Freedom of Expression in Interpersonal Interactions

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For a half-century, scholars have examined how people navigate political discussions, finding that many avoid expressing their true opinions to others who disagree and instead choose to remain silent (Noelle-Neumann 1974) or conform to the group's opinion (Carlson and Settle 2016; Levitan and Verhulst 2016). These everyday experiences of censorship draw less attention than concerns about people silencing themselves to avoid being "canceled" in more publicly visible ways (Lukianoff and Haidt 2019). However, these seemingly mundane, everyday political encounters restrict the free flow of opinion, information, and dialogue on important political topics.

The majority of previous research on political discussion focuses on the effects of exposure to disagreement (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Mutz 2006), but most of this work does not directly examine how the interpersonal dynamics of a political conversation affect the choices that people make about political expression. Carlson and Settle (2022a) build on extensive qualitative research (Eliasoph 1998; Walsh 2010) to argue that social and psychological impediments in interpersonal conversations—namely, people's desire to preserve their esteem and relationships—might structure how forthcoming they are about their political opinions. Consistent with previous research, the authors found that disagreement is indeed a central roadblock reducing the likelihood of people expressing their true opinions. However, disagreement is not the only challenge that people face in discussion: Carlson and Settle (2022a) identified other factors—including the political knowledge gap, strength of relationship, and power dynamic between discussants—that could affect how likely people are to express their true opinions. Similarly, recent scholarship highlights other important divides in American politics, such as deep involvement in politics (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022), that could affect the dynamics of discussion.

A remaining question is how these factors stack up against one another. To address this gap in our knowledge, we conducted a preregistered conjoint experiment in which we randomized features of a hypothetical political discussant and asked participants to report how comfortable they would be expressing their true political opinions in a discussion with the person described (Carlson and Settle 2022b). We find that, consistent with previous research, expected disagreement is indeed the strongest factor contributing to opinion expression. Specifically, participants were seven points more likely to report that they would express their true opinions in a conversation with someone who was a copartisan compared to an out-partisan. However, they also reported being more likely to express their opinions in face-to-face conversations than online, as well as with people with whom they had a close relationship. Where potential discussants learn about politics also was influential: participants reported being less likely to express their true opinions in conversations in which discussants preferred fringe media outlets relative to a preference for mainstream media. Finally, we find that participants reported being less likely to express their true opinions to people who shared their gender but were more comfortable expressing their true opinions to those who shared their racial or ethnic identity. Altogether, these results suggest that expected disagreement remains an important roadblock to free expression in political discussion, but it is not the only one.

WHAT DRIVES PEOPLE TO EXPRESS OR HIDE THEIR TRUE OPINIONS?

In a nation in which free political expression is valued, why should we focus on people's hesitation to exercise that right in daily conversations? Because many Americans report being uncomfortable expressing their political opinions: in 2019, 40% reported that they feel less free to speak their mind than they used to be (Gibson and Sutherland 2021). This hesitancy also has been observed in laboratory experiments (Carlson and Settle 2016, 2022a; Levitan and Verhulst 2016). Following the 4D Framework of political discussion (Carlson and Settle 2022a), we consider political discussion to be a social process through which people make many decisions. After first detecting another's political views and then deciding to engage in the discussion, individuals choose what to say. To better understand why people hide their true opinions, this article focuses on this third stage.

One answer is that people seek to avoid conflict; therefore, in the face of expected political disagreement, they will be less likely to express their true opinions. Previous research has shown that people are more likely to avoid disagreeable conversations (Settle and Carlson 2019), have more homogeneous discussion networks (Mutz 2006), and silence or censor their opinions when they expect disagreement (Carlson and Settle 2022a). We expect to observe that participants would be less likely to express their true opinions to someone who disagrees with them. Based on prior work, we operationalized expected disagreement as a

discussant with whom someone does not share their partisan identity, as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals will be less willing to express their true opinions in a conversation with someone who identifies with the opposite political party compared to a conversation with someone who identifies with the same political party.[1]

Whereas most political discussion research focuses on the effects of disagreement, more recent scholarship identifies other dividing lines in American politics that go beyond the rift between Democrats and Republicans. Krupnikov and Ryan (2022) argue that Americans are divided into those who are

example, even if two people share a partisan identity, if one receives information from mainstream sources and the other turns to partisan or fringe sources, the pair might recognize that the other's opinions are shaped by a vastly different information environment—one that they do not value. In turn, this could make them less willing to express their true opinions, an expectation that we tested as follows:

Hypothesis 4: Individuals will be less willing to express their true opinions in a conversation with someone who receives information from questionable news sources compared to a conversation with someone who receives information from mainstream news sources.

> *Altogether, these results suggest that expected disagreement remains an important roadblock to free expression in political discussion, but it is not the only one.*

deeply involved in politics and the majority who are not. Indicators of how involved potential discussants are in politics—such as how knowledgeable about and engaged in politics they are—could contribute further to how likely someone else would be to express their true opinions in a conversation. For example, people might be hesitant to express their true opinions to someone who is deeply invested in politics for fear of getting into a heated conversation (Connors and Howell n. d.) or of feeling foolish for expressing potentially ill-informed opinions. Indeed, there is evidence that political knowledge asymmetries can affect political expression (Carlson and Settle 2022a). Yet, the research designs of previous studies make it difficult to assess how these imbalances stack up against the role of expected disagreement, leading to our next two pre-registered hypotheses, as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Individuals will be less willing to express their true opinions in a conversation with someone who is politically engaged compared to a conversation with someone who is not politically engaged.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals will be less willing to express their true opinions in a conversation with someone who is politically knowledgeable compared to a conversation with someone who is not politically knowledgeable.

In a media environment as fractionalized as that in the contemporary United States, we also expected that the origin of how people choose to become informed about politics might be a relevant signal. Settle (2018) showed that people make inferences about a person's political identity based on the sources of information they share on social media. Divisions over which news outlets are trustworthy fall along partisan lines (Jurkowitz et al. 2020), but we suspected that intraparty cleavages about preferred news sources also are important. For

Finally, consistent with recent work demonstrating the social considerations that people make while navigating political discussions (Carlson and Settle 2022a), we examined the strength of the social relationship between discussants. Research on political discussion suggests that the strength of social relationships is a primary driver of whether political discussions occur (Ahn, Huckfeldt, and Ryan 2014; Mutz 2006; Walsh 2010). We expect that people would be less forthcoming with their opinions in conversations with people that they do not know well to avoid damaging a potentially fragile relationship. We tested the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Individuals will be less willing to express their true opinions in a conversation with someone who they do not know well compared to a conversation with someone they do know well.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research design allowed us to assess each of these five characteristics (i.e., expected disagreement, political knowledge, political engagement, news consumption, and strength of relationship) as a contributing factor relative to the contribution of the other factors. We conducted a conjoint experiment (see, e.g., Bansak et al. 2021) in which we presented participants with a randomized profile of a political discussant and asked them to report how likely they would be to express their true opinions in a conversation with that person. We fielded our experiment as a module on the Knight Foundation Free Expression Survey, which was conducted by Ipsos. The survey was administered to approximately 5,000 US adults from the online, probability-based Ipsos KnowledgePanel in English and Spanish in July 2021. Our module was administered at random to 2,802 respondents. Because participants repeated the task five times, with new randomized attribute levels in each task, the result was 14,010 decisions to analyze; however, most analyses depend on 13,803 decisions after excluding observations according to our pre-analysis plan.

Before the conjoint experiment began, participants were shown the following prompt to provide instructions on how the study would proceed:

We are interested in understanding the types of political conversations in which you would be most likely to express your true opinion. By expressing your true opinion, we mean that you would share what you really think about the political topic being discussed. We will present you with a description of a conversation, with information about the people in the conversation, as well as whether the conversation took place online or face to face. We then will ask you to report how likely you would be to express your true opinion in that discussion scenario. We will ask you to do this five times.

Table 1 summarizes the attributes shown to study participants. We manipulated the characteristics needed to test Hypotheses 1–5, along with additional features that were included for exploratory purposes. All attribute levels were presented with equal probability, with the exception of preferred news source. If the discussant was randomly presented as preferring mainstream partisan news and a Republican, the example source was Fox News; if the discussant was a Democrat, the example source was MSNBC; and if the discussant was an Independent, the example source was randomized.

After viewing each profile, participants were asked to report how likely they would be to express their true opinions in a political conversation with the person described. We measured their response on a five-point scale, ranging from 0 (very unlikely) to 1 (very likely).

We recoded variables for copartisanship, coethnicity, and shared gender. If participants identified with the same party as the discussant shown in the profile, they were considered copartisans. Independent respondents were only considered to be copartisans with discussants who were described as Independents.[2]

As is standard in analyzing conjoint experiments, the unit of analysis was the profile rather than the respondent. We estimated the average marginal component effect (AMCE) for each attribute in a linear regression in which the dependent variable is the likelihood of expressing their true opinions, and right-hand side variables include indicators for each attribute level. We used cluster-robust standard errors at the respondent level.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the key results that allowed us to test our hypotheses. Figure 1 shows the coefficient estimates for the effect of each discussant attribute on the self-reported likelihood of expressing one's true opinions (see the supporting table in online appendix B). The results support three of our five preregistered hypotheses and provide important insights for future research. All results replicate using marginal means (see online appendix E). We find no evidence of profile-ordering effects.

First, we observe statistically significant effects of copartisanship, preferred media source, and relationship strength on the likelihood of expressing one's true opinions.

Table 1
Conjoint Design

ATTRIBUTE	LEVELS
Relationship	
Your relationship to the person:	You have a close relationship with the person. You have met the person before but do not consider them to be close.
Conversation Context	
Context of the conversation:	The conversation occurs face to face. The conversation occurs on social media.
Party Identification	
The person's party identification:	Strong Republican Republican Independent Democrat Strong Democrat
Political Knowledge	
The person's knowledge about politics:	This person knows a lot more about politics than you. This person knows a lot less about politics than you.
Preferred News Source	
Where the person typically receives their news:	This person typically receives their news from mainstream sources, such as *USA Today*. This person typically receives their news from mainstream partisan sources, such as *MSNBC* (Democrats) and *Fox News* (Republicans). This person typically receives their news from fringe news sources that often are discredited by fact-checking organizations.
Political Engagement	
The person's political engagement:	This person is highly engaged in politics. This person is not engaged in politics at all.
Race	
The person's race/ethnicity:	White Black Latino/a Asian
Gender	
The person's gender:	Male Female

Participants were about 0.07 points (on a five-point, 0–1 scale) more likely to express their true opinions when talking to copartisans than when talking to out-partisans (Hypothesis 1). They were about 0.05 points more likely to express their true opinions when talking to someone with whom they have a close relationship compared to an acquaintance (Hypothesis 5). Regarding news consumption, participants were 0.04 points less likely to express their true opinions to someone who receives their information from fringe media sources compared to mainstream media (Hypothesis 3).

Figure 1

Effect of Discussant Attributes on Likelihood of Expressing True Opinions

Effect of Discussant Attributes on Likelihood of Expressing True Opinion
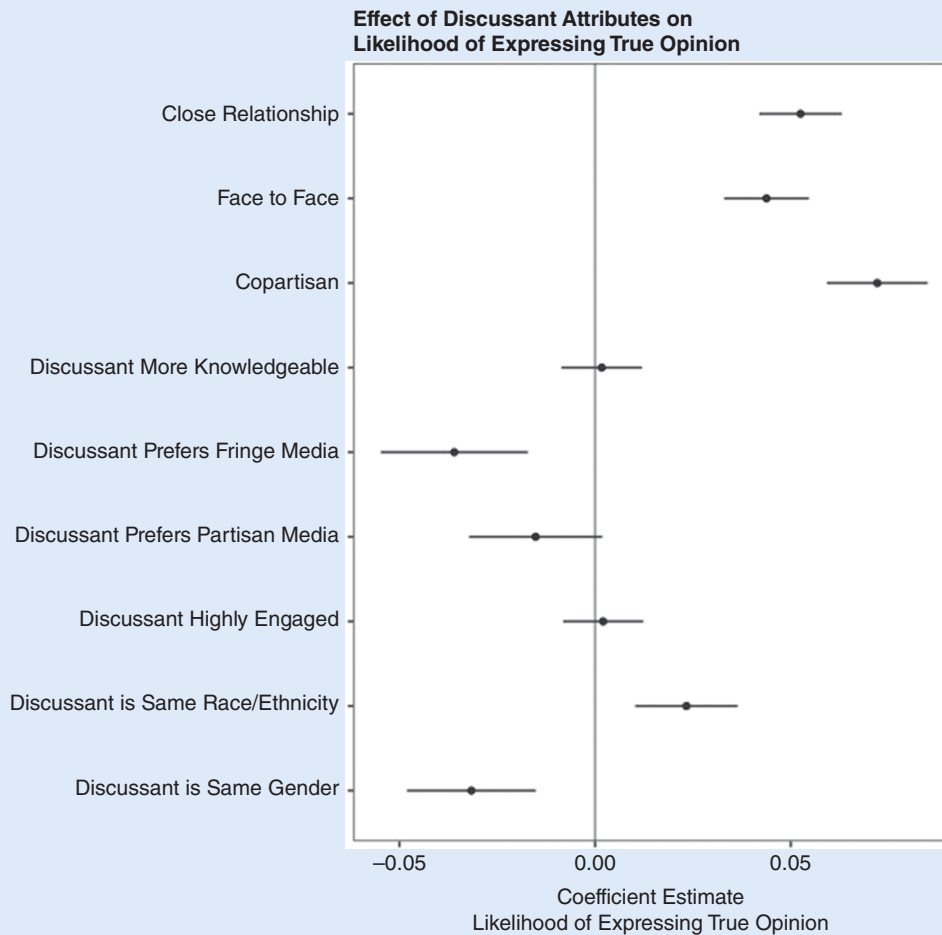
Coefficients estimated using a linear model with robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

These effects are substantively small, with most participants reporting that they would be either "neither unlikely nor likely" or "likely" to express their true opinions, regardless of the discussant's characteristics. This suggests that other factors (e.g., individual characteristics) might be more influential on the decision to express one's true opinions than the discussant's features or the discussion context. Yet, regarding these external features of the conversation, expected disagreement has the strongest effect.

We do not find support for our expectations about political engagement (Hypothesis 2) or knowledge (Hypothesis 3). These results remain robust to a variety of preregistered robustness checks, as described in online appendix C. Online appendix D discusses preregistered exploratory analyses that reveal that the more people trust the media, the less likely they are to express their true opinions to those who rely on fringe media sources, and that copartisanship has a stronger effect on women expressing their true opinions than on men. We estimate these subgroup analyses with

marginal means in online appendix F (see Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020).

DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that people are less likely to express their true opinions in conversations with people who disagree, people they do not know well, and people who receive their information from fringe media sources. Although it is not directly related to our hypotheses, people were more likely to express their true opinions in face-to-face conversations rather than on social media and with those who shared their racial or ethnic identity. These findings have important implications for considering how political expression plays out in Americans' day-to-day experiences, but we note several limitations. Although we manipulated more discussion features than previous research, we nevertheless measured only the effects of eight characteristics, which were further reduced to a few randomized possibilities. Real-world political discussions are more complex, as ethnographic research has shown (Walsh

2010). We also relied on the self-reported likelihood of expression, which may not reflect what people would do in reality.

CONCLUSION

Although political censorship on social media and on college campuses has become a hot-button issue, our results suggest that when engaging with broad questions about freedom of expression, we should be aware that people may be hesitant to express what they truly believe in the contours of their daily experiences with politics. Beyond the deleterious effects of expected disagreement on expression, we show that other factors of our contemporary political environment (e.g., the degradation of the media ecosystem) make it more difficult for people to speak honestly in conversation. We encourage future scholars to grapple with the normative complexity of opinion expression, continuing to assess when social concerns (Carlson and Settle 2022a), safety concerns, and economic concerns (Van Duyn 2018) may render honest conversations across lines of difference too costly to pursue.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FNHEVD.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522001342.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ∎

NOTES

1. We renumbered our hypotheses to improve the flow of the article.
2. We do not have the full seven-point party identification variable available for respondents; therefore, we could not investigate Independent leaners.

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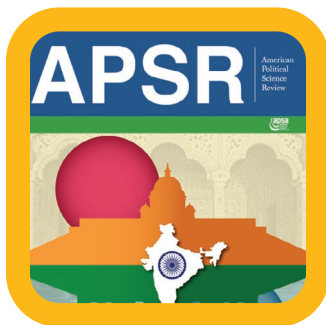
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