

Review of: "Support for Campus Censorship"

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I was asked to review this article. My expertise is not such that I can say anything very useful about method or procedure, but I do have a few remarks about the general framework.

Much of what I would have suggested to the authors to consider in a revised version has already been formulated by other reviewers, but perhaps with a somewhat different emphasis.

Perhaps first and foremost, there is the issue of terminology. While the authors are at some pains to recognize and take into account potential differences in geographical context, they do not pay any attention to the historical dimension. The language use can change, sometimes quite rapidly. As noted by others, the terms "liberal," "moderate," and "conservative," but even "right" and "left," can have very different implications not only between countries, but even within them, undergoing complicated conjunctions and contortions. And these can and do evolve over time. I am not familiar with the trajectory of party nomenclature or political terminology in Hungary, but in the Nordic countries, for instance, the term "liberal" is conventionally linked to market liberalism, in contrast to the US, where it is primarily associated with progressivism and, especially today, social justice. Yet the leadership of the "Moderate" party in Sweden (which changed its name from The Right Party in 1969, and was generally conservative on social issues) in the 1990s explicitly endorsed a free-market, feminist, multicultural agenda with generous immigration policies, HGBTQ+ friendly legislation, etc. Today, they have returned to a more conservative position on these issues, while still promoting market solutions to welfare problems. The old Farmer's League party formed alliances with the Social Democrats, changing their name to "the Center" in the 1950s, but has since the 1990s collaborated with the other market liberal parties until the latter formed a government with the populist-right Sweden Democrats after the election in 2022. Denmark's oldest party, "the Left," is now a centrist market-liberal party that has often been in coalitions with more right-wing parties, and more recently embraced a more conservative line with regard to immigration, etc. The point is that different age groups in different areas at different times might have at least somewhat different notions of what it means to be "liberal," "moderate," or "conservative," since many fairly substantial shifts in positions between parties have taken place in relatively swift succession in the last few decades. So one might be curious to know more precisely how the "self-identification" was performed. Were there instructions as to its interpretation (a definition for the purposes of the study), or was it just a label beside a box they checked?

Another terminological question one might ask is how the term "sacred" is to be understood on the first pages in relation to the last ones. In the first case, the authors define sacred concerns or sacred values as "identity-important, protected values that are relatively insensitive to trade-offs". And this sacredness is said to be connected to avoiding or inhibiting

information that can give people a fuller understanding of “empirical reality” insofar as it challenges their moral beliefs and interferes with their capacity to evaluate impartially the information they do take in. There are a couple of issues one might raise with respect to this starting point. To begin with, let us say that one holds “sacred beliefs,” that is, ones that are foundational for a way of life, for instance, kinship relations or attachment to place. In such cases, it is entirely possible to acknowledge information about “empirical reality,” understand it, and in light of one’s most firmly held principles still make choices or judgments other than one might expect from the dominant culture (see, for instance, David Goodhart’s discussion in *The Road to Somewhere*). There is a world of difference between evaluating an action or claim as bad in light of fundamental values and seeking to suppress it. The authors should be prepared to acknowledge this, given what they have to say in their concluding discussion about norms of free speech being a “sacred part” of Western civilization for hundreds of years, which, “like all norms, are fragile, requiring constant care and vigilance.” A “liberal” who is deeply concerned with social equality might make precisely this argument in defense of giving some preferential treatment to certain underprivileged groups (even at the cost of a certain diminution of free speech).

The problem that the authors are studying might well be more a question of degree rather than of kind. Instead of asking the participants to self-identify as “liberal” or “conservative,” they might just as well have asked them to answer the question: What is most important (“sacred”) to you: individual freedom or social equality? That question might have gotten to the heart of the matter without inviting the confounding of categories mentioned above. And what they will likely have found, given the widening disparities since the 1990s, is a tendency toward favoring equality, even if this means tipping the scales, especially among people who name equality as their sacred value. What the authors have actually discovered, one might argue, is that self-identifying as “liberal” or “left” no longer connotes a special concern for freedom as it once did.

A third issue that the authors might consider is their somewhat often-repeated (67 times) but never defined use of the term “information.” It’s not clear that this is an entirely felicitous choice. “Men evolved to be better leaders than women”/“Women evolved to be better leaders than men,” as well as “Islam is violent”/“Christianity is violent,” are not mere bits of “information.” They are comprehensive claims based on theoretical assumptions, methodological choices, empirical procedures, interpretations of the relevant material, and so forth, which one would expect to find in the books in question. In short, what is described in the questions is more like *ideas* rather than information. One might read the responses as displaying a concern that the *idea* that Islam is violent and the *idea* that men evolved to be better leaders than women has been all too common in the canon since time immemorial, while the opposite ideas are a welcome innovation. The stark formulations themselves contribute to the impression that old (bad) wine is being served in new bottles. Hypothetically, the participant responses might just perhaps have been different if the descriptions of the books’ contents were described more neutrally: “Some researchers contend that there is a genetic component to differences in the capacity to lead large groups of people between men and women, and argue further that this difference is or can be relevant in the selection of leaders.” Or: “As Islam/Christianity spread rapidly across the Arabian Peninsula, violent conflicts led to the domination of other people. Religion is still a source of aggression and war, and some have argued that this is particularly the case where Islam/Christianity plays a dominant role.”

Admittedly, wishing to censor a statement of fact, such as “Black people score higher than white people on intelligence tests/White people score higher than Black people on intelligence tests,” on the face of it seems to support suppression of information itself. There are different possible explanations and relevant analyses of genetic group differences in IQ test scores, and they can be used in various ways to support one ideological position or another. But those debates can't get off the ground if material providing the statistical information is not made available to begin with. Still, the authors have stacked the decks by triggering responses on politically sensitive issues that might not have been triggered if the content were described simply as: “Some scholarship argues that there is a genetic component to group differences in IQ scores.”

Finally, in my view, the title is still somewhat misleading, since it implies that the support in question is ~~on~~ the campuses, while the paper is about a plausible connection between the attitudes of young adults toward censorship in society at large and phenomena such as deplatforming at universities. Perhaps something like “Popular Support for Campus Censorship” might be more accurate.

The data provided by the design of the study does tell us something significant, to be sure, about the trends under investigation. But in light of the considerations above, it's difficult to say just what that is.