tired of hearing so much about the candidates and issues. He noted election fatigue can be common at the end of any campaign in any election year.

Argyle mentioned political self-censorship has been present in America for several years, no matter who the president is or the prominent national issues at the time. She also expects the behavior to continue well into the future, regardless of who wins this year’s election.

“It is a natural psychological reaction for people to shift what they are willing to say and how they want to say it based on who they are talking to and the context they are in,” Argyle said. “That is not a new development in the last four years and I think it’s unlikely to go away in the next four years, no matter who wins the election.”