

Review of: "Support for Campus Censorship"

Scott Liebertz¹

¹ University of South Alabama

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This paper gives some very interesting empirical data to help us think more carefully about the phenomenon of censorship preferences both on campus and in the public at large. I encourage the authors to continue doing research of this kind but with more relevant experimental manipulations using less extreme content of the type that is likely to create controversy. I was surprised, for example, to read that they weren't addressing issues of sexuality and gender identity because they were focusing on issues "we expect to be of concern on university campuses" (p. 7)." Perhaps this was just poorly worded, but it seems quite dubious that the content they chose to test would be substantially more relevant to university students and professors.

In any case, I find that the results of the study are pretty interesting but not necessarily in the way that the authors suppose. They present relatively straightforward hypotheses that people will be more likely to want to censor material that is less favorable to low-status groups, and that this phenomenon will be stronger among liberals. They focus on the extent to which they find mixed support for these, but I think there is a more encouraging story that they largely ignore. As with so many studies, the attention is drawn more to statistical significance than substantive significance. While the statistical tests do show some evidence of what is probably surprising to no one - that liberals are more protective of low-status groups than others - they largely ignore the fact that almost across the board, the preference is for not censoring the material. In the vast majority of conditions in every subsample, the DV measure is less than 4, which I'm assuming is the indifference point on a scale from 1-7. This would seem to indicate there is less preference for censorship than is often claimed, even among the most censorious group of people. To emphasize the point, the experiment seems designed to bias toward preferences for censorship in the content it uses. Respondents are exposed to claims that either men or women have "evolved to be better leaders" than the other, and that either Islam or Christianity is a "violent, warlike religion...that inspires hatred, bigotry, and even terrorism." This is content that appears intentionally hoping to offend more than controversial material that might offend. The study is arguably even more biased toward preferences for censorship in the measure of the DV. In particular, one of the questions used in the index is the extent to which "It would not be good if students read the book." I consider myself a fairly strong proponent of free speech on campus, but I admit that if I were only basing it on these passages, I wouldn't think they were a good use of students' time. That is, I might respond with a high censorship score on this question even if I wouldn't technically censor the material. In this way, I suspect the responses to the DV are biased toward more censorship preferences.

Another aspect of the content of the experimental frames I find questionable is the race and IQ condition. This seems different from the others in that it is more a question of empirical fact whether one race tends to perform better or worse on

intelligence tests. I suspect most, or at least many, respondents are aware that intelligence tests have historically been criticized for showing a racial bias. So how does one respond to the question if they think it is not just stating a controversial opinion but is simply misstating a fact? I fear that this condition is testing a different mechanism - preferences for censoring misinformation versus preferences for censoring controversial interpretations.

I suspect there are also some confounding factors related to the religion and violence condition that the authors need to address in more detail. It is not surprising to me that Conservatives have stronger preferences for censoring material critical of Christianity than Islam. But is this because the hypothesis about low-status groups doesn't hold here, or because Conservatives think of Christians in modern society as being a low-status group? If they are self-selecting into Conservative media, then they are certainly getting that message frequently. What is probably more likely, however, is that Conservatives are more likely to be Christians themselves. This would be consistent with the fact that in the university sample, where respondents are less likely to be religious, there is little discernible difference between Liberals and Conservatives on this question.

I have a couple of suggestions in terms of presentation of the results as well. I would be interested in seeing the DV disaggregated for reasons alluded to above. While these questions may be closely enough related as indicated by statistical tests, they seem different enough that there may be interesting observations to ponder by seeing the separate effects of the experimental conditions on them. The authors could also do a better job showing the interaction effects with marginal effects plots that indicate both the effect of the condition at different levels of ideology as well as the effect of ideology at different conditions (See Berry, Golder, and Milton, 2012).