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# Political Chameleons: An Exploration of Personality and Political Conformity

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Political Chameleons: An Exploration of Personality and Political Conformity


A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Government from  
The College of William and Mary

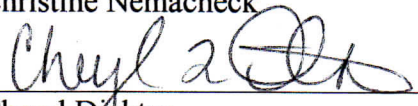
by

Taylor Nicole Feenstra

Accepted for Honors

  
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April 24, 2014

## Political Chameleons: An Exploration of Personality and Political Conformity

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College of William & Mary  
Spring 2014

Individuals do not always express their private political opinions in front of others who disagree with them. Neither the political science literature nor the psychology literature has been able to firmly establish why this behavior occurs. Previous research has explored how social network composition can influence political attitudes and how political attitudes can be resistant to persuasion. However, the concept of conformity does not involve attitude change or persuasion; it more accurately involves self-censoring to match a socially desirable norm. In an effort to improve our understanding of this behavior, I conduct a lab experiment in which participants discuss political issues with actors who deliberately disagree with them. I measured the differences between the responses participants gave on a private survey compared to their publicly stated attitudes in the discussion group. Results indicate that regardless of the order in which participants gave their responses, individuals do indeed conform to the group's opinion or censor their views. Conformity and censorship were most frequent among introverted, emotionally stable, and racial minority participants. Significant differences were also found between the types of issues; specifically, non-social and ideologically ambiguous issues yielded higher levels of conformity. Political conformity and censorship could lead to a distorted view of public opinion and may challenge the execution of freedom of expression.

Thesis Committee:

Jaime Settle, Chair  
Christine Nemacheck, Second Reader  
Cheryl Dickter, Outside Reader

## DEDICATION

To my mother who has always believed in me, supported me, and challenged me to be the best me I can be. Thank you for always reminding me to remember who I am. You are an inspiration to me academically, professionally, and personally.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The American political environment is both social (Putnam 2001; Settle, Bond, & Levitt 2011; Mondak 2010; Giuseffi, Smith, & Hibbing 2013) and polarized (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes 2012; Hetherington & Weiler 2009; Abramowitz 2010), which presents Americans with increased exposure to extreme views. This should create an increase in the exchange of political ideas, but individuals do not always express their true political opinions to others, especially when they perceive their opinion to be uncommon (Hayes 2007). When individuals alter their political opinions while interacting with others, they essentially behave like chameleons trying to blend into the environment for protection. This study aims to understand whether individuals behave like political chameleons, temporarily abandoning their true political opinions to *conform* to others who disagree.

Despite extant research on conformity from a psychological perspective, few studies investigate the concept of *political* conformity. Research conducted by both psychologists and political scientists has circumvented questions surrounding political conformity, but no study to date has experimental evidence of this phenomenon. We know anecdotally from personal experiences that individuals are not always truthful about their publicly stated political opinions and we know from existing psychology literature that humans conform to group norms on many things, specifically physical judgments as in the Asch (1952) experiments. However, linking these two concepts together to actually *test* whether individuals alter their publicly stated political views in the presence of opposing others remains unexplored. This study aims to address this gap in both the political science and psychology literatures through the use of a laboratory experiment.

Political conformity is important to study because of the negative implications it could have on the American political system. For example, the First Amendment to the United States

Constitution is designed to foster free political expression, but what is written in law does not always match reality. If political conformity in American society is so strong that individuals do not feel free to express their opinions publicly, then citizens are not taking full advantage of their First Amendment rights. It is also important to investigate which individual differences moderate conformity because it is possible that some individuals could be more likely to conform than others, leading to an unequal distribution of free expression protection. Additionally, democracy inherently depends upon diverse political opinions (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague 2004). In a society where conformity is prevalent, this necessary condition for democracy is diminished. Studying conformity is therefore important for maintaining democracy and American rights and liberties.

Normative reasons aside, political conformity can also influence policy through agenda setting. If legislators are responding to public opinion polls that reflect a distorted, conformed view of reality, the law might not be reflecting what the public actually wants. While this may be a slippery-slope argument, studying political conformity is still important for understanding how individuals are influenced. This research impacts campaigns, elections, and policy entrepreneurship, among other facets of political behavior and participation. On a smaller scale, this research sheds light on political conformity in institutional settings. For example, the way discussions, debates, and activities are set up in classrooms across all ages could foster conforming behavior.

Aside from the potential implications of political conformity, this study is important for the political science literature as well. Interdisciplinary research is crucial to a well-rounded understanding of the world, and using psychological methods to study political behavior is captivating and an important direction for political science to continue to embrace. As noted,

there is a plethora of research on conformity in psychology, but a very limited, and highly outdated selection in the political science literature. What little literature there is in political science on conformity does not reflect many experimental studies, especially not laboratory experiments. Understanding the underlying psychological foundations beneath political behavior is crucial to pushing the field forward. Understanding how and why people behave is essential to understanding political institutions and phenomena.

### **Theory**

In this study, I apply knowledge and methods from psychology to understand political conformity. Because conformity has been demonstrated in a wide variety of tasks (Asch 1952; Crutchfield 1955; Latane 1996; Nowak & Vallacher 2001) in many cross-cultural populations (Bond & Smith 1996; Barry, Child, & Bacon 1959; Triandis 1990; Hofstede 1980), I expect that individuals will also conform to the group's opinion on a political issue.

Based on existing psychology literature, we know that human conformity is explained by three goals central to human behavior: accuracy, affiliation, and positive self-concept (Cialdini & Goldstein 2004). Because these goals are central to human behavior, I expect the same goals to also motivate *political* conformity. Unfortunately, this study will not be able to examine which of these mechanisms motivates political conformity due to time and resource constraints.

Although this study cannot directly test these mechanisms, it is plausible that they are still at work. For example, the human need to be accurate motivates conformity especially among those who are uncertain, have limited information, or are presented with ambiguous answer choices (Cialdini 2001). Political scientists have demonstrated that politically uncertain individuals turn to knowledgeable members of their peer groups or elites to help inform their political opinions (Druckman & Nelson 2003; Ahn, Huckfeldt, & Ryan 2008), which leads us to

expect that uncertain individuals might rely on informational cues from peer groups when stating an opinion. However, this connection between political science and psychology research conflates the concepts of conformity and attitude formation. Conformity does *not* involve an actual attitude change. Rather, conformity involves *publicly* stating one opinion that matches the group norm when that opinion differs from the opinion an individual *privately* holds.

Although this it is reasonable to expect that individuals will conform on political issues, political judgments are substantially different from judging the length of a line, as in the Asch experiments, because

there is no “right” or “wrong” answer. Most psychology research on conformity has measured whether participants will

give a clearly incorrect answer if that is the response the group gives as well. Political judgments, however, are not based on fact and there is no absolute truth. Political judgments often involve emotional, moral, or philosophical thinking that might not be present in physical judgment tasks used in the past. However, there could still be some form of social pressure to hold a particular political opinion; to agree with the group. Ultimately, I propose that the social pressure from a peer group holding a unanimous, opposite opinion will cause individuals to deviate from their privately indicated political opinions when stating their opinion in front of the group. I propose that individual differences in personality and other characteristics will mediate the tendency to conform, as depicted in Figure 1.

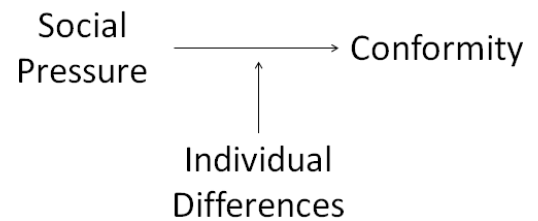


Figure 1: Proposed theory

### Literature Review

The psychology literature continues to demonstrate that humans conform to group norms under a variety of circumstances (see Cialdini & Goldstein 2004), though there is no clear



demonstration of this phenomenon in the context of political opinion discussion. Psychology research on social influence, specifically the distinctions between normative and informational social influence, has informed conformity research and political science research on attitude change and social network influences (i.e. see Huckfeldt & Sprague 1995). The connections between social influence and attitude *change* target different political behaviors than this study seeks to examine, but the influence that normative and informational social influence can have on conformity in general inform this investigation of political conformity.

Normative social influence involves conforming to meet the expectations of a person, group, or one's self (Deutsch & Gerard 1955; Kelley 1952). From a normative social influence perspective, the attitudinal congruity within a social network could indicate that a particular attitude is appropriate or socially desirable (Deutsch & Gerard 1955), which raises the perceived social costs of attitude change and motivates an individual to hold similar views (Kelley 1952). These theories about normative social influence have not been investigated in the political conformity context. Specifically, this concept addresses actual attitude *change*, whereas conformity involves only a public change from one's private view, with the actual attitude remaining constant. For instance, it might be that an individual perceives the social costs of holding a different view from the group as high enough to justify lying about his or her true political view, but he or she might not actually come to hold the group's view permanently. Regardless, the group pressure maintains its effect on the individual's stated political views.

Informational social influence involves individuals accepting information from others as evidence about reality (Wood 2000). Informational social influence relates directly to the core goal of being accurate, which means that it is likely that informational social influence is involved in political conformity. In the political context, both informational and normative

social influences have been explored within the context of social networks. Specifically, DeWall, Visser, and Levitan (2006) suggest that individuals are less likely to challenge opinions of others in a homogenous network because they prioritize emotional regulation over knowledge and accuracy goals. Additionally, several researchers have found that the opinion of a homogenous social network can signal that an attitude is valid (Festinger 1950), which increases the individual's level of confidence in holding that attitude (Levitan & Visser 2009).

Neither of these explanations, nor any other extant research on social networks and attitude change (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague 2004; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1995), directly respond to the question surrounding political conformity. These studies investigate, again, how attitudes *change* or are originally formed, which is not the question at hand. Furthermore, these studies address social networks that have been self-selected for a variety of reasons. Because political conformity often includes spontaneous interactions, political conformity questions do not necessarily involve existing social networks.

In political science, many research questions are similar to the idea of conformity without specifically addressing it. For example, there is a wealth of knowledge about democratic deliberation and the battle between human tendencies to dislike disagreement and democracy's dependence on it (e.g. Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague 2004). Within this area of exploration, some suggest that vast political agreement stems from humans adopting opinions from well-informed people because it is more efficient than uncovering the information themselves (Downs 1957). Further research in this broad area has examined political tolerance among dissenting opinions, which has often been shown to be short-lived and, of course, dependent on political diversity in a social network (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague 2004; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus 1982).

Some of this research that is loosely associated with political conformity attempts to connect psychological principles to political phenomena without actually testing them. For example, some suggest that conformity is primarily driven by Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance such that individuals strive to reduce cognitive and emotional discomfort caused by disagreement or making difficult decisions (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague 2004). Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) identify three ways dissonance can be reduced in political decision making and deliberation. First, disagreement can lead to persuasion when individuals alter their views to match those of others in an effort to reduce discomfort associated with dissonance. Second, individuals might simply avoid those who disagree with them to reduce dissonance. Third, individuals might misinterpret opposing views to make them align more with their own. A fourth option, which the authors do not consider is the idea of conformity.

Political scientists have generally studied political conformity over time through political socialization instead of examining immediate, individual conformity like psychologists have (Cundy 1979; Cutler & Kaufman 1975; Gibson 1992; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers 2009). Studies have focused on the influence of one's social network, (parents, friends, coworkers, teachers, significant others, etc.) on individual political ideology. Cundy (1979) noted that there is a difference between selective choice situations, where one opts into a particular club, often with like-minded people, and instances where one cannot make his or her choice of association based on attitudes, such as parents and work associates. People tend to associate with others who are similar to them and share political beliefs, but through exposure to opposing views in heterogeneous groups, individuals become more understanding and may even meet in the middle on some issues (Cundy 1979).

Within the studies attempting to examine political conformity more explicitly, few have a strong connection to psychological principles or methods. For instance, Di Palma and McClosky (1970) note that there is a significant relationship between personality factors and political conformity, with deviants (those who do not conform) having lower self-esteem and inflexible characteristics. Deviants were found to be more prejudiced, cynical, and responsive to extreme wings of the political spectrum. Contrary to most psychology research on conformity, Di Palma and McClosky (1979) found that the more educated someone was, the more likely he or she was to be a conformer, but this could be due to a mismatch in the operational definitions of conformity. This effect of education might be because individuals with higher education have certain qualities making them more compliant and susceptible to conformity (Di Palma & McClosky 1979; Sears 1986).

Recent studies in the mass communication and public opinion literatures examine the concept of self-censorship in political discussions. In developing the *Willingness to Self-Censor Scale*, Hayes, Glynn, and Shanahan (2005) found that individuals were less likely to report that they would be willing to state their true opinions in a hypothetical discussion if the other people in the hypothetical discussion disagreed with them. Individuals who score high on the *Willingness to Self-Censor Scale* engage in fewer political activities relative to those who score low on this scale (Hayes, Scheufele, & Huges 2006). These studies demonstrate that there are individual differences worth exploring to better understand political conformity.

Furthermore, my study will build on the work by Hayes and colleagues (2005) by testing self-censorship and conformity experimentally with participants actually interacting with other people instead of pondering a hypothetical scenario. Hayes and colleagues (2005) simply asked participants to read a detailed scenario about people at a social gathering discussing politics

where the group opinion was either the same or different from the participants'. Participants were simply asked to report if they would state their real opinion or not. This study has a major problem with a social desirability bias where participants are more likely to report they would state their true opinion than they might actually be in a real situation. This is where my study builds on current research. My study will be able to put this concept to the test and actually see if participants censor their views in front of others or not.

### **Hypotheses**

The hypotheses for this study fall into three categories under the expectation that participants will conform to the political views of a group of peers with whom they disagree.

#### 1. Demographic Variable Hypotheses

- a. Female participants will be more likely to conform than male participants
- b. Racial minority groups will be equally likely to conform as majority participants

Research in psychology has found that women tend to show higher levels of conformity than men (Cooper 1979; Eagly 1978; Bond & Smith 1996), and I therefore expect women to be more likely to conform than men (Hypothesis 1a). The literature does not suggest differences based on race or ethnicity (Janney, Mallory, Rossitto, & Simon 1969), so I do not expect a difference in political conformity (Hypothesis 1b). Most conformity research was conducted with only white males, and this study is slightly outdated, so the effects of race on conformity are unclear in the current literature.

#### 2. Issue Variable Hypotheses

- a. Participants will be more likely to conform on views that are ideologically ambiguous
- b. Participants will be more likely to conform on social issues than nonsocial issues

These hypotheses stem from the human motivation to be accurate. When issues are ideologically ambiguous and individuals do not have an ideological cue around which to anchor their views, they might be more likely to use cues from the environment (i.e. their peer group) to

state an opinion to avoid appearing on the wrong side of the issue (Hypothesis 2a). Social issues such as abortion and marriage rights tend to have a moral component to them and moral issues have been found to be more resistant to attitude change (Bloom & Levitan 2011; but see Julka & Marsh 2000; Lavine & Snyder 1999). This could be because individuals view moral mandates as more important and therefore hold them with greater certainty (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis 2005). Although conformity does not involve attitude *change*, similar mechanisms might be operating, leading an individual to resist conforming to a group norm counter to their true belief (Hypothesis 2b).

### 3. Personality Variable Hypotheses

- a. Participants who score high in conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism will be more likely to conform
- b. Participants who score high in openness to experience and extraversion will be less likely to conform
- c. Individuals who score high in conflict avoidance will be more likely to conform
- d. Individuals who score high in social anxiety will be more likely to conform

These hypotheses stem from the psychology literature on conformity and from general theory building. Individuals who score high in conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism on the “Big 5” personality scale are more likely to conform (DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins 2001) (Hypothesis 3a). The political science literature finds mixed evidence for the influence of neuroticism on political behavior (Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson 2010; Gerber et al. 2011; Mondak 2010). The psychology literature suggests that those who score high in openness to experience and extraversion will be less likely to conform (DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins 2001) (Hypothesis 3b). Political science research has shown that people who are high in openness generally seek out information and discuss politics, among many other political activities (Gerber et al. 2011; Mondak 2010; Mondak et al. 2010; Vecchione & Caprara 2009). Similarly, extraverted people tend to have the social skills to engage with

politics easily and they tend to also participate in many political activities (Gerber et al. 2011; Mondak et al. 2010; Mondak 2010). Although these connections between extraversion and openness and political activities do not include political conformity, it is conceivable that because they tend to be more politically active and comfortable, they would be less likely to conform.

Beyond the Big 5, individual differences in conflict avoidance and social anxiety might also influence political conformity. Individuals who score high in conflict avoidance will be more likely to conform (Hypothesis 3c). This hypothesis comes from the idea that if an individual chooses to publicly disagree with the group, he or she knows that that could lead to conflict in many forms and if the individual prefers to avoid conflict, he or she would probably take steps to ensure that happens by simply conforming to the group norm. Finally, individuals who score high in social anxiety will be more likely to conform (Hypothesis 3d). Socially anxious individuals might alter their publicly stated political views simply because they are anxious in social situations and perhaps agreeing with the group will make that interaction less anxiety-provoking.

## **Method**

### **Participants:**

Participants ( $n=70$ ) were recruited from a newly developed participant pool through the Government Department at the College of William & Mary. Participants were compensated with course credit or extra credit in their participating Government classes. This study was approved by the William & Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee.

### **Procedure:**

This study included three parts: pretest, lab session, and posttest. Participants took the pretest online three days prior to the lab session. The pretest was embedded in the Government

Department's Omnibus Project, which included over 100 questions. The multitude of questions and the time separating the pretest and the lab session should have prevented participants from recalling their prior responses to the questions. Three days after the lab session, participants took a brief posttest survey online.

**Pretest:**

The pretest included fourteen questions about political issues embedded within a large survey. The fourteen questions used for this study were adapted from the *American National Election Studies*. The survey topics included the Affordable Care Act, energy policy, carbon emission regulations, tax policy, foreign policy, size and role of government, minimum wage legislation, marriage equality, Medicare, the economy, abortion, gun control, Egypt intervention, and voting efficacy. The survey also included basic demographic questions and a variety of personality scales, including the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann 2003), the Conflict Avoidance Scale (Rahim, 1983), and the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) (Mattick & Clarke 1988).

*Ten-Item Personality Inventory*

The TIPI explores the Big 5 personality characteristics (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) on a condensed scale (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann 2003). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements about personality characteristics. For example, participants would be presented with the statement, "I see myself as: extraverted, enthusiastic," and asked to rate their agreement (1="disagree strongly", 7="agree strongly"). This was repeated for ten pairs of personality characteristics. The TIPI has a test-retest reliability of .72, but its internal reliability is below the field's standards, (Cronbach's alpha=.55). However, the TIPI is still widely used



because of its relatively high test-retest reliability and its shortened length, making it accessible to participants and conducive to surveys.

#### *Conflict Avoidance Scale*

The conflict avoidance scale aims to help assess the degree to which individuals are prone to avoiding conflict with others (Rahim 1983). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (1="strongly disagree", 7="strongly agree") with six statements. Some example statements are: "I attempt to avoid being 'put on the spot' and try to keep my conflict with others to myself," and "I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with others." The conflict avoidance scale has a test-retest reliability of .79, and an acceptable internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha=.75).

#### *Social Interaction Anxiety Scale*

The SIAS was designed as a clinical scale to diagnose individuals with social phobia and social anxiety. Participants indicated the extent to which 20 statements were characteristic or true of them (0="not at all", 4="extremely"). Some example statements are, "I get nervous if I have to speak with someone in authority (teacher, boss, etc.)," and "I have difficulty talking with other people." The SIAS has a test-retest reliability of .90 among social phobics for up to 13 week intervals. The test-retest reliability is slightly lower for individuals who are not socially phobic or socially anxious. The SIAS has a strong internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha=.94).

#### *Political Questions*

Most political questions on the pretest were fairly rigid, asking the participant to select his or her preferred policy option from a list of four choices, or to indicate whether he or she simply agrees or disagrees with a political statement. However, some questions asked

participants to demonstrate their support for a policy on a scale of one to ten. These questions allowed me to analyze more dimensions of conformity.

### **Lab Session**

Upon informing consent in the lab, participants entered a small conference room to discuss political issues in a “focus group” with two other “participants” who were confederates acting as part of the study. Participants and confederates took turns sharing their opinions on fourteen political issues. Participants were randomly assigned to give their responses first or last. Those randomly assigned to give their responses first were in the *control condition* because they would be giving their responses to the political questions without knowing the opinions of the actors on the issue at hand, therefore giving the participants no information about how to conform. Those randomly assigned to give their responses last were in the *treatment condition* because they would only give their response after hearing that the actors disagreed with them, giving them a position with which to conform. Aside from the order in which participants were randomly assigned to give their responses, the procedures were the same across the treatment groups. The treatment, therefore, was deliberately very subtle.

All participants interacted with actors who disagreed with them on most issues. Based on their pretest responses, the actors were told to play the “role” of either Republicans or Democrats and to follow the corresponding scripts. If a participant identified as a Democrat, the actors were scripted to be Republicans; if a participant identified as a Republican, the actors were scripted to be Democrats; if a participant identified as an Independent, the actors were randomly assigned to be either Republicans or Democrats in each session. The actors were blind to the purpose of which script they were told to use and the party identification of the participants. There were seven actors for this study. Each session included two actors, balanced by race and gender.

Each lab session included one male actor and one female actor, one of whom was white and one of whom was of a racial minority group.

Each of the fourteen issues was presented on a screen that changed automatically after one minute. Participants and actors were instructed to state their opinion on the questions on the screen and discuss them if they wanted. To maintain as much control as possible, actors were trained to avoid discussion and not to provide new information if asked by participants. One actor was “randomly selected” to be the recorder for the session and was given a response form with the questions and a spot to record each response from the participant and actors. After completing all fourteen questions, participants were thanked for their time and instructed to await a follow up survey in the coming days.

In order to make the situation more realistic and consistent with previous conformity research, the first two questions were structured slightly differently, with less social pressure for conformity. The actors gave neutral answers to the first two “faux” questions, giving the actors no signals to their political leanings. Beginning on the third question, the actors followed a script designed to disagree with the participants based on pretest results. Overall, the lab session included ten “critical” questions on which the actors disagreed with the participant according to the script, and four “faux” questions designed to make the study more realistic, with actors disagreeing with each other, agreeing with the participant, or providing a neutral response.

### **Posttest**

Three days after completing the lab session, participants were emailed a posttest. The posttest included the same fourteen political issue questions, manipulation and deception checks, and a series of self-report questions about previous experiences with political pressure. The primary purpose of the posttest was to see if participants reverted back to their original pretest

response on the posttest, even if they changed their stated opinion in the lab session. The posttest also allowed me to remove participants from the analyses who knew the purpose of the study.

## Results

A total of 70 students participated in this study, but seven were removed from the analysis because of treatment administration errors or ineffective deception. The remaining 63 participants were included in the analyses. As Table 1 demonstrates, this sample included moderate variation in party identification and gender, although it had considerably more Democrats and women.

**Table 1: Gender and Party ID by Treatment**

	Control (%)	Treatment (%)	Total (%)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	41	45	44
Female	59	55	56
<b>Party ID</b>			
Democrat	41	68	56
Republican	24	12	17
Independent	31	15	22
Other	3	5	5

There are three dependent variables related to conformity in this study. First, standard conformity means that in the lab, a participant gave an answer that differed from his or her pretest response, moved in the direction of the actors, and crossed the midpoint on the scale, such that the lab response actually countered the pretest response. For example, if on the pretest a participant indicated that he or she *strongly agreed* with something, but in the lab only said that he or she *agreed*, that would not be coded as conformity. If that participant said that he or she *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* in the lab, that would be considered conformity. Second, strict conformity includes the requirements of standard conformity, in addition to requiring

participants to give the same response on the pretest and the posttest. Third, the degree of conformity indicates by how much the participant's reported opinion differed from his or her pretest opinion, if he or she conformed.

Conformity captures a very rigid portion of opinion alteration. In an effort to gain a more comprehensive understanding of political interactions with those who disagree, I explored the same hypotheses in a broader construct: censorship. It is possible that participants moderated their views to accommodate the opinions of the actors (Cialdini, Levy, Herman, & Evenbeck 1973). There are three dependent variables related to censorship in this study. First, standard censorship means that in the lab, a participant gave an answer that differed from his or her pretest response and moved in the direction of the actors, but did not necessarily cross the threshold of conformity. Second, strict censorship required that participants moved in the direction of the actors in the lab, but also required their posttest responses to match their pretest responses. Third, the degree of censorship reflects how far participants moved from their original responses if they censored.

As shown in Table 2, the mean level of standard conformity across the 10 critical questions was 1.97, indicating that participants conformed on an average of 2 out of 10 questions. The mean level of strict conformity was lower, at 0.55. Similarly, the mean level of standard censorship was 2.5 and the mean level of strict censorship was lower, at 0.76, as shown in Table 3. The mean degree of conformity across the 10 questions was 4.43, indicating that participants altered their responses by an average of 4.43 units over ten questions. The mean degree of censorship was slightly higher, at 4.91. However, the degree of conformity is harder to assess in this study because the scales were different.

**Table 2: Summary Statistics for Conformity**

	Minimum	Median	Mean	Maximum
Standard	0	2	1.97	6
Strict	0	0	0.55	2
Degree	0	3	4.43	28

**Table 3: Summary Statistics for Censorship**

	Minimum	Median	Mean	Maximum
Standard	0	2	2.52	7
Strict	0	1	0.76	3
Degree	0	4	4.91	15

As a manipulation check, I used a *t*-test to investigate differences in the average frequency of opinion change between the pretest and the lab session between the ten critical questions and the four faux questions. There was significantly more change in reported opinion in the critical questions than the faux questions ( $p < .001$ ). This means that within participants, there was significantly more change in reported opinion on questions in which both actors disagreed with the participant. There was no significant difference in frequency of conformity or censorship between participants randomly assigned to give their responses first and participants who gave their responses last. This suggests that whether participants gave their responses before or after the confederates did not affect the frequency with which they conformed. In addition, there were no significant differences between the two randomized question orders, nor were there significant differences based on the actors with which the participants for conformity. However, there was a significant difference between the randomized question orders for standard censorship ( $p < .05$ ). Because there were no consistent significant differences between these randomly assigned conditions, all participants can be grouped together for the quasi-experimental analyses based on individual differences to test the primary hypotheses of the study. Because there was a significant difference between the randomized question orders for

standard censorship, it is possible that the question order influenced the results of the analyses related to censorship.

## **Individual Differences**

### *Personality*

This study had five hypotheses regarding the Big 5 personality characteristics. I hypothesized that extraverted and open participants would be less likely to conform, while conscientious, agreeable, and neurotic participants would be more likely to conform. This sample included a nearly equal amount of extraverts and introverts, but the rest of the Big 5 characteristics were biased toward open, conscientious, agreeable, and neurotic individuals compared to the polar opposites. To assess the influence of these characteristics on the frequency of conformity, I used a Poisson regression, shown in Table 4, because the dependent variable is a count variable of the number of times participants conformed. In support of my hypothesis, controlling for other personality characteristics, extraversion ( $p < .05$ ) was a significant predictor of conformity, such that extraverts conformed less frequently than introverts. Also in support of my hypothesis, openness ( $p < .01$ ) significantly influenced conformity, such that participants who were open conformed on significantly more issues. In contrast to my hypotheses, conscientiousness and agreeableness were not significant predictors of conformity. Finally, in the opposite direction of my hypothesis, neuroticism was a significant predictor of conformity, such that neurotic individuals conformed less frequently than emotionally stable individuals ( $p < .05$ ). As shown in Table 4, when I reproduced the same model with a strict definition of conformity, none of the personality characteristics were significant predictors of conformity, but agreeableness approached significance ( $p < .10$ ).

I constructed the same Poisson regression model with standard and strict *copyright* as dependent variables as well. As shown in Table 4, extraversion significantly influenced standard *copyright*, such that extraverts censored less frequently than introverts ( $p < .05$ ), which is consistent with what was found for standard conformity. Also consistent with conformity, openness was a significant predictor of *copyright*, such that open participants censored more frequently ( $p < .01$ ). Agreeableness and neuroticism did not have a significant influence on the frequency of standard *copyright*, controlling for all other variables. None of these variables had a significant influence on strict *copyright*, much like strict conformity.

**Table 4: Poisson Regression Results for Conformity and *Copyright***

Independent Variable	Standard Conformity	Strict Conformity	Standard <i>Copyright</i>	Strict <i>Copyright</i>
Extraversion	-0.16** (0.07)	-0.09 (1.35)	-0.15** (0.06)	-0.03 (0.13)
Openness	0.26*** (0.09)	0.22 (0.21)	0.24*** (0.08)	0.18 (0.18)
Conscientiousness	0.05 (0.08)	-0.12 (0.20)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.17)
Agreeableness	0.07 (0.08)	-0.31* (0.16)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.18 (0.14)
Neuroticism	0.22** (0.09)	-0.26 (0.18)	-0.12 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.15)
Condition	0.19 (0.21)	0.26 (0.46)	-0.03 (0.18)	0.11 (0.39)
Order	0.03 (0.21)	0.76 (0.47)	0.16 (0.18)	0.37 (0.38)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses below estimates

$p < .10^*$ ,  $p < .05^{**}$ ,  $p < .01^{***}$

To test whether the Big 5 influenced the degree to which participants conformed, I ran an ordinary least squares regression with the degree of conformity as the dependent variable and each of the Big 5 and the treatment condition as independent variables. As shown in Table 5, this model revealed extraversion ( $p < .05$ ), openness ( $p < .01$ ), and neuroticism ( $p < .05$ ) to have a



significant influence on the degree of conformity, holding all other variables constant. Conscientiousness and agreeableness do not significantly influence the degree of conformity in this sample. I ran the same OLS regression model with degree of *conformity* as the dependent variable and found the same results. As shown in Table 5, extraversion significantly influenced the degree of censorship, controlling for other variables, such that extraverts censored to a lesser degree than introverts ( $p < .01$ ). Open participants censored to a significantly lesser degree than non-open participants ( $p < .001$ ), controlling for all other variables. Neuroticism also significantly influenced the degree of censorship, holding all other variables constant, such that neurotic participants censored to a lesser degree than emotionally stable participants ( $p < .05$ ). Although agreeableness did not significantly influence the degree of *conformity*, it approaches significance for degree of *censorship* ( $p < .10$ ). None of the other variables significantly influenced the degree of censorship in this sample.

**Table 5: OLS Regression Results for Degree of Conformity and Censorship**

Independent Variable	Degree of Conformity	Degree of Censorship
Extraversion	-1.12** (0.44)	-1.09*** (0.31)
Openness	1.55** (0.63)	1.90*** (0.44)
Conscientiousness	-0.27 (0.55)	-0.74* (0.38)
Agreeableness	0.46 (0.51)	0.16 (0.37)
Neuroticism	-1.16** (0.57)	-0.97** (0.41)
Condition	0.71 (1.33)	-0.58 (0.94)
Order	-1.29 (1.30)	-0.01 (0.92)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses below estimates  
 $p < .10^*$ ,  $p < .05^{**}$ ,  $p < .01^{***}$

## Conflict Avoidance

I hypothesized that conflict avoidant participants would conform significantly more frequently than participants who were not conflict avoidant. Based on a  $t$ -test with a dummy variable of conflict avoidance (Conflict Avoidant, Not Conflict Avoidant) as the independent variable and frequency of conformity as the dependent variable, conflict avoidant participants did not conform significantly more often than non-conflict avoidant participants, but they did conform with a nearly significantly greater degree ( $p < .10$ ), as shown in Figure 2. Using a strict definition of conformity yielded no significant results. Similarly, a  $t$ -test with frequency or degree of *ensorship* as the dependent variable did not yield significant results based on conflict avoidance. There was a roughly equal distribution between the high and low conflict avoidance categories, but the majority of the participants had a moderate level of conflict avoidance. Separating highly conflict avoidant participants from the less conflict avoidant participants by the sample mean did not yield significant results.

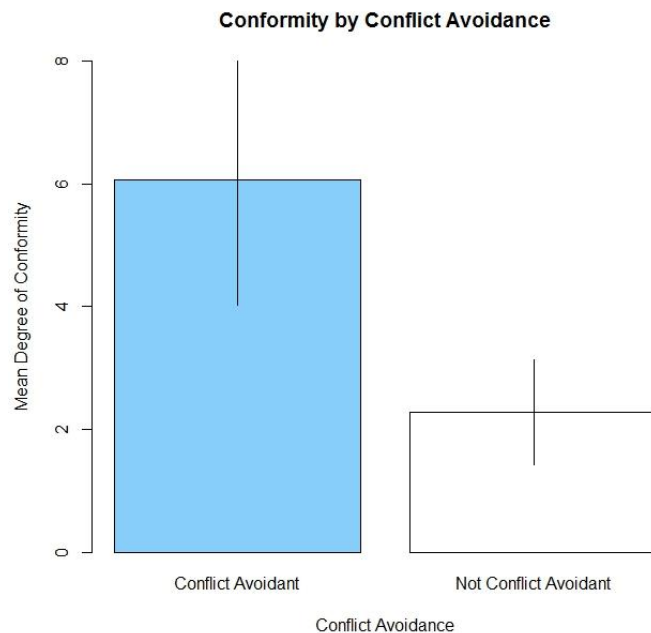


Figure 2: Mean degree of conformity for conflict avoidant and non-conflict avoidant participants. Lines represent one standard error.

### *Social Anxiety*

I hypothesized that socially anxious participants would conform more often than participants who were not socially anxious. To assess the influence of social anxiety on the frequency of conformity, I used a *t*-test with social anxiety (Socially Anxious, Not Socially Anxious) or social phobia (Socially Phobic, Not Socially Phobic) as independent variables and frequency of conformity as the dependent variable. Using the clinical thresholds of social anxiety and social phobia on the SIAS, there were no significant differences in frequency of conformity based on social anxiety scores. However, running the same *t*-test with frequency of standard *copyright* as the dependent variable showed a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ), such that socially phobic and socially anxious participants censored more frequently than participants without social phobia or anxiety. Grouping participants into above and below average social anxiety levels based on this sample approached a statistically significant difference for *conformity*, such that participants who were more socially anxious than average conformed more often than participants who were less socially anxious than average ( $p < .10$ ). Grouping participants based on average social anxiety levels did not yield significant results for *copyright*. There were no significant differences between levels of social anxiety using a strict definition or degree of conformity or *copyright*.

### *Gender*

I hypothesized that women would conform significantly more often than would men. Using a *t*-test with gender (Male, Female) as the independent variable and frequency of conformity as the dependent variable, there were no significant differences in frequency of conformity based on gender. There were no significant differences between men and women in

the degree of conformity or the frequency of conformity using the strict definition. The same null results were found for standard and strict censorship and degree of censorship.

### Race

I hypothesized that there would be no significant differences in frequency of conformity based on race. To test this hypothesis, I used a *t*-test with race (White, Minority) as the independent variable and frequency of conformity as the dependent variable. As shown in Figure 3, there was a significant difference in frequency of conformity based on race ( $p < .01$ ), such that racial minority participants conformed significantly more often than white participants. The strict definition of conformity did not yield a significant difference based on race. As shown in Figure 4, there was a significant difference in the degree of conformity based on race ( $p < .001$ ), such that racial minority participants conformed to a significantly greater degree than white participants. Using the same *t*-tests with censorship dependent variables yielded results that only approached significance. As Figure 5 and Figure 6 demonstrate, standard censorship ( $p < .10$ ) and degree of censorship ( $p < .10$ ) approached significance, such that racial minority participants censored more often and to a greater degree than white participants.

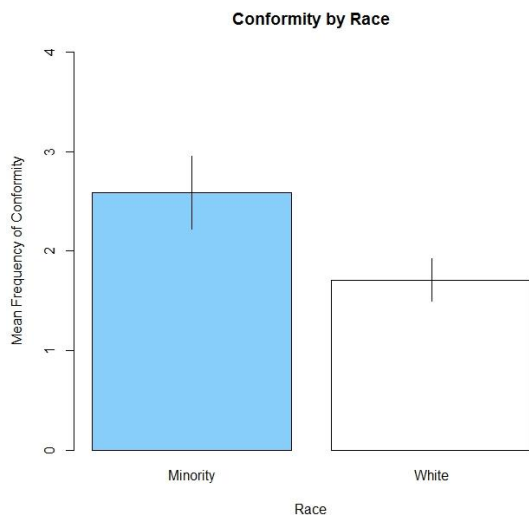


Figure 3: Mean frequency of conformity by race. Lines represent one standard error.

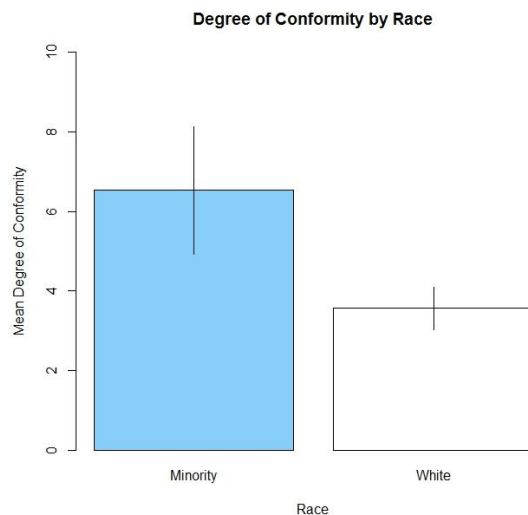


Figure 4: Mean frequency of conformity by race. Lines represent one standard error.

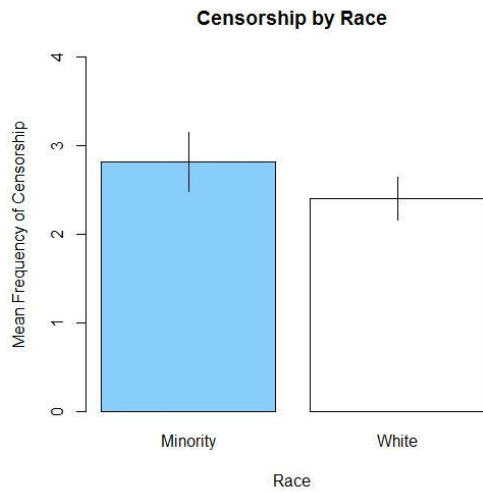


Figure 5: Mean frequency of censorship by race. Lines represent one standard error.

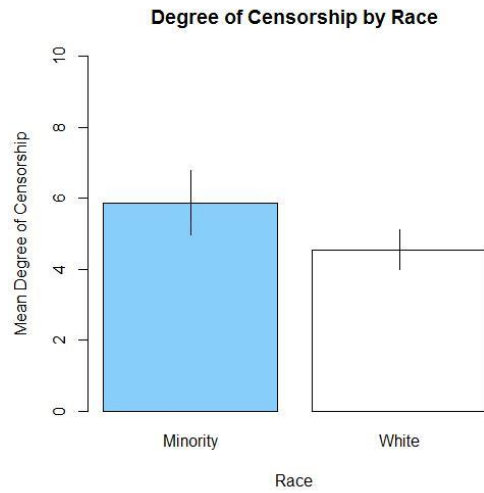


Figure 6: Mean degree of censorship by race. Lines represent one standard error.

### *Individual Differences Overall*

To examine the influence that each of these individual characteristics had, holding the others constant, I constructed a series of regressions. The first model was another Poisson regression, with the frequency of standard conformity as the dependent variable and extraversion, openness, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, conflict avoidance, social anxiety, race, gender, question order, and condition as independent variables. As shown in Table 6, the only individual characteristic that significantly influences the number of times participants conformed is neuroticism ( $p < .01$ ), holding all other variables constant. I replicated this model with the frequency of strict conformity and found that only agreeableness had a significant influence on strict conformity ( $p < .05$ ). There is also suggestive evidence that controlling for all other variables, social anxiety influences the frequency of strict conformity ( $p < .10$ ). The variables that significantly influenced standard conformity did not significantly influence strict conformity, as shown in Table 6.

I then replicated these Poisson regression models with censorship dependent variables. The results shown in Table 6 indicate that extraversion ( $p < .05$ ) and conscientiousness ( $p < .05$ )

significantly influence standard censorship, controlling for all other variables. Neuroticism approaches significance in this model ( $p < .10$ ), such that neurotic participants censored less frequently than emotionally stable participants. Much like with conformity, none of the same patterns held for strict censorship. As shown in Table 6, controlling for all other variables, the only variable that significantly influenced strict censorship with social anxiety ( $p < .05$ ).

**Table 6: Poisson Regression Results for Individual Characteristics on Conformity and Censorship**

Independent Variable	Standard Conformity	Strict Conformity	Standard Censorship	Strict Censorship
Extraversion	-0.12 (0.08)	0.18 (0.19)	-0.15** (0.07)	0.11 (0.16)
Openness	0.19 (0.12)	0.10 (0.29)	0.20* (0.11)	0.18 (0.25)
Conscientiousness	-0.04 (0.10)	-0.08 (0.24)	-0.18** (0.08)	-0.09 (0.20)
Agreeableness	-0.10 (0.10)	-0.47** (0.23)	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.18 (0.20)
Neuroticism	-0.28*** (0.10)	-0.12 (0.21)	-0.15* (0.09)	-0.07 (0.18)
Conflict Avoidance	0.05 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.21)	-0.06 (0.09)	-0.12 (0.18)
Social Anxiety	0.01 (0.01)	0.05* (0.03)	0.01 (0.01)	0.05** (0.02)
Race	0.23 (0.26)	0.17 (0.61)	-0.19 (0.24)	-0.33 (0.55)
Gender	-0.14 (0.28)	1.09 (0.80)	0.27 (0.24)	0.70 (0.60)
Condition	0.33 (0.24)	0.42 (0.53)	0.10 (0.21)	0.18 (0.44)
Question Order	0.01 (0.23)	0.87 (0.53)	0.01 (0.23)	0.44 (0.41)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses below estimates

$p < .10^*$ ,  $p < .05^{**}$ ,  $p < .01^{***}$

To examine the influence of each of these individual characteristics on the degree of conformity and censorship, I constructed ordinary least squares regressions. As shown in Table 7, neuroticism had a significant influence on the degree of conformity, holding all other variables

constant ( $p < .05$ ). Extraversion approached significance ( $p < .10$ ), but like all of the other characteristics, did not reach significance. I replicated this model with the degree of censorship as the dependent variable. As Table 7 demonstrates, extraversion and openness significantly influenced the degree of censorship ( $p < .01$ ), controlling for all other variables. In addition, neuroticism and conscientiousness significantly influenced the degree of censorship ( $p < .05$ ). None of the other variables significantly influenced political censorship in this model. As shown in Table 7, neuroticism significantly influences the degree of both conformity and censorship and there is suggestive evidence that extraversion does as well.

**Table 7: OLS Regression Results for Degree of Conformity and Censorship**

Independent Variable	Degree of Conformity	Degree of Censorship
Extraversion	-0.96* (0.54)	-1.15*** (0.39)
Openness	1.19 (0.78)	1.95*** (0.56)
Conscientiousness	-0.13 (0.63)	-0.94** (0.44)
Agreeableness	0.43 (0.67)	0.23 (0.48)
Neuroticism	-1.59** (0.65)	-1.21** (0.47)
Conflict Avoidance	0.28 (0.70)	-0.02 (0.50)
Social Anxiety	-0.02 (0.08)	0.03 (0.05)
Race	1.95 (1.72)	-0.73 (1.24)
Gender	-2.18 (1.69)	0.23 (1.19)
Condition	0.94 (1.46)	-0.28 (1.04)
Question Order	-0.97 (1.41)	0.18 (0.99)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses below estimates  
 $p < .10^*$ ,  $p < .05^{**}$ ,  $p < .01^{***}$

## Political Issues

I hypothesized that participants would conform more frequently on ideologically ambiguous issues than on ideologically salient issues. Issues were coded as ideologically ambiguous if the responses to a question did not vary by party identification or ideology, which in this sample included marriage equality, energy policy, isolationist foreign policy, and perceptions of government power. A *t*-test with type of issue (Ideologically Salient, Ideologically Ambiguous) as the independent variable and frequency of conformity as the dependent variable indicated that there was significantly more conformity on ideologically ambiguous issues than ideologically salient issues ( $p < .001$ ). However, using frequency of *censorship* as the dependent variable reveals that the ideological salience does not significantly influence the frequency of censorship. I also hypothesized that participants would conform more frequently on social issues than non-social issues. In contrast to this hypothesis, and as shown in Figure 7, participants conformed more frequently on non-social issues than on social issues ( $p < .001$ ). Participants also censored significantly more frequently on non-social issues than on social issues ( $p < .001$ ). Marriage equality was the social issue in this study and all other issues were non-social issues.

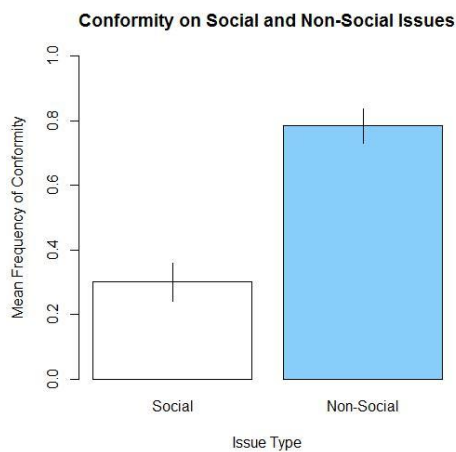


Figure 7: Mean frequency of conformity on social and non-social issues. Lines represent one standard error.

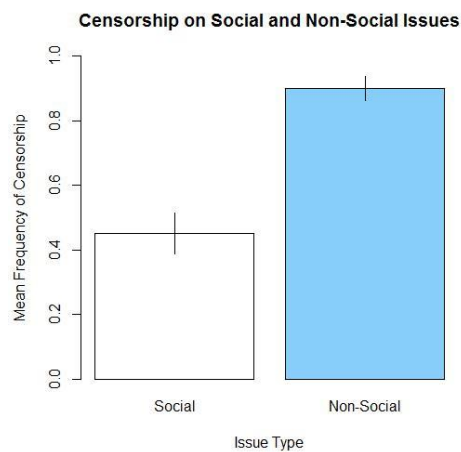


Figure 7: Mean frequency of censorship on social and non-social issues. Lines represent one standard error.



## **Other Findings**

### *Time Effects*

I investigated whether conformity or censorship levels changed over the course of the fourteen questions in the lab session. There was no significant correlation between the mean levels of conformity or censorship on each response position, regardless of the question content, in Order A and Order B. This means that there did not appear to be any time trends. The mean conformity ( $p < .05$ ,  $r = .68$ ) and censorship ( $p < .05$ ,  $r = .70$ ) levels for each question, regardless of question order, between the two orders were highly and significantly correlated. This suggests that regardless of question content, conformity and censorship were equally likely at any stage during the lab session. The content of the questions in this study was more important than the question order.

### *Prior Exposure to Political Pressure*

I also investigated participants' previous experiences with pressure to hold particular political opinions through self-report methods. In my sample, 44 percent of participants reported having felt pressured to hold a particular political opinion in their daily lives. Of those participants indicating feeling this pressure, the overwhelming majority identified friends, family, and classmates as the source of the pressure. As shown in Figure 9, 31 percent of these participants reported feeling pressure from their teachers and 14 percent reported feeling pressure from their bosses. These descriptive statistics provide evidence for the prevalence of the pressure to have a particular political opinion and where that pressure stems from.

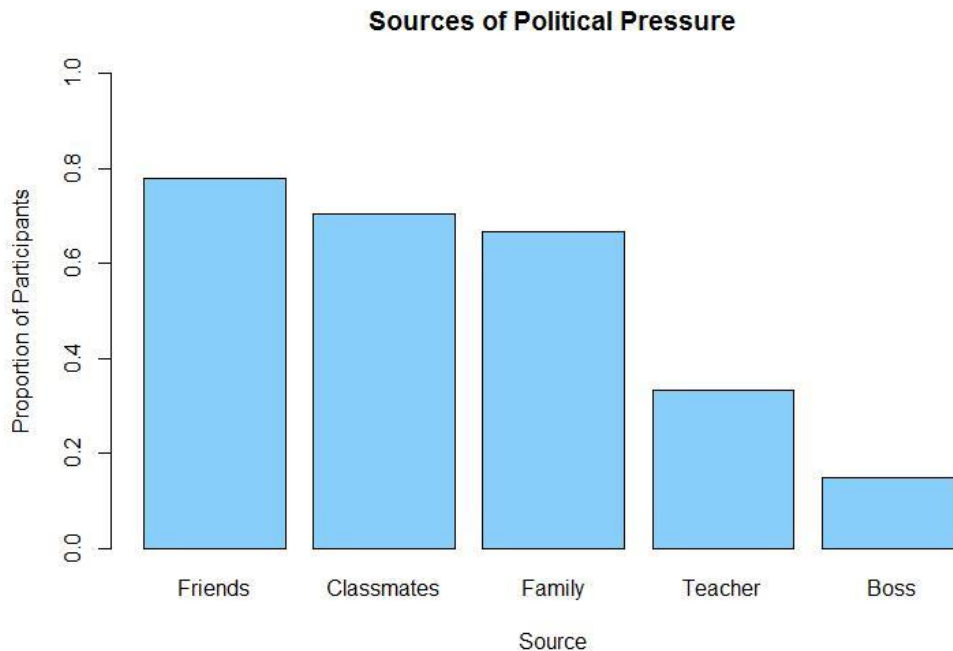


Figure 9: Of the participants who reported feeling pressure to hold a particular political opinion, this shows the proportion of participants reporting feeling this pressure from each source

### *Emotional Experiences in the Lab*

In an effort to better understand how interacting with people who disagree politically made participants feel, I asked them to reflect on the emotions they experienced during the lab session. As shown in Figure 10, very few participants reported feeling happy or excited and the most dominant emotions were surprise, frustration, anxiety, and confusion. Fortunately, very few people reported feeling scared or angry, but the point still remains that negative emotions were much more prevalent than positive emotions while interacting with people who disagree. Of course, these emotions could be connected to the experience of simply participating in a study or discussing politics generally, but regardless of the cause, negative emotions were more frequently reported than positive emotions.

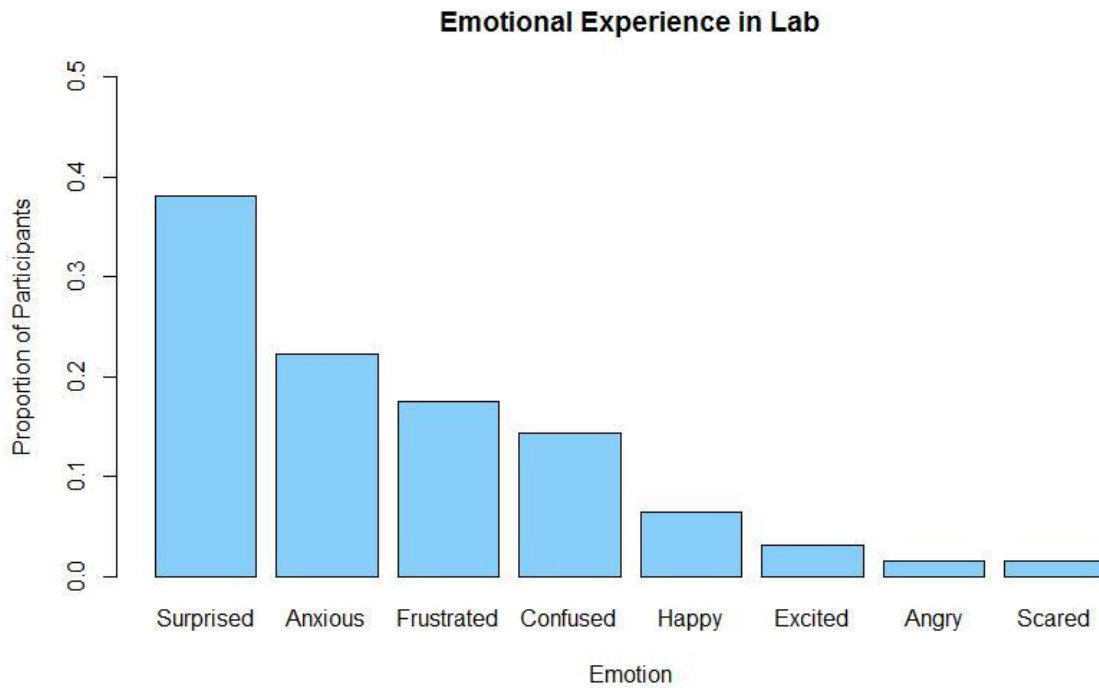


Figure 10: Proportion of participants reporting experiencing each emotion during the lab session

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether individuals conform on *political* issues and which individual differences influence this behavior. This study revealed that individuals do indeed alter the political opinions they share with others with whom they disagree from those they share on a private survey. Eighty-six percent of the participants conformed on at least one issue, and 94 percent censored on at least one issue. Altering political views in front of others was clearly a widespread behavior in this sample.

Although the subtle manipulation of altering the order in which participants gave their responses to political questions relative to the actors did not significantly affect the frequency of conformity or censorship, the quasi-experimental results based on individual characteristics demonstrate the important influence these factors have on political conformity and censorship. The subtle manipulation may have been less influential for two reasons. First, it is possible that participants altered their views from the private pretest because of social desirability biases

inherent in both groups. Settle and Hassell (2013) found that enjoying political discussion is a relatively rare quality and many people report actively avoiding political discussion. Many individuals are simply uncomfortable discussing politics, and the order in which they gave their responses might not have been relevant to their behavior. Second, the group size included two actors, while the optimal number of actors is three (MacCoun 2012). Based on extant psychological conformity research, MacCoun (2012) found that participants conform at the highest rates while interacting with three confederates. It could be that the order was less salient with a smaller group. While this study cannot evaluate whether these explanations are accurate, future research could address these questions. Despite the fact that the order in which participants gave their responses is irrelevant in this study, participants still conformed and censored at high rates.

This study demonstrated that several individual characteristics significantly influence political conformity and censorship. First, many of the Big 5 personality characteristics influence the frequency with which participants conformed and censored. Openness to experience significantly influenced the frequency and degree of conformity, regardless of the definition. Extraversion significantly influenced the frequency and degree of standard conformity, but not strict conformity. Previous work on the intersection between personality and politics has also found extraversion to be a particularly robust characteristic (see Giuseffi, Smith, & Hibbing 2013), which is consistent with my findings.

While contrary to my initial hypotheses, emotionally stable participants conformed more frequently than neurotic participants. This could be because individuals who are emotionally stable might have the skills to navigate social situations, leading them to be more aware of the social consequences of disagreeing with others politically. Neuroticism has been particularly

inconsistent in personality and politics research (see Giuseffi, Smith, & Hibbing 2013; Settle & Hassell 2013), suggesting that it might have very precise effects on particular political behaviors. Openness to experience and extraversion significantly influenced censorship in the same way they influenced conformity. These are the only two of the Big 5 characteristics to have a significant influence both conformity and censorship in the models only examining the Big 5.

Second, conflict avoidance did not consistently influence political conformity or censorship. The small variation in conflict avoidance in this sample could partially explain the null effect. Conflict avoidance only had a moderately significant influence on the degree of conformity, which does not provide strong evidence that conflict avoidance is relevant for political conformity. However, the actors in this study were not arguing with the participants; they were simply stating a disagreeing opinion. Conflict avoidance might be a more influential characteristic in a study where the conflict between the actors and the participants is more salient. This study should certainly be replicated in a sample with greater variation in conflict avoidance to better understand whether it is influential.

Third, social anxiety did not consistently influence political conformity or censorship. Much like conflict avoidance, this sample did not have much variation in social anxiety levels. The clinical thresholds for social anxiety and social phobia revealed significant differences in censorship, but not conformity. Perhaps socially anxious participants perceived stating views they did not agree with to be sufficiently anxiety-provoking on its own, leading them to censor, but not conform. However, social anxiety's inconsistent influence on this sample does not provide strong evidence that it is an important factor in influencing political conformity or censorship. Replicating this study on a sample with greater variation in social anxiety would help determine its influence on political conformity and censorship.

Fourth, perhaps the most interesting finding in this study is the strong impact that race had on political conformity. Extant psychology research on conformity suggests that the race of the participant does not significantly affect the likelihood of conformity on physical judgments (Janney, Mallory, Rossitto, & Simon 1969). To my knowledge, this is the only study that reported effects based on race, which could be because of null findings in other studies, or because much of the early conformity studies used only white men as participants. However, my study revealed that racial minority participants conformed and censored significantly more often than white participants on *political* judgments. While this sample is limited in its racial diversity, with only 27 percent of the sample representing minorities, the results are still interesting.

Political science research suggests that Americans from racial and ethnic minority groups participate at lower rates than white Americans (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie 1993). Perhaps Americans from minority groups are more likely to conform on political issues because they are less engaged with politics. However, the participants in this study were all enrolled in political science classes, which implies that they all have some degree of interest in the topic. Furthermore, there were no differences in conformity or censorship levels based on political participation. Verba and colleagues (1993) also find that participation is not significantly lower among minority groups when they control for socioeconomic status and education. Education level should not be driving this effect because all participants were of comparable education levels. Socioeconomic status data were not collected in this study, so it is possible that this influences political conformity.

Democratic deliberation theorists suggest that one of the most important factors in improving the quality of the political discussion and encouraging everyone to speak is ensuring

that everyone is presented as *equal* (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, & Shaker 2012). Although America has improved significantly, racism still exists in our daily lives, especially in politics. The 113<sup>th</sup> Congress marked the first time in history that two African American senators served concurrently, revealing the underrepresentation of racial minority groups in the political system. This underrepresentation could make racial minority group members feel unequal when discussing politics, leading them to conform or censor their views. Neither of these potential explanations are sufficient, but they help explain why race had a dramatic influence on political conformity, when it did not influence physical conformity studies in psychology.

Fifth, this study found that men and women conformed and censored with the same frequency and degree, in contrast to extant psychology research. There are three potential explanations for this result. First, this sample was biased toward women, so it could be the result of statistical tests comparing unequal group sizes. Second, although they are still underrepresented in the political sphere, women are becoming increasingly involved in politics, which could suggest that they feel more equal to men now than they did when the previous psychology research was conducted. Regardless of the reason, this finding supports the claim that political conformity is different from physical conformity.

When looking at the independent effect each of these individual characteristics had on political conformity and censorship, the Big 5 personality characteristics are the only factors to remain statistically significant. Specifically, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion appear to have strong effects on both censorship and conformity. While isolated analyses suggest that conflict avoidance and social anxiety near significance and that race is a strong predictor, it seems that they do not influence conformity or censorship, when controlling for all other factors.

Beyond individual differences, the substantive content of the issue significantly influenced political conformity and censorship. First, ideologically ambiguous issues yielded higher levels of conformity than ideologically salient issues. This supports the notion that the human desire to be accurate motivates conformity. Participants could have been anchoring their political opinions around their party's positions, but when the party's position was unclear, they could have relied on the opinions of others. If participants were conforming on ideologically ambiguous issues because they were seeking accuracy, this helps explain why there were no effects on censorship based on issue type. Censoring a political opinion would not be enough to avoid being "wrong" in this context, so if information is a motivating factor, I would expect participants to conform more frequently on ideologically ambiguous issues, but not necessarily censor more frequently. This finding is not sufficient to suggest that information and ideological salience are the key sources of political conformity, but it does provide preliminary evidence that they are important factors.

Second, participants conformed and censored more frequently on non-social issues than on social issues. In support of this finding, Bloom & Levitan (2011) suggest that social issues with a moral component are more resistant to attitude change, which supports the results of this study. Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis (2005) argue that individuals view moral mandates as more important than other issues and therefore hold them with greater certainty, making them more resistant to outside pressure to change. However, the scholarship on persuasion resistance and social issues is mixed. Even so, individuals who conform or censor do not actually change their true opinions, so this research does not perfectly map onto the conformity construct. Future research should continue to explore political conformity on social issues, especially with a wider range of social issues instead of just marriage equality.



This study is not without its limitations. As previously described, the small convenience sample did not yield significant variation on some of the independent variables including race, the Big 5, social anxiety, and conflict avoidance. Replicating this study with a larger, more representative sample would help determine whether the results we found are robust and whether there are other effects that the current statistical analyses could not detect. In addition, the sample included students from Government classes, which means that they might be more politically interested and informed than the general population. While this limits the generalizability of the findings, this should make it harder to find an effect, given that individuals with stronger beliefs are less likely to change them (Leviton 2009). On the other hand, college students have been shown to be more susceptible to conformity than other populations, which should make it easier to find a result in this sample than in the general population (Sears 1986). This study only included ten political issues, so it is not possible to generalize broadly based on political topic. Finally, it is possible that the participants' political attitudes were simply unstable and that changes detected between pretest, lab session, and posttest were not indicative of conformity, but attitude instability.

Overall, this study revealed that individuals do indeed behave like political chameleons, temporarily abandoning their political views when interacting with others with whom they disagree. Individual differences like extraversion, openness to experience, and race significantly influence the frequency and degree to which participants conform or censor. Some issues yield higher levels of opinion alteration than others. Specifically, ideologically ambiguous issues and non-social issues yielded higher levels of opinion alteration. While some individuals are more likely to conform or censor than others based on their individual characteristics, the particular issues matter as well. While the underlying causal mechanism is unclear, this study is an

important first step toward finding the optimal contexts under which political discussion is most open. Americans today are challenged to navigate a social and polarized political environment, leaving them with the choice of whether to conform or share their true views with others. The prevalence of political conformity demonstrated in this study threatens the way we understand public opinion, political expression, and sociopolitical interaction.

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## Appendix

### Script for Republican Participant

**1. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very important” and 1 being “not important at all,” how important do you think it is to vote in elections?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** 6  
**Confederate 2:** 8

**2. Prompt:** Some people think that the US should continue giving military aid to Egypt at the same level as before the military takeover. Others feel that we should suspend all military aid to Egypt. Others have opinions in between. On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is that the US should continue giving military aid to Egypt, and 9 is that we should suspend all military aid to Egypt, where would you place yourself?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** 5  
**Confederate 2:** 6

**3. Prompt:** Over the past year, would you say that the economic policies of the federal government have made the nation's economy better, worse, or haven't they made much difference either way?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Better  
**Confederate 2:** Better

**4. Prompt:** Some people think that the most important priority for addressing America's energy supply should be expanding exploration and production of oil, coal, and natural gas. Do you agree or disagree?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Disagree  
**Confederate 2:** Disagree

**5. Prompt:** Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose an increase in the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$9.00 an hour?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Strongly favor  
**Confederate 2:** Favor

**6. Prompt:** Some people believe that abortion should be permitted only if the life and health of the woman is in danger. Do you agree or disagree? Do you do so strongly?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Disagree  
**Confederate 2:** Agree

**7. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports raising taxes on the wealthy and lowering taxes on the poor?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** 7  
**Confederate 2:** 8

**8. Prompt:** Do you favor or oppose making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Favor

**Confederate 2:** Favor

**9. Prompt:** Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose setting stricter emission limits on power plants in order to address climate change?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Favor

**Confederate 2:** Strongly Favor

**10. Prompt:** Some people believe that this country would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world. Do you agree or disagree?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Disagree

**Confederate 2:** Disagree

**11. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** 8

**Confederate 2:** 7

**12. Prompt:** Some people are afraid the government in Washington is getting too powerful for the good of the country and the individual person. Others feel that the government in Washington is not getting too strong. What is your feeling, do you think the government is getting too powerful or do you think the government is not getting too strong?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Not getting too strong

**Confederate 2:** Not getting too strong

**13. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports deference to the states on gay marriage?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** 3

**Confederate 2:** 2

**14. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports cutting spending on programs like Medicaid and Medicare?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** 2

**Confederate 2:** 3

## Script for Democrat Participant

**1. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very important” and 1 being “not important at all,” how important do you think it is to vote in elections?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** 6  
**Confederate 2:** 8

**2. Prompt:** Some people think that the US should continue giving military aid to Egypt at the same level as before the military takeover. Others feel that we should suspend all military aid to Egypt. Others have opinions in between. On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is that the US should continue giving military aid to Egypt, and 9 is that we should suspend all military aid to Egypt, where would you place yourself?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** 5  
**Confederate 2:** 6

**3. Prompt:** Over the past year, would you say that the economic policies of the federal government have made the nation's economy better, worse, or haven't they made much difference either way?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Worse  
**Confederate 2:** Worse

**4. Prompt:** Some people think that the most important priority for addressing America’s energy supply should be expanding exploration and production of oil, coal, and natural gas. Do you agree or disagree?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Agree  
**Confederate 2:** Agree

**5. Prompt:** Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose an increase in the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$9.00 an hour?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Strongly oppose  
**Confederate 2:** Oppose

**6. Prompt:** Some people believe that abortion should be permitted only if the life and health of the woman is in danger. Do you agree or disagree? Do you do so strongly?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** Disagree  
**Confederate 2:** Agree

**7. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports raising taxes on the wealthy and lowering taxes on the poor?

**Participant:**  
**Confederate 1:** 3  
**Confederate 2:** 2

**8. Prompt:** Do you favor or oppose making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Favor

**Confederate 2:** Favor

**9. Prompt:** Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose setting stricter emission limits on power plants in order to address climate change?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Oppose

**Confederate 2:** Strongly Oppose

**10. Prompt:** Some people believe that this country would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world. Do you agree or disagree?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Agree

**Confederate 2:** Agree

**11. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** 2

**Confederate 2:** 3

**12. Prompt:** Some people are afraid the government in Washington is getting too powerful for the good of the country and the individual person. Others feel that the government in Washington is not getting too strong. What is your feeling, do you think the government is getting too powerful or do you think the government is not getting too strong?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** Getting too powerful

**Confederate 2:** Getting too powerful

**13. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports deference to the states on gay marriage?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** 7

**Confederate 2:** 8

**14. Prompt:** On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very likely” and 1 being “very unlikely,” how likely would you be to vote for a candidate who supports cutting spending on programs like Medicaid and Medicare?

**Participant:**

**Confederate 1:** 8

**Confederate 2:** 7