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The Ideology of Censorship

Bo Winegard
27.83 · Marietta College

Cory J Clark
26.43 · Durham University

Ethan Bunnel

Abstract

Recent work has suggested that Liberals have sacred values about protecting low status groups and thus are particularly prone to bias against any information that portrays those groups unfavorably. In a preregistered study (n = 559), we tested whether Liberals would support more censorship of information that portrays low status groups unfavorably (that men evolved to be better leaders than women, that Islam is violent and incites terrorism, and that white people score higher on intelligence tests than black people) than similar information that portrays high status groups unfavorably (that women evolved to be better leaders than men, that Christianity is violent and incites terrorism, and that black people score higher on intelligence tests than white people). The results very clearly supported predictions. Liberals consistently displayed double standards in their censorship preferences such that they desired to censor information that portrays low status groups unfavorably more than information that portrays high status groups unfavorably. Moderates and Conservatives supported more similar levels of censorship regardless of whether the information was favorable toward relatively high or low status groups, but Conservatives did display a small preference for censoring Christian violence over Islamic violence. Exploratory analyses also revealed that Millennials might be slightly more in support of censorship than Generation X in general, but Baby Boomers' censorship support generally fell between that of Generation X and Millennials.

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Support for censorship regressed on condition, ideology, and the interaction within each of the three passage types

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The Ideology of Censorship

*Bo M. Winegard[1]

*Cory J. Clark[2]

Ethan Bunnel[1]

[1]Marietta College

[2]Durham University

*Equal contribution

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Abstract

Recent work has suggested that Liberals have sacred values about protecting low status groups and thus are particularly prone to bias against any information that portrays those groups unfavorably. In a preregistered study ($n = 559$), we tested whether Liberals would support more censorship of information that portrays low status groups unfavorably (that men evolved to be better leaders than women, that Islam is violent and incites terrorism, and that white people score higher on intelligence tests than black people) than similar information that portrays high status groups unfavorably (that women evolved to be better leaders than men, that Christianity is violent and incites terrorism, and that black people score higher on intelligence tests than white people). The results very clearly supported predictions. Liberals consistently displayed double standards in their censorship preferences such that they desired to censor information that portrays low status groups unfavorably more than information that portrays high status groups unfavorably. Moderates and Conservatives supported more similar levels of censorship regardless of whether the information was favorable toward relatively high or low status groups, but Conservatives did display a small preference for censoring Christian violence over Islamic violence. Exploratory analyses also revealed that Millennials might be slightly more in support of censorship than Generation X in general, but Baby Boomers' censorship support generally fell between that of Generation X and Millennials.

Keywords: political psychology, bias, censorship

Study

This study tested the prediction that more liberal ideology would predict higher support for censorship of books stating that (1a) Men evolved to be better leaders than women on average than that (1b) Women evolved to be better leaders than men on average, that (2a) Islam is violent and inspires crime and terrorism than that (2b) Christianity is violent and inspires crime and terrorism, and that (3a) White people score higher than black people on intelligence tests and some of this gap is caused by genetics than that (3b) Black people score higher than white people on intelligence tests and some of this gap is caused by genetics.

Method

This study was preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/blind2.php. We followed this preregistration exactly except that due to an error in setting participant inclusion criteria, we ended up recruiting 45 more participants than planned. We also report additional cross-checking and exploratory analyses that were not preregistered.

Participants. U.S. participants ($M_{age} = 37.11$, $SD = 11.16$; 235 female) were recruited via Mechanical Turk. We aimed for 550 participants based on funds available to pay them, but we had to repost the study after realizing we accidentally set inclusion criteria to masters workers only. This resulted in the recruitment of 595 participants. The data were not downloaded or analyzed until the study concluded with 595 participants. As indicated in the preregistration, we excluded participants who failed an attention check, resulting in a final sample of 559 participants. Participants were slightly above the midpoint on liberalism ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.76$).

Procedure. Participants were told that they would be reading controversial passages from books and asked to respond to questions about those passages. They each read five passages in total. Two (involving swearing and gore) contained no experimental manipulation:

Swearing, No manipulation: "*Reclining in his chair, Bill reached for a can of beer. "Fuck the fucking stupid cubs. They always fucking lose. I'm sick of this goddamned shit*." Pg. 188

Gore, No manipulation: "*He stabbed his stomach and sliced his waist through his neck.*

His internal organs fell out onto the ground with a large pool of blood. He then took a hacksaw and slowly cut off his head; then he pulled out one of his eyes and ate it raw." Pg. 204

Three passages (involving leadership, violence, and intelligence) were experimentally manipulated either to portray a relatively low status group or a relatively high status group unfavorably. The alternate conditions are displayed in parentheses.

Leadership, Sex manipulation: "*Researchers have argued that men(women) are better leaders than women(men). That is, genetically men(women) appear to better able to lead large groups of people. Because of this, it is not only fair, but positively crucial, that more men(women) are leaders than women(men).*" Pg. 25

Violence, Religion manipulation: "*Islam(Christianity) was a powerful ideology that spread rapidly across the Arabian Peninsula. It was also a violent, warlike religion that promoted domination of other people. To this day, it inspires hatred, bigotry, and even terrorism.*

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Many scholars have suggested that Islam(Christianity), of all religions, is particularly hateful and likely to motivate gruesome crimes, and bigotry." Pg. 345

Intelligence, Race manipulation: "*Scholars have suggested that white(black) people score higher than black(white) people on intelligence tests. It is likely that at least some of this gap is caused by genetics. That is, whites(blacks) are genetically smarter than blacks(whites).*" Pg. 64

Following each passage, participants rated their agreement with four statements ("They should remove the book from the library.", "A professor should not be allowed to require the book for class.", "Students should not be allowed to cite the book.", and "It would not be good if students read the book.") on 7-point scales from 1= *Not at all* to 7= *Very much so*, which were combined into indices of support for censorship, αs > .93. Participants also reported some demographic variables including political ideology on a 7-point scale from *Very conservative* to *Very liberal*. No other data were collected.

Results

In three separate regressions, we regressed support for censorship on the conditions,

ideology (centered), and the interactions. All predictions were supported.

Leadership. As can be seen in Table 1, there was a significant main effect of Sex condition such that people supported more censorship of the passage indicating that men evolved to be better leaders than women than the identical passage indicating that women evolved to be better leaders than men. There was no main effect of ideology. And the predicted interaction emerged. Consistent with predictions, simple slopes one standard deviation above and below the

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mean of political ideology revealed that more liberal participants supported censorship more when the passage indicated men were better leaders than women than vice versa ($b = 1.09$), $t = 5.23$, $p < .001$. More conservative participants displayed a similar bias, but to a weaker extent ($b = .36$), $t = 1.70$, $p = .089$.

Examining the interaction another way, in the condition in which women were said to be better leaders than men, there was virtually no effect of ideology on censorship support ($b = .00$), $t = -0.06$, $p = .950$. Neither Liberals nor Conservatives wanted to censor the passage that claimed women evolved to be better leaders than men (well below the midpoint). However, in the condition in which men were said to be better leaders than women, more liberal ideology predicted more support for censorship ($b = .21$), $t = 3.74$, $p < .001$.

Violence. As can be seen in Table 1, there was no main effect of Religion condition. There was a small main effect of ideology, such that liberalism was associated with less support for censorship. We again found the predicted significant interaction. Consistent with predictions, simple slopes one standard deviation above and below the mean of political ideology revealed that liberal participants supported censorship more when the passage indicated that Islam was violent than that Christianity was violent ($b = .79$), $t = 3.60$, $p < .001$. Conservative participants displayed the opposite (though to a somewhat weaker extent) such that they supported censorship more when the passage indicated that Christianity was violent than that Islam was violent ($b = .39$), $t = -1.77$, $p = .077$.

Examining the interaction another way, in the condition in which Islam was said to be violent, more liberal ideology predicted more support for censorship ($b = .20$), $t = 3.21$, $p = .001$. In the condition in which Christianity was said to be violent, this relationship was reversed, with more liberal ideology predicting *less* support for censorship ($b = -.13$), $t = -2.12$, $p = .035$.

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Intelligence. As can be seen in Table 1, there was a significant main effect of Race condition such that people supported censorship of the passage indicating that white people score higher on intelligence tests than black people than vice versa. There was no main effect of ideology. And we again found the predicted significant interaction. Consistent with predictions, simple slopes one standard deviation above and below the mean of political ideology revealed that liberal participants supported censorship more when the passage indicated white people score higher on intelligence tests than black people than vice versa ($b = 1.09$), $t = 4.82$, $p < .001$. Conservative participants (one standard deviation below the mean) displayed no such bias ($b = .24$), $t = 1.04$, $p = .297$.

Examining the interaction another way, in the condition in black people were said to score higher on intelligence tests than white people, there was no effect of ideology on censorship support ($b = .05$), $t = 0.68$, $p = .498$. Neither Liberals nor Conservatives wanted to censor the passage that claimed black people score higher on intelligence tests than white people (well below the midpoint). However, in the condition in which white people were said to score higher on intelligence tests than black people, more liberal ideology predicted more support for censorship ($b = .29$), $t = 5.30$, $p < .001$.

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Table 1
Support for censorship regressed on condition, ideology, and the interaction within each of the three passage types

	β	t	p	95% CI	semipartial r
Leadership					
Sex Condition	.20	4.89	<.001	.43, 1.02	.20
Ideology	.00	-0.06	.950	-.13, .12	.00
Condition x Ideology	.15	2.47	.014	.04, .38	.10
Violence					
Religion Condition	.06	1.30	.194	-.10, .51	.06
Ideology	-.13	-2.13	.034	-.26, -.01	-.09
Condition x Ideology	.23	3.83	<.001	.16, .51	.16
Intelligence					
Race Condition	.17	4.13	<.001	.34, .98	.17
Ideology	.04	0.70	.482	-.09, .18	.03
Condition x Ideology	.16	2.65	.008	.06, .42	.11

Note on age. We report exploratory analyses with age below. These results might lead one to wonder whether the interactions between the experimental condition and ideology on censorship support are influenced by relationships between age and support for censorship. However, controlling for age in the models reported above either does not affect the size of the interaction effects or it strengthens them. Age does not account for the effects observed here.

Cross-check and visualization. We created a categorical ideology variable for Conservatives (those who responded 1-3 on the 7-point ideology scale; $n = 135$), Moderates (those who responded 4; $n = 114$), and Liberals (those who responded 5-7; $n = 307$) for purposes of cross-checking the results and creating easy visualizations of the data. In three 2 (condition) x 3 (categorical ideology) Univariate Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs) on support for censorship, all three significant interactions emerged again, ps<.044, η_p^2s>.01. These data can be visualized in Figure 1 below.

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Simple effects revealed that the experimental conditions only ever had a significant influence among Liberals (and always did so), ps<.003, and never among Moderates nor Conservatives, ps>.187. There also were significant differences between ideological groups only in the conditions that portrayed victims' groups unfavorably. For the passage that stated that men evolved to be better leaders than women, Liberals supported censorship significantly more than Conservatives and Moderates, ps<.010, whereas Moderates and Conservatives did not differ, p=.531. For the passage that stated that Islam is violent and incites terrorism, Liberals supported censorship significantly more than Conservatives and Moderates, ps<.027, whereas Moderates and Conservatives did not differ, p=.630. For the passage that stated that white people score higher on intelligence tests than black people, all groups (at least marginally) differed, with Liberals supporting censorship more than Moderates, p=.060, and Moderates supporting censorship more than Conservatives, p=.040. For the passages stating that women evolved to be better leaders than men, that Christianity is violent and incites terrorism, and that black people score higher on intelligence tests than white people, Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives were equally opposed to censorship, ps>.154.

Swearing and gore. Figure 1 also displays the mean support for censorship among Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives for the two topics of censorship that contained no manipulation (swearing and gore). Generally, more liberalism predicted less support for censorship for swearing and gore, but the only significant effect (in simple effects) was that Liberals were less supportive of censoring gore than Conservatives, p=.026. There were, however, significant relationships between more liberal continuous ideology and lower support

for censoring swearing, r=-.13, p=.002, and gore, r=-.15, p<.001.

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Figure 1. Left three graphs display interactions between categorical ideology and the conditions on
Right graph displays main effect of categorical ideology on the two unmanipulated topics. Full (7-p
truncated for ease of visualization.

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Exploratory age analyses. In recent years, some scholars have contended that young
people are particularly opposed to free speech and supportive of censorship. For these reasons,
we conducted several exploratory analyses with age. There were no relationships between age
and support for censorship of swearing or gore, rs=-.01, ps>.830. There were small significant or
marginal relationships between younger age and more support for censorship for the leadership,
r=-.09, p=.029, violence, r=-.10, p=.021, and intelligence, r=-.07, p=.096 passages.

We next analyzed the interactions between continuous age and each of the experimental
conditions on the relevant censorship outcome. There was no significant interaction between the
Sex condition and age on support for censorship of the leadership passage, p=.376, r=.04. There
was no significant interaction between the Race condition and age on support for censorship of

the intelligence passage, $p=.342$, $r=.04$. There was a marginal but very small interaction between the Religion condition and age on support for censorship of the violence passage, $p=.055$, $r=-.08$, such that younger people were more supportive of censoring the Islamic violence passage than the Christian violence passage whereas older people treated the two more similarly.

We next broke the sample up into three age groups: Millennials (ages 18-34 [technically 18-19 is generation Z, but we only had three in our sample so they could not be distinguished]; $n=273$), Generation X (ages 35-54, $n=232$), and Boomers (ages 55-75, $n=53$). These results can be seen in Figure 2. Five ANOVAs on each of the five censorship passages revealed no differences between age groups for censorship of swearing and gore, $ps>.125$, $\eta_p^2<.008$. There were, however, marginal or significant differences for leadership, $ps=.078$, $\eta_p^2=.01$, violence, $ps=.008$, $\eta_p^2=.02$, and intelligence, $ps=.022$, $\eta_p^2=.01$. Bonferroni post-hoc tests revealed that relative to Generation X, Millennials were marginally more supportive of censorship of the leadership passages, $p=.083$, significantly more supportive of censorship of the violence

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passages, $p=.006$, and significantly more supportive of censorship of the intelligence passages, $p=.018$. Boomers never differed from either group, $ps>.828$, but note Boomers had a fairly large standard error due to the relatively small sample size.

There were no significant interactions between categorical age groups and the experimental conditions on any of the censorship passages, $ps>.141$.
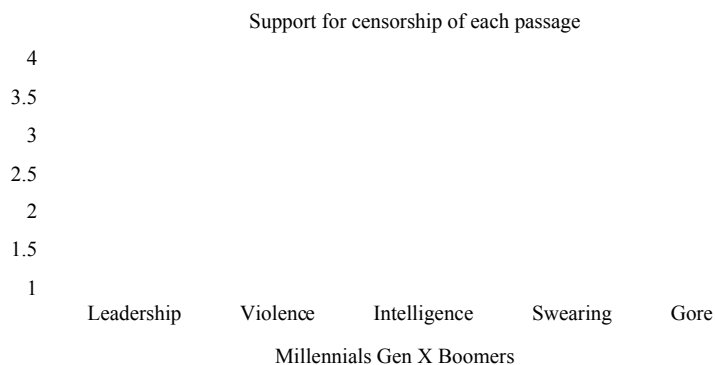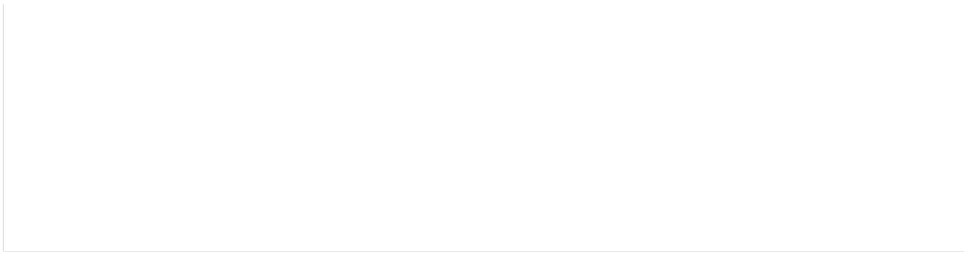
Support for censorship of each passage

4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1

Leadership Violence Intelligence Swearing Gore

Millennials Gen X Boomers

Figure 2. Support for censorship of each passage by age group

Discussion

Results supported all predictions.

Citations (0)   References (0)

This research doesn't cite any other publications.

Recommendations

Project

Equalitarianism: A Source of Liberal Bias

Cory J Clark · ◯ Bo Winegard · ◯ Connor Hasty

This is where we will update the latest version of the manuscript 'Equalitarianism: A Source of Liberal Bias' as it is currently going through the review process.

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