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Censorship on Campuses

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Abstract

Modern Western societies conceive universities as places for open inquiry and relentless pursuit of truth. Yet in recent years, many scholars have expressed concerns about increasing censoriousness on college campuses. The present investigation tested whether people have heightened desires to censor information on campuses that is perceived as threatening to group equality or reinforcing of status hierarchies—specifically, information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably. Across four samples from three countries (U.S. adults and three college-aged samples in the U.S., U.K., and Hungary; total n=1,616) and three domains of group differences, we found that people were more censorious of information that portrays lower status groups unfavorably (women, Black people, Muslims) than identical information that portrays higher status groups unfavorably (men, White people, Christians). We also found that these differential standards in censorship preferences increased as participants were more politically liberal, likely reflecting Liberals' greater aversion to inequality and protectiveness toward low-status groups. Such patterns (especially in conjunction with other recent work) challenge the conventional wisdom that evaluative biases generally *harm* low-status groups and *reinforce* existing hierarchies. Instead, in modern Western societies, at least in recent years, biases in information evaluations seem designed to *help* low-status groups and *eliminate* or *reverse* existing hierarchies.

Keywords: social cognition, censorship, cognitive biases, political psychology, cross-cultural psychology

Highlights

- People are more censorious of information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably than information that portrays high-status groups unfavorably
- This difference in censoriousness toward information that portrays low and high-status groups unfavorably was larger as participants self-identified as more politically liberal
- These patterns were similar across the United States, United Kingdom, and Hungary

“If this nation is to be wise as well as strong, if we are to achieve our destiny, then we need more new ideas for more wise men reading more good books in more public libraries. These libraries should be open to all—except the censor. We must know all the facts and hear all the alternatives and listen to all the criticisms. Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors.”

--John F. Kennedy

Censorship is often regarded as inimical to a liberal society (e.g., D’Souza, 1991; Milton, 1644/1965), yet throughout history, everyday people, governments, institutions, and other authorities have censored information thought to undermine certain ideas and ideologies presumed beyond question or criticism (Clark et al., 2023; Cramer, 1945; Fishburn, 2008; Thomas, 1969). These include that the sun has flaws (Mayer, 2011), that the Earth is not the center of the cosmos (Finocchiaro, 2008), and that humans are the product of natural selection. Although resistance to information that opposes one’s sacred beliefs is likely a natural feature of human psychology (Clark et al., 2019), the precise information that people wish to censor varies across time, culture, and context. For example, support for Democracy, an idea embraced and lauded by many Western societies, is subject to censorship in modern China (Bamman et al., 2012). If humans have a proclivity to suppress information that challenges sacred values, it’s reasonable to examine whether modern humans, even in Western societies that promote free speech and inquiry, also desire to suppress challenging or taboo information. In the present paper, we test one possible target of censorship: information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably. We test and find support for the claim that people are particularly censorious of information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably compared to identical information that

portrays high-status groups unfavorably, and, perhaps paradoxically, especially among those who self-identify as "liberal."

Modern Sensitivities

Societies across the globe are reckoning with long histories of failing to live up to their own ideals of justice. Most modern Western societies explicitly endorse human equality for all their citizenry regardless of gender, race, or religion, yet were built upon unjust systems that violated these noble goals. Moreover, even in the most progressive and advanced societies, numerous disparities between demographic groups persist, which many consider prima facie evidence of discrimination. Social justice is now a key motivating force behind many organizations, ideologies, fields of study, institutions, and social movements (e.g., Hage et al., 2020; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016; Moroni, 2019). Some scholars have contended that social justice issues have become a sacred concern in modern Western societies (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020; Pinker, 2018).

Sacred concerns or sacred values are identity-important, protected values that are relatively insensitive to tradeoffs (e.g., Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Tetlock et al., 2000). To protect sacred values, people forego information and data that could allow them to have a more well-rounded understanding of empirical reality. For example, people selectively avoid information that challenges their moral and political beliefs (e.g., Stroud, 2010), and people more negatively evaluate information that challenges their moral and political beliefs than identical information that supports them (e.g., Ditto, Clark, et al., 2019; Ditto, Liu, et al., 2019). In persistent striving for group equality, people may be motivated to avoid, reject, and perhaps silence any information that threatens this goal (Haidt, 2020; Winegard et al., 2023). People may therefore wish to censor information perceived as reinforcing a status hierarchy (information that portrays

low-status groups unfavorably) relative to information that could help level or reverse the playing field (information that portrays high-status individuals and groups unfavorably) (Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020).

Although concerns about inequality are widespread (e.g., Pew, 2020), people who self-identify as politically liberal (or leftwing) are particularly disturbed by inequality (Jost et al., 2008) and particularly empathic toward low-status groups (e.g., Hasson et al., 2018; Jeffries et al., 2012; Lucas & Kteily, 2018). Consequently, Liberals may be especially motivated to reject information that is perceived as threatening group equality. Over the past few years, a growing body of work has found that people, but especially Liberals, interact with information in ways that favor relatively low-status members of society (Clark et al., 2019; Winegard et al., 2023). For example, people upwardly adjust their evaluations of essays when they learn a writer is female (Jampol & Zayas, 2021); people are more bothered by female underrepresentation in desirable careers than male underrepresentation (Block et al., 2019); and people more favorably evaluate research on female-favoring sex differences than research on male-favoring sex differences, especially Liberals (Stewart-Williams et al., 2021; von Hippel & Buss, 2017; Winegard et al., 2023). Liberals also are more inclined to amplify the successes of women and Black people than men and White people, whereas Conservatives treat the successes of groups more similarly (Kteily et al., 2019); people have more generous acceptance criteria for admitting Black than White candidates to an honor society, especially Liberals (Axt et al., 2016); Liberals more favorably evaluate research on Black-favoring race differences than research on White-favoring race differences (von Hippel & Buss, 2017; Winegard et al., 2023). Although there is a small tendency for those high in social dominance orientation (SDO, which is strongly correlated with conservatism) to favor a White over a Black job applicant, there is a larger and more

reliable tendency for those low in SDO to favor a Black over a White job applicant (Reynolds et al., 2020). And whereas those high on system justification (also strongly correlated with conservatism) find jokes that target low and high-status groups similarly funny, those low on system justification find jokes that target low-status groups particularly unfunny (Purser & Harper, 2023).

All of this suggests that people prefer information that promotes the well-being of low-status groups over information that could conceivably undermine their well-being. And there is greater evidence that this is true of Liberals than of Conservatives. This is not to say that Conservatives are not censorious. Indeed, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom documents the most challenged and banned books in the United States, and books related to sexuality and gender identity—issues of concern to Conservatives—frequently make the list. However, because we are looking at desires for censorship on university campuses, in the present paper, we focus on issues that we expect to be of concern on university campuses.

Censorship on Campuses

The present work seeks to determine whether concerns for low-status groups are reflected in the kinds of information people wish to censor on university campuses. Universities are conceived by many prominent thinkers and institutions as places for free thought, open discourse, and the relentless pursuit of truth. University mottos across the United States and Europe, *Veritas. Virtus. Libertas*. (Truth. Bravery. Freedom.), *Per libertatem ad veritatem* (Through freedom to truth), and *Libertas perfundet omnia luce* (Freedom bathes everything with light), reflect beliefs that truth is best achieved through freedom. And famous classical liberals across history, from Jefferson to Mill, have argued that the best way to obtain true beliefs is to challenge ideas vigorously in a kind of battle so that strong ones prevail while weak ones are

rejected. In 2014, the University of Chicago released a report on freedom of expression supporting "free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberation," among other principles of academic freedom; these "Chicago Principles" have since been adopted by over 70 colleges and universities in the United States (FIRE, 2020). Thus, at least in principle, many universities support academic freedom on their campuses.

Yet in recent years, there has been much discussion of the "free speech crisis on campus" and many scholars have lamented the increasing censoriousness among young people at universities (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Such concerns have prompted scholars to explore both censoriousness and self-censorship among young people on college campuses, finding that a minority of students endorse blocking speakers with whom they disagree, with higher numbers among liberal students, and that many students report censoring themselves for fear of negative reactions from peers, with higher numbers among conservative students (Larson et al., 2020). These findings suggest that modern liberal sensitivities set the tone on campuses regarding which kinds of ideas should be aired. Some scholars have contended that the political correctness more typical of the left is comprised of (1) concerns with promoting socially disadvantaged groups and (2) desires to censor language that could offend socially disadvantaged groups (Moss & O'Connor, 2020). The new censoriousness on university campuses in the past several years may have arisen from increasing aversions to inequality and desires to protect relatively low-status groups from any possible further disadvantage.

The Present Studies

In the present studies, we hypothesized that people would wish to censor information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably more than identical information that portrays high-status groups unfavorably, and that this tendency would be stronger among those who identify as more

politically liberal. We tested this across three different paired categories that prior work has shown are perceived to differ in their relative advantage in society (high-status: men, White people, Christians; low-status: women, Black people, Muslims) (Winegard et al., 2023). We tested our hypothesis first in an adult U.S. sample, and then in three college-aged samples in the U.S., the U.K., and Hungary. Exploring this pattern across four distinct but contemporaneous populations allowed us to test the generalizability of this trend across modern Western societies in the early 2020s. Last, we meta-analyzed our results across the four samples.

Open Science Statement

Study 1 was preregistered: http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=9se8wq; Study 2 was not but followed nearly identical procedures. No participants were excluded from any study except as described in the preregistration. There are no undisclosed manipulations and no undisclosed dependent variables. There are no file drawer studies. All data and syntax will be made publicly available on Open Science Framework upon acceptance for publication.[1]

Study 1

This study tested the prediction that people would support more censorship of books on college campuses stating that (1a) Men evolved to be better leaders than women than that (1b) Women evolved to be better leaders than men, that (2a) Islam is violent than that (2b) Christianity is violent, and that (3a) White people score higher than Black people on intelligence tests than that (3b) Black people score higher than White people on intelligence tests. We expected that this would be particularly true as people were more politically liberal.

Method

[1] The authors declare no conflict of interest. These studies were conducted with ethics approval from the first and second authors' universities.

We preregistered the hypothesis that Liberals would wish to censor information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably *more* than Conservatives wish to censor such information: http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=9se8wq. We followed methods for the preregistration exactly except that because of 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, which gave us power to detect a small effect size (at α= .05, two tailed, 80% power; GPower; Faul et al., 2007). Participants leaned slightly liberal (*M*=3.36, *SD*=1.76).

Procedure. Participants were told they would be reading and responding to controversial passages from books. They read five passages in total that were made up for purposes of this study. 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. 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 their political ideology on a 7-point scale from *Very liberal* to *Very conservative*, a common measure of self-identified political ideology (e.g., Ditto et al., 2018). No other data were collected.

Results

In three separate regressions (one for each passage), we regressed support for censorship on the experimental manipulation, ideology (centered), and their interactions.

Leadership. As can be seen in Table 1, there was a significant main effect of the sex condition such that participants supported more censorship of the passage indicating that men evolved to be better leaders than women than the reverse passage. There was no main effect of ideology. And the predicted interaction emerged. Consistent with predictions, simple slopes one standard deviation above and below the mean of 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=5.22, p<.001. More conservative participants displayed a similar pattern, but to a weaker extent (b=.36), t=1.70, p=.089. In the condition in which women were said to be better leaders, there was virtually no effect of ideology on censorship support (b=.00), t=-0.06,

p=.950, but in the condition in which men were said to be better leaders, more liberal ideology predicted more censoriousness (*b*=-.21), *t*=-3.74, *p*<.001.

Violence. There was no main effect of the religion condition. There was a small main effect of ideology, such that liberalism was associated with less censoriousness. We again found the predicted interaction. Simple slopes one standard deviation above and below the mean of ideology revealed that more liberal participants supported censorship more when the passage indicated that Islam was violent than that Christianity was violent (*b*=.80), *t*=3.62, *p*<.001. More conservative participants displayed a marginal effect in the opposite direction (though to a weaker extent) such that they supported censorship more when the passage indicated that Christianity was violent than that Islam was violent (*b*=-.40), *t*=-1.80, *p*=.072. In the condition in which Islam was said to be violent, more liberal ideology predicted more censoriousness (*b*=-.21), *t*=3.32, *p*=.001. In the condition in which Christianity was said to be violent, this relationship was reversed, with more liberal ideology predicting *less* censoriousness (*b*=.13), *t*=2.06, *p*=.040.

Intelligence. There was a significant main effect of the race condition such that participants 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 interaction. 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. More conservative participants displayed no such pattern (*b*=.24), *t*=1.04, *p*=.297. In the condition in which Black people were said to score higher on intelligence tests, there was no effect of ideology on censorship support (*b*=-.05), *t*=-0.68,

p=.498. However, in the condition in which White people were said to score higher, more liberal ideology predicted more censoriousness (*b*=-.29), *t*=-5.30, *p*<.001.

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	-.12, .13	.00
Condition x Ideology	-.15	-2.47	.014	-.38, -.04	-.10
Violence					
Religion Condition	.06	1.30	.194	-.10, .51	.06
Ideology	.13	2.13	.034	.01, .26	.09
Condition x Ideology	-.23	3.83	<.001	-.51, .16	-.16
Intelligence					
Race Condition	.17	4.13	<.001	.35, .98	.17
Ideology	-.04	-0.70	.482	-.18, .09	-.03
Condition x Ideology	-.16	-2.65	.008	-.42, .06	-.11

Cross-check and visualization. We created a categorical ideology variable for Liberals (those who responded 1-3 on the 7-point ideology scale; *n*=307), Moderates (those who responded 4; *n*=114), and Conservatives (those who responded 5-7; *n*=135) 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). There were again significant main effects for the sex and race conditions, *p*s<.010, η_p^2s=.02, and not for the religion condition. All three significant interactions emerged, *p*s<.044, η_p^2s>.01. These data are reported in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Simple effects revealed that the experimental conditions only ever had a significant influence among Liberals (and always did so), *p*s<.003, and never among Moderates nor Conservatives, *p*s>.187. There also were significant differences between ideological groups only in the conditions that portrayed low status groups unfavorably. For the passage that stated that men evolved to be better leaders than women, Liberals supported censorship more than

Conservatives and Moderates, *p*s<.010, whereas Moderates and Conservatives did not differ, *p*=.531. For the passage that stated that Islam is violent, Liberals supported censorship more than Conservatives and Moderates, *p*s<.027, whereas Moderates and Conservatives did not differ, *p*=.630. For the passage that stated that White people score higher on intelligence tests, 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, that Christianity is violent, and that Black people score higher on intelligence tests, Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives were similarly opposed to censorship, *p*s>.154.

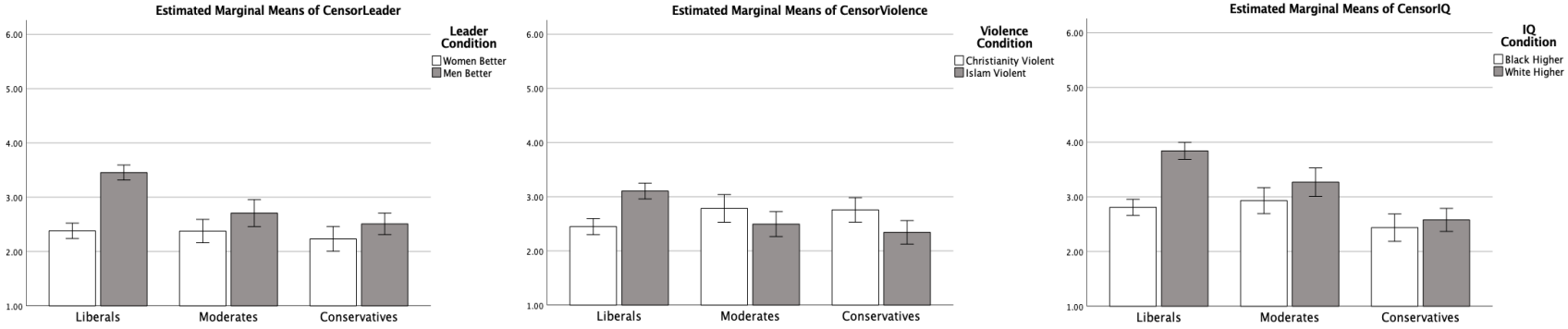
Table 2
ANOVA results with categorical ideology in Study 1

	F	*p*	η_p^2
Leadership			
Sex Condition	11.83	**	.02
Ideology	5.22	**	.02
Condition x Ideology	3.35	*	.01
Violence			
Religion Condition	0.01	.928	.00
Ideology	0.78	.457	.00
Condition x Ideology	5.31	**	.02
Intelligence			
Race Condition	8.23	**	.02
Ideology	8.71	***	.03
Condition x Ideology	3.17	*	.01

Note. + *p*<.100, * p<.050, ** p<.010, *** p<.001

Figure 1

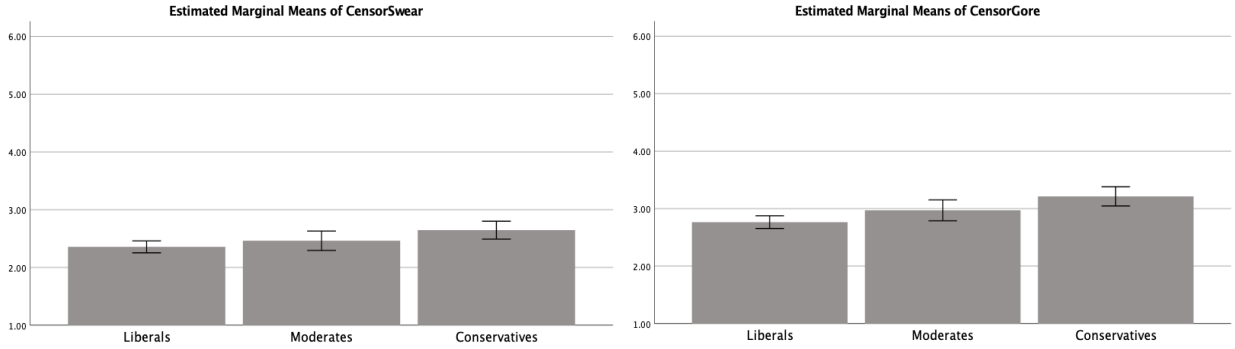
Means and standard errors of support for censorship by experimental conditions and categorical ideology for each passage type in the US adult sample in Study 1



Note. Full (7-point) censorship scale was slightly truncated for ease of visualization. Error bars are standard errors.

Swearing and gore. Although unrelated to our hypotheses, there were significant relationships between more liberal ideology and lower support for censoring swearing, r=.13, p=.002, and gore, r=.15, p<.001. In two one-way ANOVAs with categorical ideology (see Figure 2), there were no significant differences between Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives on their support for censoring swearing, $F(553)=1.21$, p =.298, and there was a marginally significant effect for gore, $F(552)=2.55$, p =.079, with simple effects revealing a significant difference only between Liberals and Conservatives, p=.026.

Figure 2
Censorship means and standard errors for swearing and gore passages by categorical ideological group in Study 1



Note. Full (7-point) censorship scale was slightly truncated for ease of visualization.

Discussion

Results were generally as expected. Participants, but especially Liberals, tended to be more censorious of information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably than identical information that portrays high-status groups unfavorably. Study 2 sought to replicate and extend these results to three college-aged samples by recruiting university students and young adults rather than a broader range of adults as in Study 1.

Study 2

Study 2 replicated Study 1 in three college-aged samples (roughly ages 18-26) in the U.S., the U.K., and Hungary. We expected similar patterns of results, but perhaps with stronger main effects for the experimental manipulations because younger people tend to lean more liberal than adults.

Method

Participants. This study was not preregistered because we could not anticipate sample sizes for two of our three samples (both relied on our ability to recruit as many participants as possible within a limited time frame). Sample sizes for each sample were determined in different ways. For the U.K. sample, we collected the maximum number of participants we could during the 2020 spring semester at a British university (n=128; M_{age}=19.43, SD=1.07; 112 female). This sample size is quite small, and thus all results for British participants are interpreted with caution. For the U.S. sample, we recruited 449 participants from Prolific Academic based on funds available to pay, restricting participation to those currently living in the U.S. and between ages 18 and 26 (n=449; M_{age}=22.29, SD=2.79; 207 female). For the Hungarian sample, we collected the maximum number of participants we could by the end of October 2020 at a Hungarian university (n=480; M_{age}=21.71, SD=3.93; 375 female). The overall sample (n=1057; M_{age}=21.68, SD=3.35; 694 female) leaned slightly liberal (M=3.08, SD=1.31; US M=2.93, SD=1.39; UK M=3.06, SD=1.09; Hungary M=3.24, SD=1.28).

Procedure. The procedure and analyses were nearly identical to our preregistered Study 1 with the exceptions that (1) our recruitment strategies and samples differed as described above, (2) no attention check was included, (3) for Hungarian participants, all materials were translated to Hungarian, and (4) our analyses included country predictors and their interactions.

Results

In three separate regressions, we regressed censoriousness on the experimental manipulations, ideology (centered), a UK dummy variable, a Hungarian dummy variable, and all two-way and three-way interactions.

Leadership. As can be seen in Table 3, there was a significant main effect of the sex condition such that participants supported more censorship of the passage indicating that men evolved to be better leaders than women than the reverse passage. There was no significant main effect of ideology. And the predicted interaction emerged. Neither country dummy variable significantly moderated the condition x ideology interaction, suggesting the patterns were similar across countries. Given these non-significant moderations, we dropped the country variables and their interactions for purposes of testing simple slopes. However, the upcoming categorical results report and display results overall and for each country separately.

More liberal participants supported censorship more when the passage indicated men were better leaders than women than vice versa (b=2.17), t=13.17, p<.001. More conservative participants displayed a similar but weaker pattern (b=1.15), t=6.97, p<.001. In the condition in which women were said to be better leaders, more liberal ideology was associated with more support for censorship (b=-.23), t=-2.75, p=.006. In the condition in which men were said to be better leaders, this was reversed, with more liberal ideology predicting less support for censorship (b=.16), t=2.92, p=.004.

Violence. There was a significant main effect of the religion condition such that participants supported more censorship of the passage arguing that Islam was violent than the passage arguing that Christianity is violent. There was no main effect of ideology. We again found the predicted significant interaction. Neither country dummy variable significantly moderated the condition x ideology interaction, suggesting the patterns were similar across

countries, thus we again dropped the country variables and their interactions for purposes of testing simple slopes.

Consistent with predictions, liberal participants supported censorship more when the passage indicated that Islam was violent than that Christianity was violent (b=1.65), t=4.53, p<.001. More conservative participants displayed the same pattern to a weaker extent (b=.83), t=2.30, p=.022. In the condition in which Islam was said to be violent, more liberal ideology predicted more support for censorship (b=-.17), t=-2.70, p=.007. 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=.14), t=2.54, p=.011.

Intelligence. There was a significant main effect of the race condition such that participants supported more censorship of the passage indicating that White people score higher on intelligence tests than Black people than the identical passage indicating the reverse. There was no main effect of ideology. Here, we observed no significant interaction between the condition and ideology, p=.128, although the pattern was in the expected direction. Again, country did not significantly moderate the (non-significant) condition x ideology interaction, and so we again dropped the country variables and their interactions for purposes of testing simple slopes.

Consistent with predictions, liberal participants supported censorship more when the passage indicated White people score higher on intelligence tests than Black people than vice versa (b=2.04), t=12.26, p<.001. More conservative participants displayed the same pattern to a slightly weaker extent (b=1.34), t=8.04, p<.001. In the condition in which Black people were said to score higher on intelligence tests, there was no effect of ideology on censorship support

(*b*=.03), *t*=0.54, *p*=.591. However, in the condition in which White people were said to score higher, more liberal ideology predicted more support for censorship (*b*=-.23), *t*=-3.70, *p*<.001.

Table 3

Support for censorship regressed on condition, ideology, country, and interactions in Study 2

	β	*t*	*p*	95% CI		semipartial
				Lower	Upper	*r*
Leadership						
Sex Condition	**.31**	**7.39**	**<.001**	**0.86**	**1.49**	**.199**
Ideology	.11	1.95	.052	0.00	0.31	.052
UK Dummy	-.05	-1.27	.206	-0.78	0.17	-.034
Hungary Dummy	-.24	-6.18	<.001	-1.23	-0.63	-.166
Condition x Ideology	**-.19**	**-3.68**	**<.001**	**-0.64**	**-0.20**	**-.099**
Condition x UK	-.05	-1.26	.207	-1.10	0.24	-.034
Condition x Hungary	.24	5.23	<.001	0.73	1.60	.141
UK x Ideology	-.02	-0.37	.709	-0.47	0.32	-.010
Hungary x Ideology	.04	0.81	.417	-0.13	0.30	.022
Condition x UK x Ideology	.03	0.67	.500	-0.39	0.80	.018
Condition x Hungary x Ideology	-.03	-0.55	.583	-0.43	0.24	-.015
Violence						
Religion Condition	**.29**	**6.57**	**<.001**	**0.78**	**1.45**	**.190**
Ideology	.09	1.56	.120	-0.04	0.30	.045
UK Dummy	-.04	-0.96	.336	-0.74	0.25	-.028
Hungary Dummy	-.13	-2.98	.003	-0.79	-0.16	-.086
Condition x Ideology	**-.12**	**-2.07**	**.039**	**-0.49**	**-0.01**	**-.060**
Condition x UK	.01	0.29	.770	-0.60	0.82	.008
Condition x Hungary	.05	0.97	.331	-0.24	0.70	.028
UK x Ideology	-.04	-0.97	.335	-0.67	0.23	-.028
Hungary x Ideology	.04	0.69	.490	-0.15	0.32	.020
Condition x UK x Ideology	.06	1.34	.180	-0.20	1.05	.039
Condition x Hungary x Ideology	-.07	-1.37	.171	-0.59	0.11	-.040
IQ						
Race Condition	**.27**	**6.44**	**<.001**	**0.78**	**1.47**	**.177**
Ideology	-.01	-0.21	.836	-0.20	0.16	-.006
UK Dummy	-.05	-1.24	.215	-0.84	0.19	-.034
Hungary Dummy	-.25	-6.20	<.001	-1.35	-0.70	-.170
Condition x Ideology	**-.08**	**-1.53**	**.128**	**-0.44**	**0.06**	**-.042**
Condition x UK	-.04	-0.86	.393	-1.05	0.41	-.023
Condition x Hungary	.25	5.43	<.001	0.85	1.82	.149
UK x Ideology	.01	0.18	.856	-0.43	0.52	.005
Hungary x Ideology	.07	1.34	.180	-0.08	0.41	.037
Condition x UK x Ideology	.01	0.28	.780	-0.55	0.74	.008
Condition x Hungary x Ideology	-.09	-1.79	.074	-0.70	0.03	-.049

Patterns within countries. Despite that the country dummy variables did not significantly moderate the interactions between condition and ideology, we report the results by country in Table 4. Across all countries, the experimental manipulations always had a significant effect such that young adults were more censorious of passages that portray low-status groups unfavorably than of passages that portray high-status groups unfavorably. The interactions between the experimental manipulations and ideology were in the expected direction for all passages in the U.S., but this pattern was statistically significant for the leadership passage, $p<.001$, and the violence passage, $p=.027$, but not the IQ passage, $p=.103$. In the U.K., the interactions between the experimental manipulations and ideology were in the expected direction only for the leadership passage and to a small degree the IQ passage, and none of the interactions were statistically significant. Recall the U.K. sample was much smaller than the others, so these estimates may be unreliable. In Hungary, the interactions between the experimental manipulations and ideology were significant and in the expected direction across all passages, $ps<.001$. These main effects and interactions are meta-analyzed below.

Table 4

Support for censorship regressed on condition, ideology, and the interaction in Study 2

	β	*t*	*p*	95% CI		semipartial
				Lower	Upper	*r*
U.S.						
Leadership						
Sex Condition	.33	7.56	<.001	0.87	1.48	.330
Ideology	.12	1.99	.047	0.00	0.31	.087
Condition x Ideology	-.23	-3.76	<.001	-0.64	-0.20	-.164
Violence						
Religion Condition	.32	7.05	<.001	0.80	1.42	.314
Ideology	.11	1.67	.095	-0.02	0.29	.075
Condition x Ideology	-.14	-2.22	.027	-0.47	-0.03	-.099
IQ						
Race Condition	.31	6.90	<.001	0.81	1.45	.308
Ideology	-.02	-0.22	.825	-0.19	0.15	-.010
Condition x Ideology	-.11	-1.63	.103	-0.42	0.04	-.073
U.K.						
Leadership						
Sex Condition	.24	2.72	.008	0.20	1.28	.238
Ideology	.06	0.48	.633	-0.25	0.41	.042
Condition x Ideology	-.10	-0.85	.398	-0.72	0.29	-.074
Violence						
Religion Condition	.37	4.43	<.001	0.67	1.76	.372
Ideology	-.06	-0.47	.637	-0.45	0.27	-.040
Condition x Ideology	.08	0.69	.491	-0.33	0.68	.058
IQ						
Race Condition	.23	2.66	.009	0.21	1.41	.234
Ideology	.02	0.12	.904	-0.39	0.44	.011
Condition x Ideology	-.05	-0.36	.723	-0.66	0.46	-.031
Hungary						
Leadership						
Sex Condition	.55	14.36	<.001	2.02	2.66	.547
Ideology	.15	3.15	.002	0.09	0.40	.120
Condition x Ideology	-.19	-3.93	<.001	-0.77	-0.26	-.150
Violence						
Religion Condition	.32	7.38	<.001	0.99	1.70	.318
Ideology	.13	2.38	.018	0.04	0.39	.102
Condition x Ideology	-.20	-3.51	<.001	-0.77	-0.22	-.151

IQ						
Race Condition	.53	13.24	<.001	2.10	2.83	.518
Ideology	.08	1.65	.099	-0.03	0.32	.065
Condition x Ideology	-.18	-3.58	<.001	-0.81	-0.24	-.140

Cross-check and visualization. We again created a categorical ideology variable for Liberals (*n*=661), Moderates (*n*=259), and Conservatives (*n*=135) in twelve 2 (condition) x 3 (categorical ideology) ANOVAs on support for censorship, first collapsed across all countries, and then within each country. These results are reported and displayed in Table 5 and Figure 3, and the statistical significance of all simple effects between conditions within each ideological group overall and by country are reported in Table 6. Below, we summarize the results most central to the present hypotheses.

There were significant main effects of all three experimental manipulations overall, within the U.S., and within Hungary. In the U.K., this was significant for the violence passage, marginal for the IQ passage, and not significant for the leadership passage.

The interactions between the experimental manipulations and ideology were less consistent. These were significant overall for the leadership passage and intelligence passage, but not the violence passage. Within the U.S., the interaction was significant only for the leadership passage. Within the U.K., the interaction was marginal only for the violence passage. Within Hungary, the interaction was significant or marginal for all three passages.

Moving on to simple effects, displayed in Table 6, the experimental manipulation had a significant effect among Liberals overall, within the U.S., within the U.K., and within Hungary for all three passages (consistent with hypotheses). Among Moderates, the experimental manipulation had a significant effect for all three passages overall and within the U.S. and Hungary. Within the UK, the experimental manipulation had no significant effects for

Moderates. Among Conservatives, the experimental manipulations had a significant effect for all three passages overall. For Conservatives within the U.S. and UK, this was significant only for the violence passage, and within Hungary, this was significant only for the leadership and IQ passages.

Overall interpretation. The overall pattern across samples appears consistent with our hypotheses. There were strong main effects for the experimental manipulation such that all young adults across the ideological spectrum and within the U.S., U.K., and Hungary were more censorious of information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably than information that portrays high-status groups unfavorably. This pattern is especially characteristic of young adults who identify as relatively liberal, and it becomes somewhat weaker and more inconsistent among young adults who identify as more conservative. These patterns were tested in the upcoming meta-analyses.

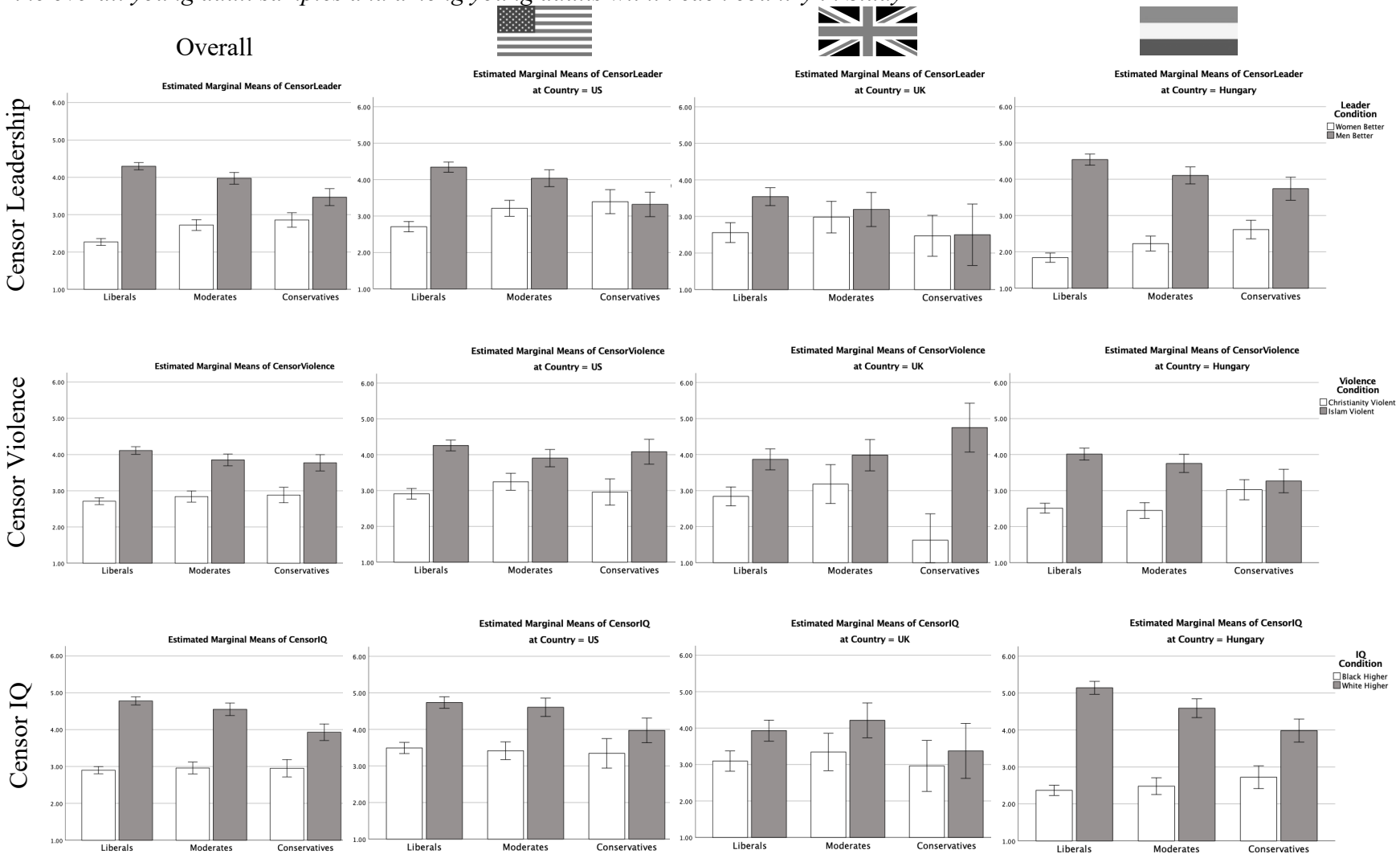
Table 5
ANOVA results overall and within each country with categorical ideology in Study 2

	Overall			US			UK			Hungary		
	F	*p*	η_p^2	*F*	*p*	η_p^2	*F*	*p*	η_p^2	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Leadership												
Sex Condition	99.27	***	.09	16.50	***	.04	1.19	.278	.01	98.19	***	.17
Ideology	0.50	0.605	.00	0.47	.625	.00	0.74	.481	.01	0.01	.992	.00
Condition x Ideology	11.81	***	.02	7.05	**	.03	1.01	.367	.02	6.45	**	.03
Violence												
Religion Condition	65.43	***	.06	27.41	***	.06	21.13	***	.15	22.70	***	.05
Ideology	0.20	.821	.00	0.03	.969	.00	0.36	.701	.01	0.32	.727	.00
Condition x Ideology	1.80	.166	.00	1.72	.181	.01	2.97	+	.05	2.87	+	.01
IQ												
Race Condition	108.25	***	.09	24.04	***	.05	3.07	+	.03	91.13	***	.16
Ideology	2.49	+	.01	1.48	.229	.01	0.59	.556	.01	1.35	.259	.01
Condition x Ideology	3.31	*	.01	0.67	.512	.00	0.10	.910	.00	4.42	*	.02

Note. + p<.100, * p<.050, ** p<.010, *** p<.001

Figure 3

Means and standard errors of support for censorship by experimental conditions and categorical ideology for each passage type in the overall young adult samples and among young adults within each country in Study 2



Note. Full (7-point) censorship scale was truncated for ease of visualization.

Table 6
Significance of simple effects between conditions by ideological group overall and within countries in Study 2

		Overall	US	UK	Hungary
Leadership	Liberals	***	***	**	***
	Moderates	***	**	ns	***
	Conservatives	*	ns	ns	**
Violence	Liberals	***	***	**	***
	Moderates	***	*	ns	***
	Conservatives	**	*	***	ns
IQ	Liberals	***	***	*	***
	Moderates	***	***	ns	***
	Conservatives	**	ns	ns	**

Note. ns p>.100, * p<.050, ** p<.010, *** p<.001

Swearing and gore. Figure 4 displays mean censoriousness among Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives for swearing and gore.[2] As in Study 1, more conservative ideology predicted higher support for censoring swearing, r=.22, p<.001, and gore, r=.17, p<.001. For the swearing passage, there was a significant main effect of country, $F(2, 964)=13.55$, p<.001, and ideology, $F(2, 964)=23.19$, p<.001. There was no interaction between country and ideology, p>.100. In the U.S., Moderates were more censorious than Liberals, p<.001, and marginally more censorious than Conservatives, p=.051, and Liberals and Conservatives did not differ, p=.173. In the UK, Liberals were less censorious than Moderates, p<.001, and marginally less censorious than Conservatives, p=.081, and Moderates and Conservatives did not differ, p=.295. In Hungary, Liberals were less censorious than Moderates, p=.003 and Conservatives, p=.001, and Moderates and Conservatives did not differ, p=.495.

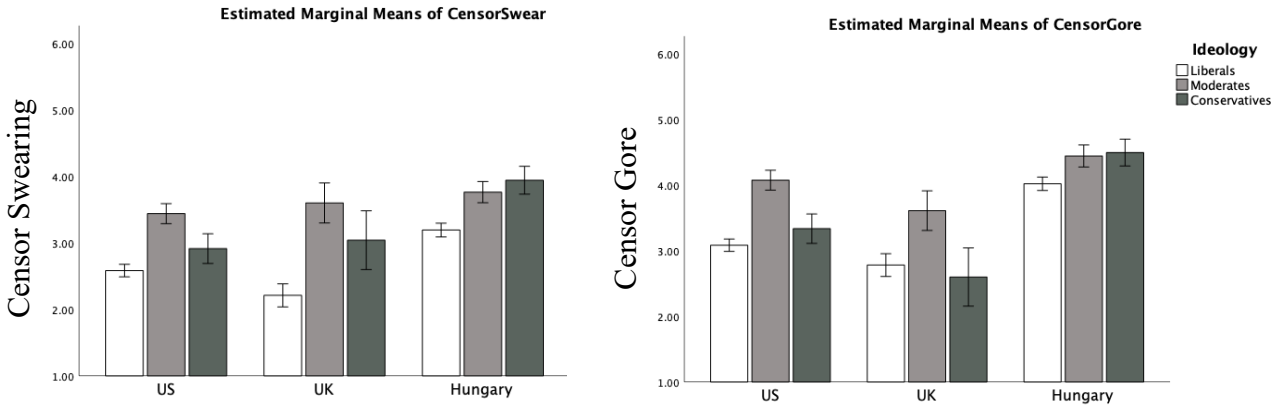
[2]Because of an error, a subset of Hungarian participants were randomly assigned to either swearing or gore rather than receiving both, thus the n is somewhat smaller for these passages than the passages containing experimental manipulations.

For the gore passage, there was a significant main effect of country, $F(2, 962)=29.19$, $p<.001$, and ideology, $F(2, 962)=13.11$, $p<.001$. There was no interaction between country and ideology, $p>.100$. In the U.S., Moderates were more censorious than Liberals, $p<.001$, and Conservatives, $p=.006$, and Liberals and Conservatives did not differ, $p=.300$. In the UK, Moderates were more censorious than Liberals, $p=.018$, and marginally more censorious than Conservatives, $p=.060$, and Liberals and Conservatives did not differ, $p=.700$.

In Hungary, Liberals were less censorious than Moderates, $p=.031$, and Conservatives, $p=.038$, and Moderates and Conservatives did not differ, $p=.843$.

Figure 4

Support for censoring swearing passage and gore passage by ideological group (see top right key) and country in Study 2



Note. Error bars are standard errors.

Mini Metas

As a last step, we conducted six mini meta-analyses on the main effects of each of the three experimental manipulations and their interactions with ideology for each of the three passages.

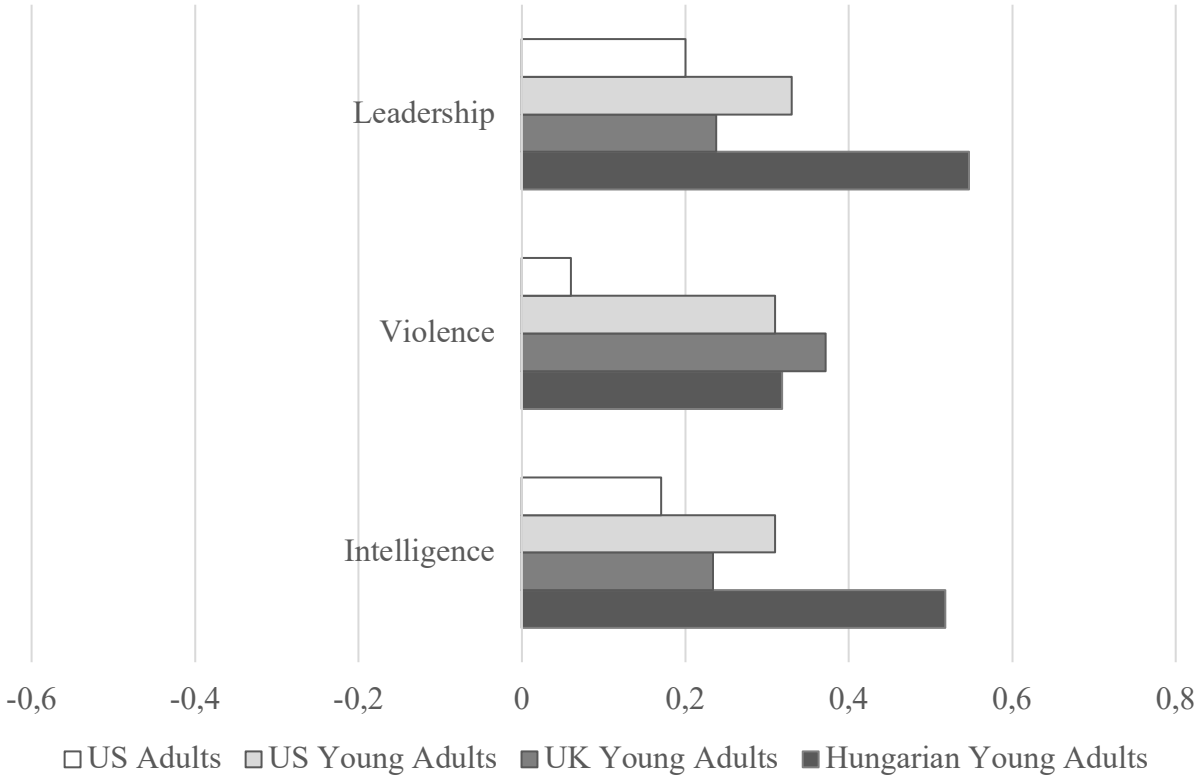
Method

We included one effect size for each of our four samples across Studies 1 and 2 for a total of four effect sizes and 1616 participants per meta-analysis. We used procedures outlined by Goh and colleagues (2016). For both the main effects of the experimental manipulations and the interaction effects between the experimental manipulations and continuous ideology, we used the semipartial *r*s as effect size estimates. The *r* effect sizes were then Fisher's *Z* transformed to r_zs. Because the study methods were identical across samples, we conducted fixed effects meta-analyses, which weight by sample size (see Goh et al., 2016). The r_zs were weighted and averaged using the formula: Weighted $\bar{r}_z = \Sigma([N-3]r_z)/\Sigma(N-3)$. The $\bar{r}_z$s were then converted back to *r* effect sizes. To estimate statistical significance, we used the Stouffer's Z test, in which the *p* values for each effect size were converted to *Z*s, combined using the formula: $Z_{combined} = \Sigma Z / \text{sqrt}(k)$, and then converted back to *p*s.

Results

Main effects. There were significant main effects for the sex condition, $r = .35$, $p < .00001$, the religion condition, $r = .23$, $p < .00001$, and the race condition, $r = .33$, $p < .00001$. Participants were more censorious of information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably than information that portrays high-status groups unfavorably. Figure 5 displays the effect sizes for the main effect of the experimental manipulations by passage and sample.

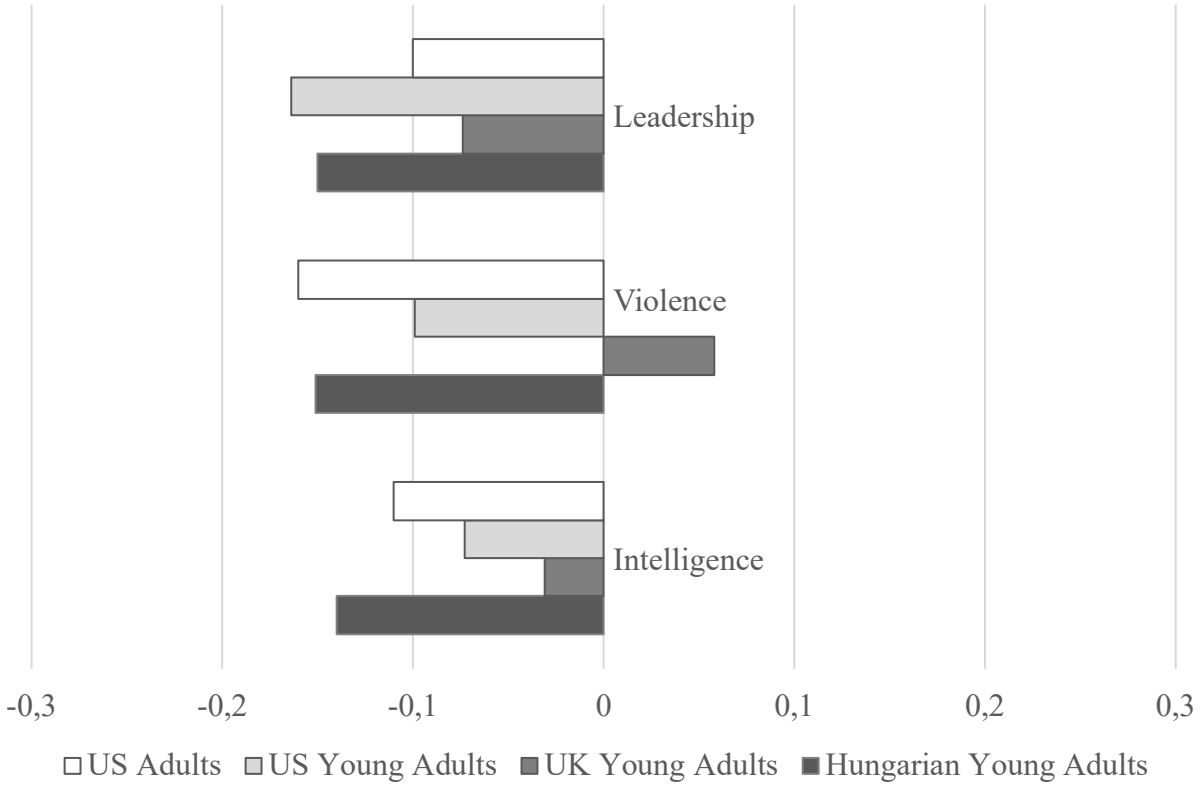
Figure 5
Effect sizes for the main effects of the experimental manipulations within each passage type and by each sample



Note. Positive values indicate that participants were more censorious of information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably than identical information that portrays high-status groups unfavorably.

Interaction effects. There were significant interactions between ideology and the sex condition, r=-.13, p<.00001, between ideology and the religion condition, r=-.12, p=.00002, and between ideology and the race condition, r=-.10, p=.00007. The main effects were larger among participants who identified as more liberal.

Figure 6
Effect sizes for the interaction effects between ideology and each experimental manipulation within each passage type and by sample



Note. Negative values indicate that the experimental manipulations had larger effects as participants were more liberal.

General Discussion

Across four different samples (US adults, and US, UK, and Hungarian young adults) and three domains (sex and leadership ability, religion and violence, and race and IQ scores), we found consistent evidence for our hypothesis that people would be more censorious of information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably than identical information that portrays high-status groups unfavorably. Also as hypothesized, this tendency was stronger as participants identified as more liberal. These patterns were confirmed in meta-analyses across all three passage types, suggesting that information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably likely

constitutes a domain of sensitivity in modern Western societies that provokes desires for censorship—at least on university campuses.

In recent years, scholars and other public intellectuals have become increasingly concerned about censorship on campuses, with numerous media outlets publishing articles on speaker "shout downs" and disinvitations; students protesting books, courses, and faculty members; and in rare cases, professors getting fired or asked to resign for their research or other speech (Clark et al., 2023). Beyond anecdotes, the present work is the first (to our knowledge) to forward and systematically test a specific domain that is likely to be a target of such efforts. Although there are many types of information people may wish to censor for various reasons, one type of information people wish to censor is information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably. Thus, we expect that data, books, scholarly papers, media articles, professors, researchers, teachers, and journalists who forward this sort of information will be subject to particularly high censorship pressure.

We theorized that these desires for censorship would be stronger among Liberals because Liberals are more averse to inequality and more protective of relatively low-status groups compared to Conservatives; and indeed, this is what we found. However, both Moderates and Conservatives demonstrated similar patterns (albeit weaker and less consistent) as Liberals, and particularly among the young adult samples. Young adult Conservatives looked quite similar to adult Liberals, and young adult Liberals looked perhaps like more extreme adult Liberals. We cannot know from the present work whether this is a cohort effect or an age effect, but if the former, we perhaps can expect this particular censorship preference to increase into the future.

The present findings are consistent with a growing body of literature showing that people—but especially Liberals—evaluate information that favors low-status groups more

positively than identical information that favors higher status groups (e.g., Axt et al., 2016; Purser & Harper, 2023; Schaerer et al., 2023; Stewart-Williams et al., 2021; von Hippel & Buss, 2017; Winegard et al., 2023; see also Clark et al., 2019; Clark & Winegard, 2020). Such patterns are consistent with the idea that people interact with information in ways meant to reverse existing hierarchies—but they challenge the conventional wisdom that people hold double standards in ways that *harm* low-status groups and *reinforce* existing hierarchies. Instead, in modern Western societies, at least in recent years, information evaluations seem designed to *help* low-status groups and *eliminate* or possibly even *reverse* existing hierarchies. It seems quite possible that this is a relatively recent phenomenon and that ten, twenty, thirty, or forty+ years ago, people displayed more traditional patterns of discrimination *against* women and racial and religious minorities, but that now, people increasingly display the opposite patterns (see, e.g., Schaerer et al., 2023). Future work should meta-analyze whether group-based evaluative biases have changed in their direction over time.

Recent work has identified similar tendencies such that people (and especially Liberals) "are easier" on relatively low-status groups. For example, people upwardly adjust their evaluations of essays when they learn a writer is female (Jampol & Zayas, 2021), people have more generous acceptance criteria for admitting Black than White candidates to an honor society (Axt et al., 2016); people present less self-competence to Black than White people (Dupree & Fiske, 2019); and people find jokes at the expense of high-status groups funnier than jokes at the expense of low-status groups (Purser & Harper, 2023). Some scholars have suggested that such patterns are patronizing and ultimately could harm the very groups these behaviors are intended to help. Could the same be said of having different standards for censoring information? Does censoring information that appears critical of low-status groups halt opportunities for such

groups to grow, develop thick skin, and improve? Or, as likely intended, does censoring such information prevent disadvantages such as psychological harm and negative stereotypes? We cannot know from the present work whether these tendencies are harmful or helpful or morally justified or not—only that they exist. We hope future work will explore downstream consequences of these kinds of behaviors.

The present results raise potential challenges for universities—which, first and foremost, are meant to pursue truth and generate empirically accurate knowledge through a vigorous clash of ideas. If groups are not identical in all ways, and many characteristics carry some valence, occasionally, empirical reality will cast low-status groups in a relatively negative light compared to high-status groups. This opens the possibility that empirically correct information could be subject to censorship on university campuses—at least in some cases (see, e.g., Clark et al., 2024). A perfect understanding of empirical reality is often a moving target, such that even relevant experts do not always know which information they can reject. In other words, there is no easy and straightforward way to designate which varieties of censorship are excluding incorrect or deleterious information from discourse and which varieties are excluding correct or useful information. Our results support the notion that people may occasionally wish to exclude information for moral reasons rather than purely accuracy reasons (Clark et al., 2023). We suspect some universities will find moral concerns a legitimate basis for excluding information from their libraries and classrooms while others might not—nonetheless, universities likely will have to continue to grapple with this challenge now and into the future.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the present work. First, our studies were all self-report. Although participants may have expressed support for removing books from libraries and

preventing professors from assigning books in classes, they may have overestimated (or underestimated) their boldness in this regard. We hope our results will be helpful for future researchers in testing whether censorship *behaviors* (e.g., protesting the inclusion of books, signing petitions to have scholars fired, etc.) are similarly higher for information that portrays low-status groups unfavorably (and the scholars who forward such information).

Another limitation is that the U.K. sample was very small overall and thus we cannot have full confidence in the results for the U.K. sample. Although patterns among the UK sample were quite similar to the other three samples for the leadership and IQ passages, they were a bit different for the violence passage. Specifically, whereas (similar to the other three samples) they had stronger desires to censor information that suggested that Islam incited violence than information that suggested that Christianity incited violence, this pattern slightly increased as participants became more *conservative*. This might be surprising because higher religiosity is associated with conservatism, and thus more conservative participants are more likely to be Christians themselves. In other words, they *are* the high-status group that is being portrayed unfavorably in the high-status condition, which they have relatively weak desires to censor. Because this sample was small, we are not confident that this pattern would replicate, but we hope interested scholars will explore this possible pattern further.

This raises another limitation—we selected our high-status and low-status groups based on dynamics in the U.S. (and previous work that tested these groups in the U.S. [Winegard et al., 2023]), thus perceptions of what qualifies as a low-status group could be slightly different in other countries. However, like the U.S., Great Britain and Hungary are both majority White (of European ancestry) and Christian (although of different branches of Christianity). European countries share many cultural ideas and patterns, even if they are different from each other as

well. Furthermore, our results (for the most part) were quite similar across all three countries. It is unclear whether this means that the same groups are considered similarly in need of protection in all three countries, or whether, perhaps through the widespread influence of U.S. culture, the sensitivities of the U.S. have spread to other countries in the Western world.

Conclusion

Many scholars have sounded a tocsin about creeping censoriousness in the West, worrying that it may interfere with a Millian marketplace of ideas, in which theories battle each other and the truth prevails after a daunting gauntlet of competition. Our results suggest that scholars and concerned citizens have reason to heed this alarm. Of course, it's important not to exaggerate or to politicize these concerns. All too often, such conversations devolve into claims of right-wing or left-wing malevolence and illiberalism instead of a dispassionate discussion of the underlying data and the challenges that they present. Our goal here is to shift the focus onto the data. To grapple with a problem, scholars first need to understand it. But it is also worth noting that norms about free speech have been a sacred part of Western civilization for hundreds of years and that they, like all norms, are fragile, requiring constant care and vigilance. Those who try to censor speech are rarely malevolent; rather, they legitimately believe that certain kinds of speech and information are dangerous to society. That sense of moral righteousness is perhaps humanity's most noble and most dangerous motivation. And understanding it might be the key to protecting the Millian marketplace for the next generation of scholars and scientists.

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