



62% of Americans Afraid to Share Political Views

James Joyner

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In light of recent debates over “cancel culture” versus marginalized voices finally being heard, a new survey from a libertarian think tank both illuminates and obfuscates.

Emily Ekins, the Cato Institute (“**Poll: 62% of Americans Say They Have Political Views They’re Afraid to Share**“):

A new Cato national survey finds that self-censorship is on the rise in the United States. Nearly two-thirds—62%—of Americans say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive. The share of Americans who self-censor has risen several points since 2017 when 58% of Americans agreed with this statement.

These fears cross partisan lines. Majorities of Democrats (52%), independents (59%) and Republicans (77%) all agree they have political opinions they are afraid to share.

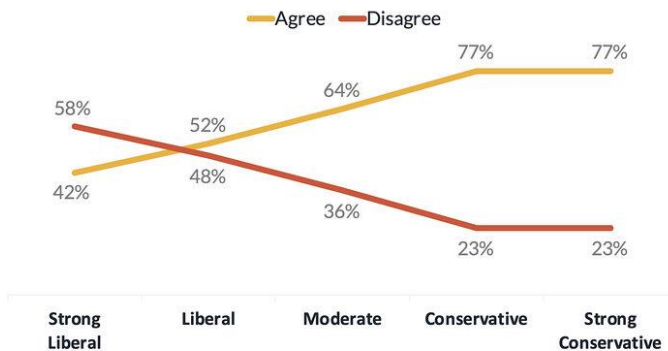
So far, so good.

Strong liberals stand out, however, as the only political group who feel they can express themselves. Nearly 6 in 10 (58%) of staunch liberals feel they can say what they believe. However, centrist liberals feel differently. A slim majority (52%) of liberals feel they have to self-censor, as do 64% of moderates, and 77% of conservatives. This demonstrates that political expression is an issue that divides the Democratic coalition between centrist Democrats and their left flank.

While I think this divide exists, I’m not sure that this data point provides any evidence once way or the other.

Staunch Liberals Stand Out as Only Group Who Feels They Can Share their Political Opinions

Agree/Disagree: The political climate these days prevents me from saying things I believe because others might find them offensive.



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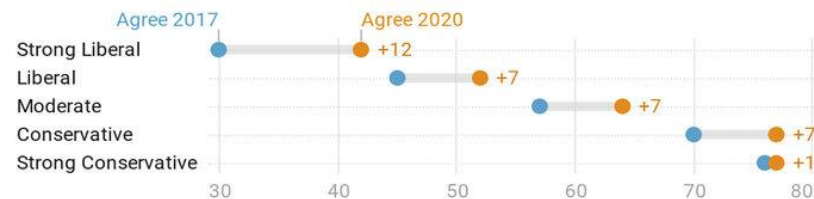
The trendlines do, however, suggest that, the further left one's views, the more one believes they're protected. But, of course, that may well be because people further to the right of the spectrum have views that are more offensive. Still, while the chart doesn't give breakdowns of what percentage of those surveyed fit into each cohort, it would be odd for the vast majority of respondents to feel they're outside the mainstream.

What's changed? In 2017 most centrist liberals felt confident (54%) they could express their views. However today, slightly less than half (48%) feel the same. The share who feel they cannot be open increased 7 points from 45% in 2017 to 52% today. In fact, there have been shifts across the board, where more people among all political groups feel they are walking on eggshells.

More Americans Have Opinions They're Afraid to Share in 2020 than in 2017

Agree/Disagree: The political climate these days prevents me from saying things I believe because others might find them offensive.

% who agree



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That all groups have moved in the same direction and, with the exception of "Strong Conservative," by a substantial margin is indeed interesting. Offhand, the only issues where the needle has moved substantially since 2017 are LGBTQ rights, and especially trans rights. Certainly #MeTwo, #BlackLivesMatter and various associated events have changed the conversation on sex and race as well, although only at the margins.

Self-censorship is widespread across demographic groups as well. Nearly two-thirds of Latino Americans (65%) and White Americans (64%) and nearly half of African Americans (49%) have

political views they are afraid to share. Majorities of men (65%) and women (59%), people with incomes over \$100,000 (60%) and people with incomes less than \$20,000 (58%), people under 35 (55%) and over 65 (66%), religious (71%) and non-religious (56%) all agree that the political climate prevents them from expressing their true beliefs.

Again, without something more concrete than “true beliefs,” we’re led to speculate as to which issues are of concern. That the elderly, religious, and males are the most fearful isn’t surprising. Nor that whites are more uncomfortable than blacks. That Hispanics are more fearful (although, well within the margin of error) than whites is. (Although, again, that invites conjecture. Hispanics are likely even more “conservative” on LGBTQ issues than whites.)

The survey, at least in Cato’s own write-up, never really answers those obvious questions. As a general rule, I want people to feel free to have open dialog on all but the most extreme views. I’m less concerned with people being afraid to say “Hitler was right” and “God hates fags” than to weigh in on open debates.

Instead of drilling down on what views people are afraid to express, they instead go in the completely opposite direction: what views they’re happy to punish others for having.

The survey found that many Americans think a person’s private political donations should impact their employment. Nearly a quarter (22%) of Americans would support firing a business executive who personally donates to Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden’s campaign. Even more, 31% support firing a business executive who donates to Donald Trump’s re-election campaign.

That strikes me as plainly nuts. That liberals hate Trump more than conservatives hate Biden doesn’t surprise me. But the number of Americans who should support firing individuals for who they support politically should be vanishingly small; it’s not.

The breakdown of those who do isn’t hugely surprising, however:

Support rises among political subgroups. Support increases to 50% of strong liberals who support firing executives who personally donate to Trump. And more than a third (36%) of strong conservatives support firing an executive for donating to Biden’s presidential campaign.

Young Americans are also more likely than older Americans to support punishing people at work for personal donations to Trump. Forty-four percent (44%) of Americans under 30 support firing executives if they donate to Trump. This share declines to 22% among those over 55 years old—a 20-point difference. An age gap also exists for Biden donors, but is less pronounced. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of Americans under 30 support firing executives who donate to Biden compared to 20% of those over 55—a 7-point difference.

Given that, though, perhaps this isn’t surprising, either:

Nearly a third (32%) of employed Americans say they personally are worried about missing out on career opportunities or losing their job if their political opinions became known. These results are particularly notable given that most personal campaign contributions to political candidates are public knowledge and can easily be found online.

And it’s not just one side of the political spectrum: 31% of liberals, 30% of moderates and 34% of conservatives are worried their political views could get them fired or harm their career

trajectory. This suggests that it's not necessarily just one particular set of views that has moved outside of acceptable public discourse. Instead these results are more consistent with a "walking on eggshells" thesis that people increasingly fear a wide range of political views could offend others or could negatively impact themselves.

These concerns are also cross-partisan, although more Republicans are worried: 28% of Democrats, 31% of independents, and 38% of Republicans are worried about how their political opinions could impact their career trajectories.

Americans with diverse backgrounds share this concern that their employment could be adversely affected if their political views were discovered: 38% of Hispanic Americans, 22% of African Americans, 31% of White Americans, 35% of men, 27% of women, 36% of households earning less than \$20,000 a year, and 33% of households earning more than \$100,000 a year agree.

Maybe this is reasonable in the hypercharged political environment we're living in.

Given that liberals overwhelmingly believe that Trump supporters are white nationalists, one would imagine that Trump supporters living in major metropolitan areas or in certain industries would be very leery of divulging their support. And, apparently, a not insignificant number of liberals think supporting Trump should be a firing offense.

While the numbers are smaller in the other direction, one would similarly expect that Biden supporters—and, certainly, those with very liberal social views—would be cautious about expressing them in the Deep South or in industries dominated by conservatives. Or if the CEO is a Trump donor who has somehow been spared being fired.

Some are more worried about losing their jobs or missing out on job opportunities because of political views. Those with the highest levels of education are most concerned. Almost half (44%) of Americans with post-graduate degrees say they are worried their careers could be harmed if others discovered their political opinions, compared to 34% of college graduates, 28% of those with some college experience, and 25% of high school graduates.

Given that "Americans with post-graduate degrees" are concentrated in a handful of high profile professions, it's perhaps not shocking that we're most worried about the consequences of free expression. Indeed, much of the "cancel culture" debate is among those in the academy, media, and other public-facing vocations.

But this educational divide appears largely driven by partisanship. Democrats with graduate degrees (25%) are about as likely as high school graduates (23%) to be worried their political views could harm their employment. However, a major shift occurs among Republicans who attend college and graduate school. About a quarter of Republicans with high school degrees (27%) or some college (26%) worry their political opinions could harm them at work—but this number increases to 40% among Republican college graduates and 60% of those with post-graduate degrees. A similar trend is observed among independents. The share of independents who have these concerns increases from 18% among high school graduates, to 35% among those with some college, 41% of college graduates, and 49% of post-graduates.

Again, this raises more questions than it answers. Conservatives in the academy—especially in more elite institutions—are naturally going to feel unsafe speaking out against the orthodoxy.

But are they simply worried that they'll be ostracized for professing, say, belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ or that they're members of the Republican Party? Or are they feeling hamstrung in expressing views that many deem racist or LGBTQ-phobic?

A more surprising—and seemingly contradictory—finding:

Younger people are also more concerned than older people, irrespective of political viewpoint. Examining all Americans under 65, 37% of those under 30 are worried their political opinions could harm their career trajectories, compared to 30% of 30-54 year-olds and 24% of 55-64 year-olds. But the age gap is more striking taking into account political views. A slim majority (51%) of Republicans under 30 fear their views could harm their career prospects compared to 39% of 30-44 year-olds, 34% of 45-54 year-olds, and 28% of 55-64 year-old Republicans. Democrats reflect a similar but less pronounced pattern. A third (33%) of Democrats under 30 worry they have views that could harm their current and future jobs, compared to 27% of 30-54 year-olds, and 19% of 55-64 year-old Democrats.

Given that younger cohorts are always more liberal, it's odd that young folks feel threatened while liberals don't. My guess here is that this is simply a function of younger people—battered first by the Great Recession and now by the COVID meltdown—are simply more fearful for their employment, period.

Ekin sees it differently:

These data suggest that a significant minority of Americans from all political persuasions and backgrounds—particularly younger people who have spent more time in America's universities—are most likely to hide their views for fear of financial penalty.

It's been nearly two decades since I taught undergraduates but this strikes me as unlikely. With the possible exception of the most elite universities, there's hardly a more conducive environment for consequence-free speech than a college campus.

Ekins concludes,

Taking these results together indicates that a significant majority of Americans with diverse political views and backgrounds self-censor their political opinions. This large number from across demographic groups suggests withheld opinions may not simply be radical or fringe perspectives in the process of being socially marginalized. Instead many of these opinions may be shared by a large number of people. Opinions so widely shared are likely shaping how people think about salient policy issues and ultimately impacting how they vote. But if people feel they cannot discuss these important policy matters, such views will not have an opportunity to be scrutinized, understood, or reformed.

I reflexively and instinctively agree with that sentiment. But, again, it would be more instructive if we understood what issues and what viewpoints it is people are afraid to share.