

TRUMP AND THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how 14 conservative college students managed their political expressions on campus during and after the 2020 U.S. presidential election with Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's theory of the spiral of silence. Through conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with conservative students or alumni from the University of Houston and Texas A&M University, it was found that several participants from the University of Houston felt strong social pressure to censor their political expressions while most of the sample from Texas A&M University did not. Students in the sample reported experiencing social pressure in two primary domains: classrooms and greater campus. This paper contributes to theory by considering the role that institutions can play in peoples' political expressions. Findings suggested a possible association between two-step flow theory and the spiral of silence theory in some outcomes. Affective social interactions with professors and other students, or "episodes" are discussed.

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Political polarization in the United States remains at some of the highest levels in history, with divisions between members of the two dominant parties, Democrats and Republicans, persisting through several presidential administrations (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). At the fore of contemporary political turmoil stands former President Donald Trump, whose rise to office in 2016 ignited a firestorm of controversy. Trump's brazen remarks on foreign policy, his opponents, and the media fit within a typology of right-wing populism that has resurged internationally since before 2016 (Norris, 2019). Even after Trump's loss to President Joe Biden during the 2020 election and permanent suspensions from Facebook and Twitter following the January 6th 2021 Capitol riot, political divisions between Americans persist (Green, 2021).

Trump's repeated hints at running again in 2024 and his enduring popularity within the Republican Party (Roche, 2021) make him a viable candidate in the next bid for the White House. In addition, the possibility of another Trump presidency may warrant further study of his constituents, as the U.S. 2016 and 2020 presidential elections were subject to atypical electorate behaviors. Trademarks of his previous elections and campaigns included large discrepancies in polling data (Dickie, 2020) and repeated references to his base as the "silent majority" (Holman, 2019), implicating mass swaths of latent supporters. The silent majority has implications in ideological suppression, similar to the notion of "cancel culture," which refers to silencing alternative perspectives, especially on college campuses (Norris, 2021). Such phenomena constituted this study's inspiration and theoretical applications—specifically, conservative college students' political expressions on university campuses with Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's theory of the spiral of silence (1974).

The spiral of silence investigates ideological minorities (real or perceived), positing that those who think their opinions are not shared by the dominant group silence themselves to avoid

being socially isolated (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Since first introduced in the 1970s, the spiral of silence has been internationally validated (Donsbach, 2008) and modified to include other researchers' findings, and even updates from Noelle-Neumann herself (1977; 1993; 1995). Some of these updates include the potentially important roles that friends, family, and social structures (such as institutions) can play in influencing people's decisions to express their opinions or self-censor. The inclusion of personal influences modifies the original assumption that public opinion is what pressures people into quietude. Subsequently, there is room for debate about whether micro (close friends, family) or macro (the public, academic institutions) level factors are more responsible for influencing people's willingness to address an issue. Thus, this thesis aimed to develop such findings by exploring conservatives' political expressions within the contexts of college campuses.

Campus clashes pertaining to free speech and political activism stretch back several decades, with political election cycles routinely stirring up controversy (Behrent, 2019). However, instances of students attempting to stifle speech and commit violence against those they disagree with have occurred regularly through Trump's presidency (Chemerinsky, 2017). In addition, polling data suggests that modern college students increasingly view offensive statements or ideas as the end of a person's right to self-expression (Behrent, 2019). Such episodes of violence and cultural shifts regarding intellectual sovereignty make campuses an appropriate venue for exploring the spiral of silence.

In synthesizing the current standing of widespread political polarization, Trump's potential rerun in 2024, consistently high polling errors during the 2016 and 2020 elections, and college campuses as bases of ideological contention, in this thesis, I aimed to explore how conservative college students managed their political expressions at the University of Houston

and Texas A&M University during and after the 2020 U.S. presidential election. I utilized Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory to investigate whether Trump-era Republican identity was controversial enough to promote self-censorship, and whether college campuses exerted institutional opinion pressures on students. In this study, I conceptualized social contexts as belonging to three broad categories—reference groups (friends and family), institutional or field opinion (schools, corporations, and larger organizations), and public opinion (the broadest, most abstract level), with a focus on institutional or field opinions. In addition, I conceptualized issues as those which corresponded to an individual's identity (as exemplified by conservatives and liberals) and those in which people were interested (signified by naming a matter of importance).

To investigate this thesis, I conducted 14 in-depth interviews with conservative students or alumni from the University of Houston and Texas A&M University. These schools were chosen due to their opposing political orientations. Following an interview guide, I asked participants questions about their political expressions on campus, the issues that were most important to them, and how they perceived the social climates at their schools. Interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed for emergent themes and codes. Findings suggested that the University of Houston sample generally experienced the spiral of silence while the Texas A&M sample did not. Students and alumni from UH reported feeling social pressure to self-censor their conservative views in two primary contexts: classrooms and the greater campus. However, those in the sample who experienced the spiral of silence were more likely to censor their political views in the classroom for fear of academic retribution from professors. Furthermore, the UH samples' experiences implied that identifying as a conservative on campus was sometimes controversial in itself, making right-wing political identification in the Trump-era a potentially sufficient means for studying the spiral of silence. This may have been due to the

UH sample ascribing high importance to contentious topics like abortion, immigration, and what some perceived to be rapid changes in American culture. As a qualitative study, this thesis only covers the lived experiences of the 14 students or alumni who agreed to participate in the project, which mostly consisted of politically engaged conservatives. As such, this paper does not describe the general experiences of Republican-leaning students at either institution. However, the accounts rendered in this thesis offer a glimpse at a sub-population that has yet to be studied extensively.

This thesis aimed to contribute to conversations surrounding the spiral of silence's influence factors (specifically on college campuses) while considering conservative identity during the Trump-era as a potentially controversial construct. This thesis begins with an overview of the spiral of silence theory, followed by some of its criticisms and developments, and provides frameworks for regarding the university as an institution with its own opinion climate and Trump-era conservatism as a potentially contentious matter. I then describe the current state of American political partisanship, former President Donald Trump's role in it, and how political party affiliation may be conducive to the spiral of silence. Furthermore, I identify college campuses as venues of ideological contention and describe the dynamics between the political left and right wings concerning higher education. Next, I explore the spiral of silence by analyzing the on-campus political expressions of 14 Republican/conservative students who attended conservative and liberal colleges. Finally, I describe the method used, and structure the findings around the three main research questions of this study. I conclude by discussing how universities can promote ideological suppression and suggest that two-step flow theory may have implications in the spiral of silence.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

There are, generally, two sides to every story—plaintiffs and defendants, oppressors and their victims, those who espouse their convictions with alacrity, and others who whisper. Within the vast realm of dichotomies, perhaps one of the most important among them lies in perception, or that which lends itself to awareness, and that which does not. In the social sciences, such concepts merge to form a theory of public opinion, otherwise known as the spiral of silence. The spiral of silence references how people come to repress their positions under the pressure of public opinion. Its societal implications are vast, permeating through the prevailing narratives of the day in pursuit of a more visceral, if unpopular, personal truth.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the spiral of silence theory, followed by a brief outline of its evolution, and concludes with a few critiques of the theory's assumptions. In doing so, I situate the spiral of silence as a theory with growing emphasis on the influence of social contexts. I explore findings that suggest people may regard the sentiments of friends, family, and colleagues more than the general populace, or "public opinion." Merriam-Webster, a popular American dictionary, defines public opinion as "the predominant attitude of a community: the collective will of the people; a summation of public expression regarding a specific issue or event" (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 2021). With an overarching definition of the subject in place, I move to a more nuanced interpretation of how public opinion can function as an ideological suppressant—a theory of the spiral of silence.

1.1 The Spiral of Silence: An Overview

This section outlines the spiral of silence as initially conceived by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, discusses some of the more salient criticisms against the theory, and defends the spiral

of silence as a relevant and appropriate framework for this study. Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory (1974) posits that individuals who perceive themselves as minority opinion holders suppress or change their views for fear of being socially isolated. This theory elaborates on the vulnerability people can experience while holding controversial beliefs and suggests that lay-people respond to such circumstances passively when they are in the minority. For instance, this occurs when a student does not vocalize a counter opinion when he/she believes the class disagrees with them, or pretends to support a political candidate in the presence of their family (which also supports said candidate), but votes for that candidate's opponent on election day. Since first proposed by Noelle-Neumann in 1974, the spiral of silence has also evolved to include factors that contribute to 'bucking' or thwarting its effects.

Noelle-Neumann originally argued that people are endowed with a "quasi-statistical organ" (1974, p. 44), or sense, that functions as a popularity barometer by assessing social environments (McQuail, 1994; Baldwin et al., 2004) for the distribution, strength, urgency, and future success viewpoints will have in social settings (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Furthermore, the theory holds that individuals can distinguish between static and changing opinion fields (Noelle-Neumann, 1977) such that those who deem their positions as dominant or gaining traction are more likely to voice their opinions, while those in minority or declining opinion camps will not. Thus, as dominant and recessive groups set into play, a spiral forms, resulting in a cumulative polarity that develops over time. For example, if an individual or group supports candidate A, but a louder or larger group in the same space supports candidate B, then the spiral of silence holds that candidate A supporters are likely to fall silent, while candidate B supporters grow louder and more assertive. The spiral's self-reinforcing nature implies totalitarian outcomes, where minority views are either wholly converted to the mainstream ideology or resigned to silence (Noelle-

Neumann & Peterson, 2004). However, ideological unification remains unlikely for several reasons.

Early public opinion scholars, including Alexis de Tocqueville, Ferdinand Tonnies, James Bryce, and Floyd Allport, assumed popular sentiments wielded compulsory power over outsiders (Hucker, 2018). Some of their works inspired Noelle-Neumann's original "strong majority effects" conception of the spiral of silence theory. However, others reported contradictory results. In the early 1950s, a conformity experiment by Solomon Asch (1956) found that around a fifth of his participants' views (on clear matters of fact) remained unshakeable, even in the face of overwhelming opposition. He suggested this minority had already been ousted by mainstream society and therefore had nothing to lose by contradicting it. An example of ideological resistance might include a topic like racism in the United States, where overt claims to racial superiority remain outside of mainstream conversations but are still present in groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which continue to espouse claims of "white power" despite the group having little public support.

Building on Asch's work, Noelle-Neumann (1974) referred to these groups as "hard cores" (p. 48) or groups who are immune to social pressures and maintain their positions regardless of the opinion climate. Hard cores are said to source their resilience from morality—a central element of the spiral of silence's framework (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Scheufele & Moy, 2000). Some scholars suggest that the spiral of silence *only* works within the bounds of moral or value-laden topics (Noelle-Neumann, 1985; Scheufele, 2008), where people perceive a strong sense of right and wrong and suspect that "those who think differently are not merely stupid, but bad" (Noelle-Neumann & Peterson, 2004, p.349). As such, strong convictions like religious beliefs, ingrained cultural practices, and social justice causes may be ripe issues for promoting

the spiral of silence. Demographic variables may also account for differences in individuals' willingness to express themselves, as men, younger people (Scheufele & Moy, 2000), and the middle and upper classes are considered more outspoken (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Moy et al., 2001) than other groups.

Contests over ideological superiority, or what society 'should' believe, often place public opinion as an achievement of the majority. However, fluctuations between groups' willingness to express themselves occasionally results in a paradox whereby an outspoken minority appears ideologically dominant. In such cases, larger groups that are underrepresented compose "silent majorities" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 46). Silent majorities refer to mass (or majority) populations that do not express their positions openly. The existence of silent majorities has been empirically proven (Noelle-Neumann, 1995) and remains historically-rooted in American politics, with usage by U.S. presidents Calvin Coolidge, Richard Nixon, and Donald Trump (Holman, 2019). The term offers politicians a vehicle for invoking support for their ideas or movements, often in the absence of visible evidence. As a rhetorical device immune to verification, the silent majority pits one group against another by implicating a "loud minority" as its opposite. Here, a contrast is drawn between numerically dominant and recessive ideological groups as distinct entities in direct competition with each other.

In a similar but separate phenomenon, isolation between subgroups (such as student groups or classes) and their broader counterparts (as in schools and states) can result in a "dual climate of opinion" (Scheufele, 2008) where opposing groups simultaneously perceive their views as being in the majority. For example, an American Democratic party student group in Houston, Texas, may perceive that their party has enough support to outvote Republicans on election day. In contrast, rural Republican student groups may think they can outvote Democrats,

who may have little representation in rural areas. In this hypothetical scenario, each group hinges its position on the support it receives from its relative surroundings, forming insulated opinion climates that allow both groups to suppose their dominance simultaneously. This phenomenon, otherwise known as a “dual climate of opinion,” may contribute to expectational upsets during political elections when assessing the true distribution of ideas can be difficult.

Scholarly work has expanded the dual climate of opinion to include “micro-climates” (Moy et al., 2001) or various contexts that harbor their own prevailing opinions. The inclusion of multiple independent belief spheres challenges the top-down, strong public opinion model assumed in Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) earlier theoretical references by delineating power to reference (or smaller) influence groups (Clemente & Roulet, 2015). This idea was exemplified early on by Asch’s (1956) finding that a single nonconformist was enough to inspire others to reject majority viewpoints, subsequently shifting focus to smaller, more intimate social references like family and friends. These smaller groups, or microclimate opinion spheres (Moy et al., 2001), can also apply to corporations, universities, and practically any social domain an individual can occupy.

These domains, and the prevailing opinions of their inhabitants, function collectively to constitute a general basis of public opinion. Noelle-Neumann defines public opinion as controversial positions that individuals can express in public without fear of being socially isolated (1977, p. 145). Others have taken a different approach. Hans Speier, a prominent German-American sociologist during the mid-twentieth century (Noelle-Neumann, 1995, p. 35), suggested:

Let us understand by public opinion, opinions on matters of concern to the nation freely and publicly expressed by men outside the government who claim a right that their

opinions should influence or determine the actions, personnel, or structure of their government (Speier, 1950, p. 376).

From Speier's perspective, public opinion holds political implications directly rooted in democratic power—an enduring sentiment among scholars in the social sciences.

In fact, Noelle-Neumann originally developed the spiral of silence to explain the outcome of the 1965 Federal Republic of Germany election, where polls vastly underestimated voter turnout for the Christian Democrats, who won the election by a significant margin, despite the public anticipating a close race with the Social Democratic Party (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1977). Subsequently, the theory expounded on the fluid nature of public opinion and the behavior change associated with prognostication. It suggests that if minority opinion holders suspect future dominance—through the quasi-statistical organ—then they become more likely to voice their positions to a waning majority in the hopes of advancing a factional opinion to a public one (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). We witness such transfers of power during political elections, when nominees succeed their predecessors, often reinstating the ideals of an opposing party. At the end of their appointed terms, politicians typically step down or are voted out of office, clearing the way for a new leader and marking the end of a political cycle. In democratic societies, this process often reflects the transient will of the majority.

The oscillations of public opinion formation, domination, sustenance, and recession (as observed in political cycles) can stem from individuals' observations of their surroundings and the mass media (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In accord with an evolving academic consensus on media effects during the 1970s, Noelle-Neumann leaped in asserting, "the mass media have to be seen as creating public opinion: they provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity, or with acquiescence, or with silence" (1974, p.51). Scholars often see this

environmental pressure as the result of media *ubiquity*, *consonance*, and *cumulation* (Scheufele, 2008, Baran & Davis, 2015), or the aggregation of widespread sources, echoing similar messages, over an extended period of time.

Since the spiral of silence contains individual and societal level implications, it is widely recognized as a micro *and* macro level theory, linking opinion expression or repression to larger currents in society's social fabric (Scheufele, 2008). Scheufele and Moy (2000) draw its connection to mass society theory as both theories emphasize the role of mass media in shaping people's subjective realities. In a similar vein, Perry (2001) posits that the spiral of silence resembles Gerbner's cultivation model in its emphasis on mass-media reinforcement effects, as both frameworks focus on the effective cumulation of mass media messages. While the spiral of silence bears media-centric properties, the theory ultimately converges elements of sociology and mass communication to form a broad framework that has been applied and critiqued for five decades.

1.2 Critiques of the Spiral of Silence

The spiral of silence has been widely criticized since its introduction in the 1970s. Recent challenges to the theory include its high emphasis on the power of public opinion, the questionable accuracy of the quasi-statistical sense, its assumption of universal human nature, whether "loud minorities" might be a more worthy topic, and methodological issues with its validation. I will present summaries for each of these arguments in turn. However, I argue at the end of this section that despite its criticisms, the spiral of silence remains an appropriate framework for studying U.S. politics due to its macro and micro-level implications regarding polarizing issues.

The most central critique of the spiral of silence is its assumption that public opinion provides ultimate social pressure. For example, Clemente and Roulet (2015) identify small groups and organizations as possessing “field” opinions formed at the institutional level. Their findings effectively break public opinion into separate entities, suggesting that people may be unable to distinguish between public and localized (or field) opinions, and that peoples’ perceptions may reflect more on their immediate surroundings than the general public, as Noelle-Neumann suggests. I return to the notion of “field opinions” later in this chapter and position the concept relative to reference groups and public opinion. Similarly, Moy and colleagues (2001) found that people’s consonance with friends and family was *more* important than their perceptions of the public in determining whether individuals would speak out. Contrary to the spiral of silence’s original precept, reference groups may surpass public opinion as a primary influencer while simultaneously insulating those who reject or resist prevailing opinion climates (Scheufele, 2008). This challenge regarding the bottom-up approach (or smaller groups having more influence than larger ones) is a central component of this study’s framework and can further the theory’s development rather than discredit it.

Scheufele (2008) also points out that while the quasi-statistical sense that Noelle-Neumann introduced in her early works may prove accurate in many cases, it is ultimately an instrument of individual perception, and therefore subject to human error. In other words, just because someone *thinks* the climate of opinion is for or against them does not necessarily make it so. Human error in gauging the opinion climate may lead minority opinion holders to speak out or dominant groups to self-silence. However, Scheufele and Moy (2000) argue that the discrepancy between perception and reality is often slim enough—within the context of the spiral of silence—to cease being an issue. In addition, Donsbach (2008) asserts that people are

generally accurate in their estimations of opinion climates, making the human error criticism mostly superficial.

Cultural differences may also account for the varying degrees of applicability the spiral of silence has within specific contexts. Noelle-Neumann's (1974) early work on the spiral of silence was based on survey data in which she asked whether people traveling on a train with a stranger would be willing to disclose their opinions on controversial subjects. The customs and courtesies passengers are expected to follow on a train vary drastically among and within many countries. For example, in the United States, a cordial greeting may be standard fare on Montana's Empire Builder but inappropriate on a New York City Subway. Similarly, differences might exist between collectivistic and individualistic societies (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Huang, 2005) such that individuals' willingness to disclose sensitive information can vary according to social norms, with fear of isolation generally more prevalent among East Asians than Westerners (Kim & Markman, 2006). Nevertheless, the spiral of silence has been validated in various Eastern and Western contexts, with most literature in both regions at least partially supporting the theory (Willnat et al., 2002; Donsbach, 2008; Matthes et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the spiral of silence has been criticized for its focus on the repressed. Moscovici (1991) asserts that we should lend less credence to silent majorities due to their transformative latency concerning public opinion. Instead, he suggests shifting our focus to loud minorities, which possess a greater role in public opinion formation (Moscovici, 1991). Given that marginalized/silenced groups remain the spiral of silence's primary focus, whether they are in the majority or minority camps, such a suggestion essentially flips the theory on its head. This idea recognizes the marginalized as peripheral players on the public opinion stage, suggesting we would do better to focus on: those who believe they can make a difference, are certain that they

are right about an issue, or have a keen interest in the subject (politics, for example), and are likely to speak out regardless of the opinion climate (Lasorsa, 1991). However, people who suppress their opinions can occupy a considerable portion of the electorate in democratic societies, making the silenced worthy of consideration.

Finally, there have also been methodological critiques of the spiral of silence. For instance, Glynn, Hayes, and Shanahan (1997) called for more observatory work on the theory (p. 461), as the vast majority of extant research on public opinion consists of survey data (Blumer, 1948; Lasorsa, 1991; Scheufele & Moy, 2000) that addresses contexts and issues hypothetically. Concerns about survey methodology center around the lack of applied psychological states and social pressure on participants, which putatively fosters spiral of silence effects (Glynn et al., 1997). In other words, survey participants base their answers on imagined scenarios that may not reflect their actual behavior in a given situation. Explicit calls to test the spiral of silence with surveys (Noelle-Neumann & Peterson, 2004) may limit the development of more nuanced experiments and interpretations. Furthermore, the limited amount of qualitative research (Ryan, 2011; Weerakkody, 2002; Neubam, 2016; Malaspina, 2014; Journell, 2017) regarding the theory reflects a methodological tradition that potentially excludes ideas, factors, and influences that may be acquired more readily through open-ended responses, such as interviews.

These criticisms exist within a broader body of studies that have found inconsistent and even counter-results for the spiral of silence (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). For example, Glynn, Hayes, and Shanahan's (1997) meta-analysis of the spiral of silence studies conducted across six countries found little support for the notion that "willingness to express opinions is influenced by perceived support for those opinions" (p. 461). However, Matthes and colleagues' (2018) even larger meta-analysis found a strong significant relationship between opinion expression and

opinion climate. Other experiments—such as Huang’s (2005) comparative study of Taiwan and the United States—posit that operational variables, such as fear of isolation, are not necessarily universal. Huang (2005) revealed that the desire to maintain harmony drove support for the spiral of silence in Taiwan but found no theoretical support in the United States. However, such studies are outliers within the vast landscape of spiral of silence literature, with most works at least partially supporting the theory (Donsbach, 2008).

Despite its shortcomings, the spiral of silence has been internationally validated (Donsbach, 2008) and serves as an appropriate framework for studying relationships between perceptions and behavior due to its micro and macroscopic implications. Contributions to the theory, including the growing emphasis on reference groups and field opinions, allow for more nuanced interpretations of the social settings or contexts that contribute to reinforcing and silencing individuals—a cornerstone of this study. Furthermore, the potential inaccuracy of the quasi-statistical sense bears little weight on the theory’s validity, given that most people are reasonably accurate in their perceptions of their opinion climates (Donsbach, 2008). Other criticisms regarding cultural differences, such as contrasts between Eastern and Western cultures, serve as important considerations for domestic and international studies but do not necessarily threaten works that focus on more localized settings, where cultural frameworks may not vary as much. In addition, Moscovici’s (1991) suggestion that we should pay less attention to silent majorities might refocus others who are interested in public opinion formation. However, silenced groups possess electoral power in democratic societies, making them important matters of political and academic inquiry. Finally, past studies’ reliance on hypothetical responses have prompted criticism which suggests that future studies should focus on real-life scenarios, which

this study intends to do. On the whole, the spiral of silence remains a widely criticized but practical theory of public opinion and an appropriate fit for this study.

1.3 Spiral of Silence: Issue Factors and Contexts

So far, I have introduced the spiral of silence theory, some of its criticisms, and explained why the theory is still valid and appropriate. Next, I elaborate on how morally-laden issues and layered contexts pertain to the spiral of silence. I begin by outlining issues that scholars have focused on in the past while arguing for the distinction of topics that pertain to peoples' identities and interests. I also explore the roles of reference groups, institutional/field spaces, and general public opinion as contextual influences. I then present conceptual frameworks for issues and contexts, respectively, which underpin the basis of this study. In doing so, I aim to foster a more thorough account of the theory's implications at the socio-contextual level while building on others' work in the field.

It is important to note that not all issues can produce a spiral of silence. Studies have shown that the theory requires issues with a moral component to function (Kim, 2012; Scheufele, 2008; Baldwin et al., 2004; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). This may be because morally-charged issues possess the ability to divide people and reinforce attitudes in ways that trivial disputes do not. Examples of such issues include interracial marriage, equal rights for homosexuals (Willnat et al., 2002), children with HIV/AIDS having the right to attend public schools (Gonzenbach & Stevenson, 1994), partial-birth abortion, and gun rights (Baldwin et al., 2004) to name a few. It may be helpful to view issues as constituting an ideological venue, with morality dictating which side an individual takes and the extent of their involvement. Thus, studies on the spiral of silence utilize "hot button" or controversial issues as vehicles of study.

The contexts that accompany such issues often consist of *who* influences opinion expressions, *where* the action takes place, and *when* such manifestations occur. One of the aims of this study is to dissect how social environments can assert organic influences, perhaps expanding public opinion into multiple spheres and sociological venues. Therefore, it is essential to consider not only the subject of debate in studying the spiral of silence but also the contexts surrounding it. Together, issues and contexts constitute the bulk of the spiral of silences' exploratory factors (or what the theory aims to explain), with theoretical assumptions standing in for *how* groups are brought to quietude (perceiving that they are in the minority) and *why* (fear of isolation).

1.3.1 *Issues, Identity, and Involvement*

Noelle-Neumann's (1974) original experiment surveyed participants about their willingness to discuss controversial issues like abortion, capital punishment, and corporal punishment for children during a hypothetical multi-hour train ride. Since then, scholars have followed in utilizing controversial issues to investigate popular points of contention that may produce spirals of silence. For instance, Miyata and colleagues (2015) investigated people's use of Twitter in Japan to express their positions on nuclear power—a subject of much debate since the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011. In the United States, Moy and colleagues (2001) investigated the spiral of silence with regard to affirmative action, affirming the spiral's existence while also finding that friends and family had greater influences over participants' willingness to speak out than society at large. Beyond a theoretical basis, these studies share culturally relevant and morally-charged topics with no definitive solutions—a prerequisite for forming a spiral of silence.

Exploring a more nuanced angle, Bowen and Blackmon (2003) studied the role of diversity in structured workplaces and how active concealment (or silencing) of an ‘invisible’ identity—in their case, homosexuality—can be detrimental to organizational performance, including group cohesion, productivity, and turnover. The intertwining of issues and identity, such as race and gender, presents a novel area for study, particularly among identities that are often invisible, i.e., political affiliation, religion, and sexual orientation, to name a few. This is not unlike the rising popularity of identity politics, which refers to “the specific processes that emerge when a movement’s identity is, to some extent, externally imposed and forms part of the basis for grievances” (Bernstein, 2005). Put differently:

With all these identities accumulating on top of each other, partisanship has become a kind of “mega-identity,” as political scientist Lilliana Mason argues, with party identification standing for much, much more. In fact, it’s reached the point that when you meet somebody, you can immediately size them up as a “Trump voter” or a “Biden Voter.” That kind of easy stereotyping leads us to see the other party as distant and different. And typically, things that are distant and different are also more threatening (Drutman, 2020).

For those facing controversial topics that also subsume personal identifiers, the spiral of silence may be two-fold. In such instances, the issues subjected to contestation denote not only what a person *thinks* but who they *are*. In essence, one may argue that identity-topics are fundamentally distinct relative to their less visceral counterparts.

Similarly, it has been suggested that people’s interest in an issue may affect their decision to speak out, even more than their demographic attributes (Lasorsa, 1991; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). For example, Lasorsa’s (1991) study regarding a series of participant-sourced current

issues (ranging from the economy to AIDS) found that those who were interested in politics, perceived they could make a difference, or were certain their position was correct tended to speak out no matter the opinion climate. This subject closely resembles that of “issue involvement,” which focuses on people’s attitudinal positions and their susceptibility to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Findings on this front are often mixed, with the strength and complexity of positive and negative messages eliciting a great range of responses (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). However, if a person’s interests affect their susceptibility to the spiral of silence, then issue engagement may be an underdeveloped area within the theory. In addition, it may be that people who possess controversial identities are intrinsically interested in such matters (given a personal stake in the subject), marking a possible overlap between identities and interests.

In conclusion, there are several issue-attributes that pertain to the spiral of silence—those that possess a moral component, identity-laden topics, and issues where individuals possess an active interest. The literature suggests that interested parties are likely to speak out regardless of the opinion climate (Lasorsa, 1991), arguably making those with “active-interest issues” less susceptible to the spiral of silence than individuals facing ‘low-interest issues.’ In a similar vein, issues pertaining to people’s identities, such as sexual orientation, race, and political party membership, may drive higher interest levels among those who identify with said groups versus those who do not. Given this study’s focus on Republican/conservative students, the sample mostly belonged to the upper left quadrant of the Individual-Level Issues Model illustrated in Figure 1.1.

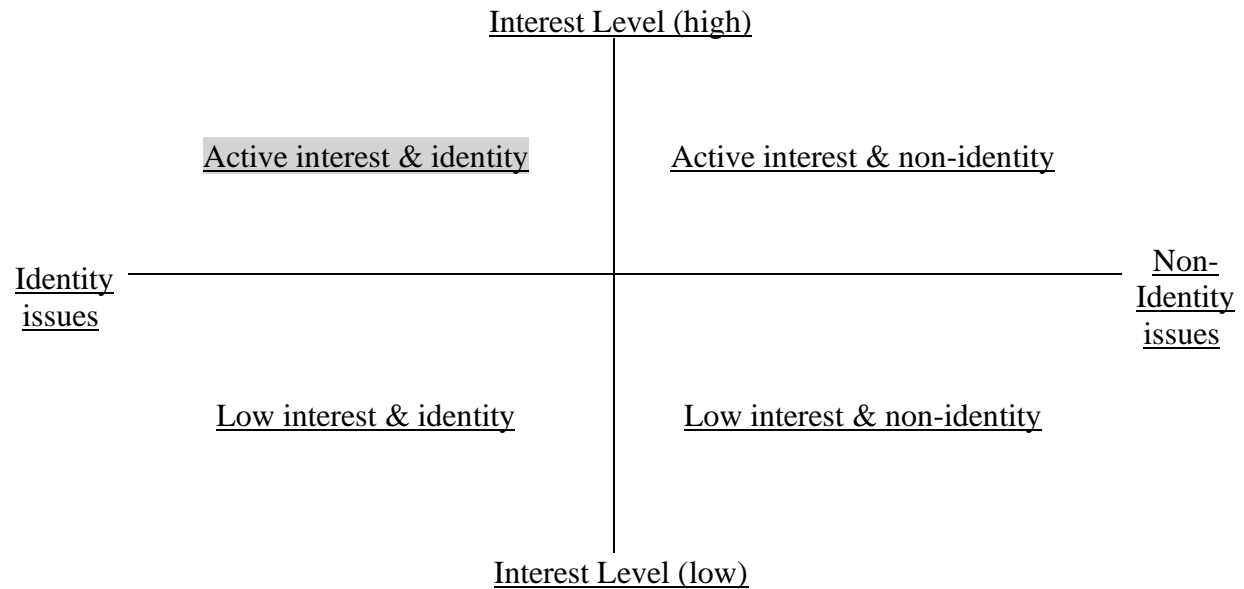


Figure 1.1. An Individual-Level Issues Model

The issues framework above categorizes peoples' relationships to matters into four primary groups. The upper quadrants denote people with active interest, while the lower quadrants indicate non-interest. Similarly, quadrants on the left stand for those who identify with the subject, while those on the right represent those who do not. An example might include the subject of Republican political activism in the United States. In this instance, the model sorts politically active Republicans (active interest and identity); Republicans who are not politically active (low interest and identity); politically active people who do not identify with any political party (active interest and non-identity), and people who are not politically active and do not identify with any political party (low interest and non-identity).

1.3.2 Contexts

Contextual developments regarding the spiral of silence boil down to diversification. For instance, Donsbach (2008) challenged Noelle-Neumann's references to a single or unified public

opinion while Clemente and Routlet (2015) emphasized the importance of “field” or “institutional” (i.e., schools or workplaces) level influences. The push to expand applicable contexts means that home, neighborhood, city, and state domains (and practically any social environment an individual can occupy) may have the potential to harbor different “public” opinions, and therefore their own spirals of silence. Several studies (Miyata et al., 2015; Moy et al., 2001) have found that sentiments among peoples’ interpersonal relationships held more sway on a persons’ decision to express themselves in public than society at large. Similarly, it has been found that people typically fear being excluded from their close social circles more than the general populace (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). This suggests that reference groups may play a prominent role in influencing an individual’s decision to speak out. Given the potential for social actors and locations to collectively produce institutional leverage, it follows that opinions must be considered within their respective environments.

At the broadest level, public opinion generally constitutes the most abstract reference to societal consensus. This often includes larger domains that transcend an individual’s immediate surroundings, such as city, state, and national settings. Due to its transcendent nature, public opinion exists beyond localized opinion spheres, encompassing the largest share of people and places, including reference groups and institutional or “field” level opinion circles. Early studies regarded public opinion as the pinnacle of social power and the critical driver in pressuring minority opinion groups into silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). However, other research suggests that public opinion may assume a more peripheral or less influential tier on the social pressure hierarchy. I represent this in Figure 1.2.

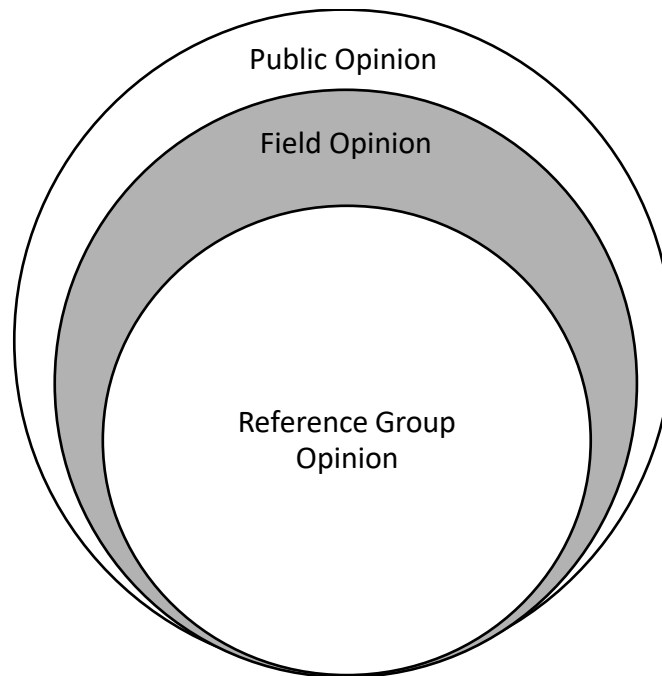


Figure 1.2. A Social Contexts Model

The model illustrates reference groups, institutional or “field” level opinion spaces, and public opinion spheres in their proposed relationships to one another. Based on the literature, I suggest that reference groups occupy a smaller but more centralized position in the spiral of silence’s socio-contextual framework, followed by field opinions, then public opinion (which constitutes the largest size but least prominent area with regard to influence). In other words, I suggest that people are influenced primarily by friends and family, followed by their work or school environments, and least by the general public. For example, when deciding whether to become politically outspoken, people may take cues from their friends and family, then defer to their colleagues, and lastly consider the media’s cues (in attempting to gauge the regional or national opinion climate). These concepts are modeled with concentric circles in the figure above.

All three layers occur simultaneously in online contexts, which is referred to as “context collapse,” or the merger of public, private, professional, and personal social spaces (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Online spaces comprise one of the most frequented domains in modern American culture, especially since the development of user-to-user platforms like social media. Around seven in ten Americans use social networking sites (SNS), and about half of those users check their platforms multiple times per day (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). With most Americans receiving the bulk of their political news from social media platforms in 2020 (Shmargad & Klar, 2020), SNS must be recognized as a legitimate, multifaceted, and independent locale. This matters from a contextual perspective because modern discourses often take place on digital platforms. Furthermore, only a few sites—Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter among them—dominate the social media landscape (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), making the domain vast, but concentrated. Research of the spiral of silence on SNS has heavily favored the most popular sites, with scholars (Miyata et al., 2015; Chan, 2018) validating the theory’s applicability online.

While digital contexts constitute the vanguard of modern theoretical research (Baran & Davis, 2020), traditional spiral of silence studies have a stronger basis in in-person scenarios. The importance of studying both is made clear in recognizing that most twenty-first-century Americans experience dual realities by oscillating between in-person and online presences, especially those under the age of thirty (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Furthermore, mass transitions to online schooling and work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in unusually high rates of digitally-mediated social interactions (McClain et al., 2021). Recognizing the internet as its own domain makes contextual mapping more difficult, as online spaces are often simultaneously personal and public. Therefore, it is necessary to account for both real-life *and* digital contexts in pursuing the spiral of silence.

In line with the digitization of work, it is relevant to note that modern corporations occasionally take stances on political and social issues, potentially creating environments of top-down executive influence. Cases in point include Boeing, Microsoft, Nordstrom, and U.S. Bank opposing the dissolution of affirmative action policies in Washington state in 1998, otherwise known as Initiative 200 (Moy et al., 2001). When businesses and institutions become involved in political matters, they can also place their employees in the predicament of choosing to side with or against the establishment. This quandary is exacerbated by evidence that suggests monetary rewards supersede social gratifications (Spreckelmeyer et al., 2009), meaning that employees may feel financially compelled to agree with their superiors. In addition, when faculty or staff on school grounds—especially those who wield academic power (typically in terms of grading)—demonstrate consonant stances or opinions, students may feel pressured to conform or withhold their views for fear of retribution. This concept is important for studying the spiral of silence in academia, as professors' lectures represent a sort of "grey media," that mimics the properties of conventional media. To contextualize the applicability of influences in higher education, I transition to an overview of recent currents in the American sociopolitical landscape.

1.4 Trump and the American Divide

Having reviewed the spiral of silence, its criticisms and defenses, and the contexts and issues frameworks, I transition to an overview of the broader political context surrounding this study. This section provides a general understanding of the social climate surrounding former U.S. President Donald Trump by noting the prominence of heightened political polarization, its relationship to public opinion, and how media consonance may have contributed to a spiral of silence. I begin by tracing the historical association between morally-charged issues and political

theatre and how Trump's unique style as a populist candidate exacerbated divisions between Democrats and Republicans—the two main camps in contemporary U.S. politics. I then summarize mainstream media's role in their near-unanimous prediction of a Hillary Clinton victory in 2016 (Barbaro, 2016) and how the spread of disinformation on social media fed partisan flames while destabilizing the American information ecology (Lee, 2019). Finally, I fit these occurrences within the roles that identities and interests play in setting the stage for a potential spiral of silence.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump, the real estate mogul turned populist politician, ushered in his own period of political reign, as evidenced by references to the current period (2021 at the time of this writing) as the 'post-Trump era.' Pippa Norris, a political science professor at Harvard University, defines populism as:

A style of discourse reflecting first order principles about *who* should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with 'the people' not the elites. Populism challenges the legitimate authority of the 'establishment.' It questions the rightful location of power in any state, including the role of elected representatives in democratic regimes (2019, p. 5).

Such behavior was exhibited by Trump's denouncement of mainstream media outlets like CNN (or the "Clinton news network") as "fake news" and taking to Twitter to declare the New York Times "a true ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE." These remarks fit within a broader Washington establishment and journalism delegitimization wave that matured concurrently with his election campaign and rise to the presidency.

The 2016 U.S. presidential primary election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton is widely considered one of the most contentious in American history, with polarizing campaigns and supporters espousing name-calling and violence on both sides of the political aisle (Kushin

et al., 2019). For example, Janet Flanigan, a freelance writer who spoke with the *Los Angeles Times* in November 2016, stated, “everyone who voted for Trump is being called names. We’re called redneck, ignorant, racist, haters” (Barabak & Duara, 2016). Similarly, online attacks toward those on the political left included creative terms such as “libtards,” “feminazis,” and “snowflakes” (Olson & LaPoe, 2017) to describe hybridizations of liberal and retarded, feminist and Nazi, and denoting someone (“snowflake”) as delicate, unique, and condescendingly special. Moreover, during his campaign and presidency, Trump’s heated rhetoric regarding morally-loaded issues like immigration, gun control, law and order, and climate change initiatives deepened the already growing political divide between Democrats and Republicans. By 2016, 58 percent of Republicans and 55 percent of Democrats had strongly unfavorable views of the other party, compared to 21 percent of Republicans and 17 percent of Democrats in 1994 (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019, p. 151).

Some of the dangers of hardline polarization include growing mistrust and even hatred toward members and leaders of the other party—roughly half of Democrat and Republican voters claim the others’ policies are a threat to the nation and that they fear their members (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019, p. 151). In addition, studies have found that when partisans view political opponents as evildoers who possess malicious intentions for the country, they become more likely to adopt practices like impeding others’ right to expression and using force against them (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 151). Such extraordinarily high rates of polarization and visceral dislike between rank and file Democrats and Republicans in the United States has provided fertile soil for conflict, especially within the media.

Mass media in the U.S. have faced heavy scrutiny since Trump’s rise to the presidency in 2016. Industry culture stands accused of undermining democracy by covering political

campaigns as a horserace (Perloff, 2017, p. 40) and favoring information about who is leading and who is behind over heartier policy and issue-based coverage (Zoizner, 2021). Such practices can contribute to a public that is less informed about substantive issues while furthering political cynicism (Zoizner, 2021). In addition, faulty polling in both the 2016 and 2020 elections (Dickie, 2020) may have instilled doubt in polling accuracy and media credibility that has yet to be restored. As of 2021, 68% of Democrats trust mainstream media to report accurately and fairly, while just 11% of Republicans think the same (Brenan, 2021). Media consonance in predicting Hillary Clinton as the almost certain election winner in 2016 (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017, p. 11) may have bolstered the notion that mainstream media do not represent the views and opinions of average Americans (Vos & Wolfgang, 2018). Andrew Breitbart, a Conservative blogger and founder of the far-right outlet Breitbart News, reflected similar sentiments in a 2009 interview with Peter Robinson, saying:

I believe that the organism that is the Democrat media complex behaves, oftentimes, in an evil fashion. My goal is to destroy the mainstream media as we currently know it, so that it is more equitable, so that it is more fair (Robinson, 2011).

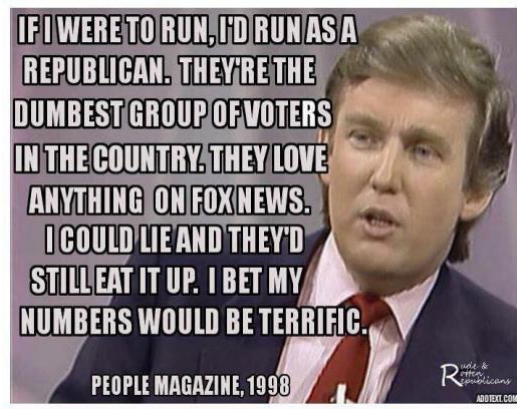
Breitbart died before Trump took office, but his online platform flourished and went on to occupy a disproportionate share of the right-wing media ecosystem during the 2016 election (Benkler et al., 2017). Social media algorithms on Facebook and Twitter cycled far-right content in highly insulated bubbles, which prevented many Republican users from being exposed to central or left-leaning information (Benkler et al., 2017). This ran in contrast to Democrats and centrists, who largely utilized mainstream outlets for their political news (Gottifred et al., 2017). Both sides, however, were subject to mass disinformation campaigns that pushed polarizing content across social media (Bontcheva et al., 2020, p. 124). Wardle and Derakshan (2017)

define disinformation as “information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country” (p. 20). Information disorders are historically common during times of anxiety, conflict, and revolution (Chen, 2017; Kiernan, 2017), all of which were present in Trump’s campaigns. At its peak in 2016, fake or misleading news was reportedly shared on social media more often than mainstream content (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). In Figure 1.3, I present examples of popular memes containing disinformation that propagated on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. They show a fabricated statement by Donald Trump and a false endorsement by Pope Francis as examples of disinformation or untrue information designed to cause harm (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). Presumably, the leftward meme sought to hurt Trump’s credibility while the rightward meme sought to bolster it.

In sum, separate information ecologies between Republicans and Democrats, the influx of disinformation, and media consonance regarding a Clinton victory produced a highly partisan electorate in 2016. For example, Ekin’s (2017) research found that ‘nearly two-thirds of Clinton voters agree that it is “hard” to be friends with Trump voters, while 34% of Trump voters feel the same way about Clinton voters. These conditions were consistent with several antecedents necessary to produce a spiral (or spirals) of silence, namely: the proliferation of morally-charged issues such as immigration, gun control, climate change, Donald Trump himself, and mainstream media’s incessant coverage of Democrat-leading political polls.

It may be argued that Trump’s 2020 election loss has temporarily quelled political tensions. With Trump’s Twitter and Facebook accounts permanently suspended due to comments he made during a riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, the former president’s primary communication channels with the public have been severed. In addition, President Joe Biden’s definitive standing as the succeeding American President has solidified Democrat control of the

White House at least until 2024. However, political tensions remain high, with President Biden's approval ratings in sharp decline (Balz et al., 2021) and Trump alluding to running for office again in 2024 (Roche, 2021).



Fake Trump quote (meme)¹

Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement

TOPICS: Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump



Fake Pope Endorsement (meme)²

Figure 1.3 “Fake News” Memes

Given the sustained political partisanship between Democrats and Republicans, their potentially separate information ecologies, and what may amount to an intermission in the Trump era, I presented an issues framework for establishing how these concepts fit within a spiral of silence format. First, given the extreme animosity between Democrats and Republicans—especially the widespread hatred of Donald Trump, who had the greatest negative ratings of any Republican or Democrat in the history of public opinion polling (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019)—I posit that mere party identification as a Republican/conservative (or exhibiting support for Trump) may constitute its own issue. In this instance, one's identity as a Trump

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ishmaeldaro/trump-fake-quote-people-magazine>

² Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/fake-presidential-election-news-viral-facebook-trump-clinton-2016-11>

supporter may guide susceptibility to experiencing a spiral of silence, with the presence of identity and interest suggesting a greater willingness to speak out, and the absence of either or both of these attributes indicating a higher willingness to self-censor. The binary aspects of this framework, i.e., the presence or absence of interest and support for Trump, are not meant to render a comprehensive account of people's often complex and nuanced positions. Rather, they reflect a prevailing aspect of media culture.

Mainstream media have been credited with exerting considerable influence over the public (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020), which is often done by presenting two (often binary) sides of an issue (Baran & Davis, 2020, p. 82). This delivery style is pragmatic, given the time constraints imposed on news segments and the necessity of condensing stories (Campbell et al., 2014). However, It is argued that such simplistic accounts contribute to conflict by presenting topics with often extremist, either/or points of view (Campbell et al., 2014). In addition, the fragmentation of the current media landscape, with classic (or legacy) mediums like newspapers, radio, and television competing with web-based digital platforms like social media, imply that today's information ecologies are more insulated *and* connected than they were in the past (Campbell et al., 2014). Media outlet diversification has been praised for catering to niche interests (including partisan platforms), while social media has been credited with exposing users to cross-cutting political information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), despite accusations that its algorithms lead to increased polarization (Cinelli et al., 2020).

Mass polarization effectively divides people according to their ideologies, splitting public opinion into binary (for or against) stances that can strengthen over time. As people become less willing to associate with ideological 'others' and entertain opposing viewpoints, they risk dwelling in echo chambers or opinion spheres that consist mostly of people who agree with one

another (Cinelli et al., 2020). In the technological realm, filter bubbles—or strict exposure to homogenous content—can result from algorithms that seek to maximize users’ time online, especially on social media platforms. Therefore, perhaps one of the attributes of modern polarization, and the technological affordances that enable its growth, is that people may be able to create and maintain their own realities. This concept is a relatively recent phenomenon, blossoming with the development of web 2.0 (or user-to-user communication platforms) and may warrant recognition of independent opinion spheres as a revision of public opinion’s basic tenants.

On the whole, Donald Trump’s unique standing as a controversial political figure in the highly polarized United States presents several issues. First, the widening political divide (enhanced by disinformation, media culture, and digital affordances) has reduced traditional political issues to general dislike for people of the opposing party. This has created an environment that may be conducive to identity-based spirals of silence, where people are reluctant to identify themselves as Republicans or Democrats for fear of being socially isolated. Furthermore, independent opinion spheres (both digitally and in-person) that follow in the wake of mass polarization warrant a need for studying environments that harbor multiple ideological viewpoints. Perhaps the epitome of such places, at least in principle, are college campuses.

1.5. College Campuses as Ideological Institutions

In the previous sections, I introduced the spiral of silence, proposed frameworks that correspond to its applications, and connected them to the broad social environment surrounding former President Donald Trump. In this final section of chapter 1, I outline the relevance of college campuses in matters of public opinion and how cultural shifts may be threatening the

concept of free speech on campus (Chemerinsky, 2017; Ekins, 2017; Behrent, 2019). I also explore the perception of politically liberal dominance in higher education (Journell, 2017; Ekins, 2017) and its proposed implications. Ultimately, I incorporate the dynamics of public opinion on campus into my contextual framework, where institutional/field variables may be conducive to the spiral of silence among students.

College campuses stand at the forefront of America's partisan divide, serving as battlegrounds for issues surrounding free speech and controversial political speakers (Chemerinsky, 2017). For some, higher education institutions represent places of ideological freedom (Golding, 2000). However, trends in public opinion research suggest such liberties are under siege, as current college students are often split on or dismissive of the right for people to make offensive statements on campus (Chemerinsky, 2017). These sentiments reflect a growing movement that began in the 1980s, following a series of racist demonstrations on several U.S. midwestern colleges (Behrent, 2019). In addition, recent political turmoil has reignited expressive tensions, pitting advocates for free speech against "political correctness" (Behrent, 2019).

Milo Yiannopoulos, a far right-wing provocateur with a long track record of attracting pushback on college campuses (Chemerinsky, 2017), is a case in point. In 2017, his speech was canceled at the University of California, Berkeley due to rioters. Later that same year, another speech of his at the University of Washington led to a person being shot, despite the university spending \$75,000 on extra security (Chemerinsky, 2017). In a similar vein, Professor Allison Stanger of Middlebury College, Vermont, suffered serious injuries (also in 2017) when protesters attacked her and guest speaker Charles Murray—a controversial social scientist—while they were attempting to leave campus (Chemerinsky, 2017). These episodes represent some of the

more extreme cases of speaker resistance on academic institutions, but protests and other attempts at stifling unpopular opinions remain a growing trend (Behrent, 2019; Ekins, 2017; Chemerinsky, 2017; Slater, 2016).

Such stances gain palpable implications on college campuses, where overwhelming majorities of faculty are perceived as well left of the political center (Maranto & Woessner, 2012). Pippa Norris, a political science Professor at Harvard University, posits:

Lack of intellectual diversity can be problematic within the discipline, especially in controversial areas, such as the politics of race, gender, power, and inequality, limiting alternative perspectives questioning the prevailing normative values and empirical theories embedded in the mainstream research agenda (2021, p. 16).

Other problems lie in the perception of academia and political liberalism as being synonymous, causing portions of the public to doubt the validity of academic inquiry and its results (Read, 2018). Put differently:

In radical right antipathy towards universities and student culture, we can arguably at times see both an anti-intellectual, anti-elite refutation of progressivism in academic culture, and an attempt to challenge or undermine the conception that academia has any authority to define “truth” (Read, 2018, p. 599).

Indeed, public opinion pertaining to and within college campuses may have implications for how academia is perceived as a whole. For example, seemingly separate issues like political liberalism and epistemology may be collectively dismissed by their associations with one another (Vyse, 2017). Furthermore, the stratification of political dominance, as in liberal strongholds nested within Conservative spheres, may provide a reference point for studying public opinion intersectionality. For example, the state of Texas in the United States has a long history of voting

Republican in general elections (Batheja, 2016). However, higher education institutions (as in college campuses) often maintain leftist majorities (Ekins, 2017), possibly fostering dual climates of opinion. In such cases, nested opinion spheres like college campuses can serve as permeable membranes that allow for exchanges of minority opinion holders while maintaining their overall ideological compositions. That is to say, Republicans may establish student groups on college campuses, but campuses as a whole often maintain liberal majorities, while Texas remains definitively conservative. Therefore, this thesis focuses on how Republicans express or repress their political opinions on Texas campuses within the context of Trump's presidency.

In applying the notion of layered or nested contexts to the contextual framework presented in figure 1.2, I recognize reference groups as the first and smallest point/s of contact, comprising close friends and family. Moving to an institutional or field level, I consider the university campus' faculty and student body as exerting mid-tier influence. At the most abstract level, beyond reference and field domains, I use the term "public opinion" to refer to the broadest areas such as city, state, and national sentiments. It is important to note that these groups and their scales are not mutually exclusive. For example, many individuals act as reference groups, are members of institutions, and possess resident or citizen statuses at the same time. In addition, it is possible (and likely) that multiple tiers of each group operate simultaneously. For example, someone may have several reference groups, be part of multiple institutions (school and work, for example), and face influences from different publics, i.e., by reading a local newspaper then watching a national news outlet to gauge a sense of general public opinion. Overlaps are inevitable in all three tiers.

With current work on the spiral of silence focusing on the importance of reference groups, field, and public opinions, I suggest that Republican student group members within

college campuses present a useful dynamic for studying the spiral of silence. For instance, Republican students may be outnumbered by Democrats on campus, forming a minority-majority ideological relationship that is brought to the fore during times of political strife, where morally-laden issues often define how candidates and parties differ from one another. The presence of two distinct parties, morally-charged issues, numerical disparities between sides, and ubiquitous media coverage may set the stage for a spiral (or spirals) of silence to occur.

The issues used to explore the spiral of silence in this study were: identifying as a conservative/Republican, the U.S./Mexico border wall, and gun rights. Given recent surges in political polarization, I posited that identifying with a political party (in this case, a Republican or conservative) in certain contexts may generate enough discord to constitute its own issue. I explored whether identifying with and being interested in an issue corresponded to a willingness to speak out on the matter. As such, I identified four combinations of identity and interest: individuals that both identify with and are interested in an issue; individuals who identify with but are not interested in an issue; individuals who do not identify with but are interested in an issue; and individuals who do not identify and are not interested in an issue. Given previous scholars' findings, it seemed that those with both attributes present may be the least likely to self-censor, while those with one attribute may be somewhat unlikely to self-censor, and those with neither may be most susceptible to the spiral of silence.

In pursuing these aims, I explored whether Republican students experienced the spiral of silence on campus during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. I also investigated the role of college campuses as institutional opinion spheres during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Thus, I proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did conservative college students experience the spiral of silence on campus during the 2020 U.S. presidential election?

RQ2: Which university contexts influenced conservative students' willingness to express their political views?

RQ3: What issues were Trump-era conservative students most concerned with?

Chapter 2: Methods

This thesis employed qualitative, focused interviews to study how conservative college students managed their political identities and opinions on conservative and liberal campuses. Interviews were utilized to explore contextual nuances within the spiral of silence theory, and since most of the theory's research is of a quantitative nature, this method offered an opportunity to complement existing research. For example, Noelle-Neumann's seminal (1974) study surveyed 9,966 people with multiple-choice questionnaires, and her work set the methodological standard for most of the theory's future inquiries. Other scholars in the field (Scheufele, Lasorsa, Gearheart and Zhang etc.) have mostly followed the survey method and utilized fewer participants. Cases in point include: Scheufele, Shanahan, and Lee's sampling of 358 undergraduate students (2001); Lasorsa (1991) surveying 624 Austin, Texas residents, and Gearheart and Zhang's (2015) random sample of 1,871 individuals. While participant numbers tend to fluctuate according to researchers' resources, advances in technology have provided researchers with a greater toolbox for accessing participants, as evidenced by Gearheart and Zhang's use of a survey company to collect 1,871 responses within a week. However, while practices have been made more efficient by innovations, most research designs that study the spiral of silence still adhere to a couple staples of tradition: a focus on moral issues and the use of quantitative methods.

Moral or value-laden issues remain a key ingredient of the spiral of silence's framework because, according to the theory, people must possess strong attitudes on a subject to create social pressure (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In sourcing topics for studying the spiral of silence, some researchers have selected their own issues, such as Scheufele et al. (2001) utilizing the subject of genetically modified food (p. 309). Others have sourced their topics organically. For

example, Lasorsa (1991) asked participants about the “most important problem facing this country today” (p. 136) and carried out the remainder of his questionnaire based on each participant’s responses. Alternatively, popular issues have also been a source of ideas—Hampton et al. (2014) referred to studies conducted by the Pew Research Center, and found that Edward Snowden’s revelation of mass unconstitutional surveillance by the U.S. government was a subject that many Americans had ambivalent stances on, making it a proper fit for the spiral of silence research. Their study also utilized survey data. In sum, investigating morally-laden issues with quantitative methods is standard fare in spiral of silence research.

However, some scholars have broken the mold by investigating the spiral of silence qualitatively (Askay, 2014; Ryan, 2011; Weerakkody, 2002; Neubaum, 2016). Such studies often do so on the basis of expansion, with some citing the need to more broadly explore the motivations behind self-censorship (Ryan, 2011) or organizational voice and silence (Askay, 2014; Greensberg & Edwards, 2009). Combining approaches, or methodological triangulation, has also been explored in the interest of cross-validating findings from both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Weerakkody, 2002). Collectively, these works often aim to challenge or augment the theoretical assumptions that Noelle-Neumann put forth in her original thesis, including fear of isolation, people’s constant use of the quasi-statistical sense, and public opinion as control variables. In some ways, qualitative research on the spiral of silence seems to reflect efforts to refine and augment the theory to include nuances that were previously un-or-under considered.

In accordance with prior efforts, this study used in-depth interviews to broaden, enrich, and renew (Kvale, 1996, p. 10) current theoretical understandings of the spiral of silence. This method strives to “understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects’ own

perspectives” (Kvale, 1996, p. 27). In addition, qualitative inquiry carried the potential to inform particularities in the contexts and issues frameworks (presented in the previous section of this thesis) that were not readily discernable through surveys. For example, in exploring universities as institutional or field opinion spheres through interviews, participants had the freedom to articulate how exactly larger entities exerted particular and collective influences. This would have been difficult, or less efficient, to ascertain through predetermined responses like surveys. As Sarah Tracy suggests, qualitative research ‘provides opportunities to access tacit and unarticulated data, connect with research participants, and engage in vulnerable conversations’ (2020, p. 7). Interviews were also an appropriate method for this study because high rates of ambivalence surrounding support for Trump, even within the Republican Party, made the use of alternative qualitative methods, like focus groups, a riskier enterprise, given the potential for groupthink syndrome and group leader effect dynamics within student groups, and even the spiral of silence itself (Weerakkody, 2002).

2.1 Sample

To pursue the research questions presented earlier, I interviewed 14 conservative college students or alumni from the University of Houston and Texas A&M University—both are public universities located in the U.S. state of Texas. Conservative students were an appropriate fit for this study due to the close association between conservatism and the Republican party—the official party of former President Donald Trump, whose supporters constitute this study’s sample. Given that the University of Houston is perceived as possessing a liberal slant, and Texas A&M University is recognized as more conservative (Levin, 2016), the featured universities were selected in-part for their opinion climate diversity.

Texas has voted Republican in every presidential election since 1980 (Daniel & Batheja, 2016), but possesses large metropolitan areas that tend to vote Democrat, making the state an appropriate domain for sourcing liberal *and* conservative campuses. The University of Houston was listed by the Houston Chronicle as among the most liberal in Texas (Levin, 2016) while Texas A&M University ranked among the most conservative (Levin, 2016). According to the 2020 election data, the precinct around UH's main address voted 89% in favor of Biden, while the precinct around A&M's address voted 57% in favor of Biden (Park et al., 2021). The University of Houston resides inside the state's most populated city of Houston (Texas-demographics, 2020) and is ranked as one of the most diverse universities in the nation (Iracheta, 2019). Texas A&M is the largest university in Texas and is widely recognized as the academic and political rival of Texas' flagship university, the University of Texas at Austin.

The overall sample consisted of 14 participants, with seven from the University of Houston and seven from Texas A&M University. All of the A&M sample were enrolled at the time of their interviews, while three of the UH sample were enrolled, and four were alumni. Five participants from Texas A&M University indicated they were between 18 and 24 years of age, while one indicated they were between 25 and 34 years of age, and one indicated they were between 35 and 44 years of age. Six of the participants from the University of Houston indicated they were between 18 and 24 years of age, while one indicated they were between 25 and 34 years of age. The sample consisted of 8 males and 6 females, and while ethnic information was not requested, Dylan (UH) identified as Asian and Gabby (UH) as Latina. See the table 1 below for a breakdown of participant demographics.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Name	Sex	Age	Area of Study	University
Mary	Female	18-24	Communication	University of Houston
Joe	Male	18-24	Communication	University of Houston
Patrick	Male	18-24	Political Science	University of Houston
Carla	Female	18-24	Communication	University of Houston
Dylan	Male	18-24	Biology	University of Houston
Gabby	Female	18-24	Political Science	University of Houston
Susan	Female	25-34	Public Relations	University of Houston
Amy	Female	18-24	Political Science	Texas A&M University
Louie	Male	35-44	Economics	Texas A&M University
Mark	Male	18-24	Political Science	Texas A&M University
Austin	Male	18-24	Economics	Texas A&M University
Paul	Male	18-24	Engineering	Texas A&M University
Jessica	Female	25-34	HR	Texas A&M University
Tony	Male	18-24	Public Admin	Texas A&M University

2.2 Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was used to direct conversations with participants and keep the discussion on track (Tracy, 2020). A copy of the interview guide is provided in Appendix A. The guide contained six modules, beginning with introductory questions, followed by a background section, three topic sections, and a conclusion. The introduction aimed to get a sense of the interviewee's lifestyle as a student (i.e., what made you choose this university, what

are you studying, what does a regular day at school look like for you?) while the background section fleshed out the interviewee's political orientations, including the strength of their conservatism, their feelings for members of the Democratic Party, media consumption habits, and views on former president Donald Trump.

Topic sections began with questions that garnered a general sense of the participant's political expressions; probes into participants' political activism, impersonal expressions (such as bumper stickers and signs), and social media posts were included. The first section encouraged interviewees to reflect on their political behavior as a lead into more robust topics two and three. Questions in topic two fleshed out the participant's identities and interests as a Republican (e.g., "as a conservative, what political issues do you consider to be the most important?") while exploring political identity as potentially controversial (e.g., "would you say that being a Republican or conservative is a part of your identity; have you been criticized on campus for being a Republican or conservative?"). In addition, participants were asked about their stances on the U.S./Mexico border wall and gun rights, as these matters were associated closely with conservatism and Trump politics. Both issues were recognized as being highly controversial (Jaramillo-Dent & Perez-Rodriguez, 2019; Grant et al., 2021), which made them appropriate control issues for exploring the spiral of silence. Participants also produced their own political issues during interviewing, but control issues were included to guarantee comparison among participants and campuses in the event that participants prompted dissimilar subjects.

Topic three in the discussion guide moved the conversation towards contextual references, based on the model in figure 2.2. In this section, questions fleshed out the relevance of layered opinion spheres for the interviewee, beginning with traditionally inner social circles like friends and family, then moving to institutional realms, and beyond to the general public.

This section focused on college campuses as political venues and potential institutional opinion spheres with questions like, “do you feel like you can express your political opinions on campus; are there places on campus where you feel more comfortable expressing your political views; are there places on campus where you do not feel comfortable expressing your political views?” The guide’s questions encouraged participants to reveal precisely how, where, and if their campuses exert/ed social influences. The final section served as a catch-all by asking the interviewee if they would like to add anything that was not previously discussed.

The guide flowed thematically, beginning with the participant’s general political orientations before transitioning to political issues and social and physical contexts. This progression functioned to build a dynamic relationship between the interviewer and participant (Kvale, 1996) while easing into some of the participants’ personal experiences later in the interview. While some of the questions were personal (e.g., “how comfortable would you be dating/marrying/befriending a Democrat?”), all such questions were prefaced with a reminder that the interviewee was not obligated to answer. In addition, interview questions referred to broad chronological periods, spanning from the 2020 U.S. presidential election to the present. This range sought to account for the political and personal transitions associated with the election and succession of the following non-election years.

2.3 Procedures

I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven conservative students that were enrolled during the spring 2020 presidential election at each of the universities selected for this study (University of Houston and Texas A&M University), for a total of 14 interviews/participants. Interviews took between 19 minutes and 43 seconds to 40 minutes and

19 seconds, with an average of 29 minutes and 30 seconds per interview. Guidance pertaining to the recommended number of interviews for qualitative study varies widely, with Kvale's (1996) early work placing the average (during his time) between ten and fifteen (p. 102), and Tracy (2012) recommending five to eight for single-semester doctoral methodology courses (p. 138). However, Guest and colleagues (2006) found that most qualitative codes (92%) could be found in 12 interviews for studies seeking to describe homogenous group members' shared beliefs, behaviors, or perceptions (p. 76). Given the semester-long time constraint on conducting interviews and difficulties associated with accessing the sample, it was deemed that 14 interviews would be pedagogically valuable and achieve sufficient saturation with regard to students' experiences.

Participants were recruited with the following methods: an in-person visit to a College Republican club meeting, Facebook solicitation in a student veterans' group, and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is defined as asking participants to refer a friend, colleague, or family member for participation in a study (Tracy, 2020, p. 84). Attempts to contact Republican student groups at both universities through Facebook (as initially intended) were unsuccessful, so I attended a club meeting where I recruited five participants. I also posted a Facebook solicitation in a closed group (of which I am a member), the A&M Student Veterans Association, which resulted in the recruitment of another two participants, for a total of seven participants at Texas A&M University. Recruitment for students at the University of Houston (UH) consisted almost entirely of snowball sampling. The first participant from UH referred me to another participant, who referred me to five others, for a total of seven from the University of Houston.

Participants were emailed a screen-out survey that was created on the program Qualtrics, a web-based surveying platform. The screen-out survey posed three questions: what is your age;

do you identify as a Republican or conservative; which university were you a student of during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Selected answers for “under 18 years old” to the age question, “no” to the political identification question, and “none of these” to the university question were screened out of the survey and excluded from participation. Those who passed the questionnaire were then directed to a consent form that described the study and requested consent to audio record their Zoom interview. Candidates granted consent by checking an “I agree to the terms of this study, including being audio recorded” box and typing their email address in an open text box.

Upon ensuring respondents met eligibility criteria, I emailed them to schedule a time to conduct a Zoom interview. Zoom was utilized for its convenience and safety, as the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic and risk of virus transmission made in-person meetings inherently riskier. Despite these risks, I did conduct an in-person visit to Texas A&M University. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, meaning participants were asked a standard set of questions (interview guide featured in Appendix A), but unscripted questions arose in the course of conversation, and impromptu follow-up questions were asked when appropriate. Interview questions followed scholars’ (Tracy, 2020; Kvale, 1996) guidance in being concise, jargon-free, and broadly focused. Interviews were recorded directly on Zoom and uploaded to the processing application Otter.ai for automated transcription. While most of the interviews were conducted without issue, it was discovered during an interview that one participant was in high school during the 2020 election, necessitating their removal from the study.

Post interview, participants were compensated with an Amazon e-gift card in the amount of \$20. Gift cards were issued via participants’ consent email within one week of each interview. Recordings were then transcribed on Otter.ai and edited for audio and textual consistency. All

participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms that bear no resemblance to their actual names in order to protect participants' identities. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was utilized to conduct coding, whereby transcriptions from Otter.ai were uploaded to NVivo, in addition to a codebook.

The first version of the codebook was derived from questions featured in the interview guide. The codebook featured codes and subcodes that were designed to answer the research questions presented earlier, or categorize participants' responses. For example, the code "Contexts" referred to the physical and social settings that influenced students' political expressions. Other top-level codes included, "Political Views," "Political Expression," and "Issues." One particularly relevant sub-code of "Contexts" was "Classrooms," which denoted the classroom setting within the broader campus. Other relevant sub-codes included "Professor Influence," "Social Hierarchy," and "Conservativism." If a participant spoke about an experience that pertained to arguing with a professor about a political issue in the classroom, then that section of the transcription was coded to "Political Expression" and "Classrooms." It was not uncommon for texts to apply to multiple codes.

I conducted all coding procedures independently. Audio recordings were transcribed before being uploaded to NVivo, where they were coded at a paragraph level. Codes that contained disproportionate amounts of content or were heavily referenced by participants became themes. Themes reflected the prevailing sentiments of the sample, and effectively answered the research questions. However, the first round of coding revealed that three additional codes were necessary, as the original codebook did not capture all participants' experiences. Supplementary codes consisted of: "Transitions" (i.e., how participants' views and political expressions had changed over time); "News Sourcing," (i.e., which sources participants

received their news from) and “Asymmetrical Aggression” (i.e., the perception that conservatives received a disproportionate amount of hostility on campus). After adding the emergent codes, the transcriptions were coded again to ensure the codebook was comprehensive. The codebook used for this study is featured in the Appendix B. In total, there were 8 top-level codes and 25 sub-level codes.

Chapter 3. Findings

The next three sections are devoted to answering the research questions presented earlier. RQ1 (to what extent did conservative college students experience the spiral of silence on campus during the 2020 presidential election) is addressed first, followed by RQ2 (which university contexts influenced conservative students' willingness to express their political views), and then RQ3 (what issues were Trump-era conservative students most concerned with). The goal of this thesis is not to generalize participants' experiences, as some of the research questions imply. Rather, the "students" referred to in the research questions pertain only to the sample. In addition, some of the sentiments from quotations featured in this section were limited to the issuing individual or a relatively small group of two or three others. All results should be interpreted within these bounds.

3.1 Spiral of Silence Applicability

Students reported considerable variances in the extent to which they censored their political views on campus, depending on their environments. Those in the sample who felt most at liberty to express their political views were students at Texas A&M University, while the sample from the University of Houston felt generally uncomfortable expressing conservative viewpoints. This contrast was made clear by Louie's appraisal of Texas A&M as being, "One of the most conservative campuses in America" and Carla's surprise upon transitioning from online to in-person classes at the University of Houston, "I didn't know U of H was that liberal."

Students' comfort in expressing their political views on campus was almost entirely school-dependent, with the sample from UH reporting consistent discomfort in the classroom and on campus, while those at A&M reported feeling at liberty to express themselves almost

anywhere on campus, with a few exceptions. However, some of the sample experienced notable changes in their levels of comfort and political outspokenness during their time as students.

Several participants reported that as they advanced in their programs and age, they grew more secure in expressing their political views. This transition was exemplified in the following statement:

You know I was a people pleaser [as a freshman in 2019]. I would never say anything about politics in that [sociology] class because I would feel like that that professor would kind of look at me differently, or something like that. Nowadays I feel like that kind of stuff still is happening, but where I'm at now, in my life, and with politics, I wouldn't be afraid to say something at this point. I don't care (Austin, A&M).

In addition to age, others referred to social or professional support structures (mostly those who worked in some capacity with the Republican party) as a means of ensuring that whatever controversies they encountered on campus would not affect them in the future. Several students expressed concern about academic and professional consequences for expressing their views on campus, but these problems seemed to decline with age and ideologically conservative employment.

Because you know, when you're 17, 18 years old, you think what's happening right now is the most important thing in the world. But as you get older, you get better about thinking in the long term. And in the long term getting quote, unquote, canceled or just any of the other university drama, it doesn't really matter...I can't say there's any one moment where I said okay, I'm going to shift now. I think it was more of a function of me thinking less like a college student, and more like a young professional as I got older. Because as a young professional, I knew that I was getting involved with organizations

and institutions that would support me if something bad happened on campus (Tony, A&M).

Lastly, in reflecting on an argument he had with a professor (featured in more detail in section 3.2), Patrick (UH) said, “You know, it was my senior year, so I wasn't like that worried about how it would affect me that much.” Here, Patrick seemed to suggest that his concerns about academic reprisal were not as strong when he was a senior, and were perhaps more prevalent as a lowerclassmen. Others echoed this progression. Some in the sample associated voicing their opinions in class with the possibility of receiving lower grades on assignments. This was suspected to occur through two avenues: providing the incorrect (subjective) answer on an assignment or outright professor bias against the student.

While most of the sample (all of the students from A&M and three of seven from UH) were enrolled in classes during their interviews, four UH students were no longer studying at the time of their interviews. Former students reported a general decline in their political expressions (e.g., challenging others’ views, making political posts on social media, etc.) since graduating. Reasons for scaling back included a lack of motivation and need to maintain a professional profile. All who cited job-related reasons for their reduced or non-personal political expressions (three UH alumni) currently work with or for the Republican party, making political activism at least part of their day-to-day lives. The other alumnus, who did not state where he worked, simply noted, “I don’t have the energy these days to get into very disagreeable conversations all the time” (Dylan, UH). On the whole, there seemed to be a positive trend towards political outspokenness as students advanced in their academic careers, and just the opposite for graduates. What united the experiences of students and alumni, however, were the ways in which they experienced social pressure on campus.

Current and former students from both universities reported experiencing social pressure in two distinct ways: public opinion and episodes. For the purposes of this paper, public opinion refers to the perceived opinion climate surrounding a setting, while episodes deal with specific instances of hostility or controversy regarding a political issue. While both forms of pressure were reported by the sample as being more pronounced at the University of Houston, conservative students at Texas A&M also experienced ideological resistance or pressure, mostly in the form of episodes with professors or other students.

Several conservative UH students and alumni reported going silent on campus due to the perceived ubiquity of left-leaning or non-conservative viewpoints (public opinion). For example, Carla, a graduate student at UH, reported feeling like a lone Republican on campus, saying, “I thought I was the only one.” In contrast, Aggies (students at A&M) mostly agreed that, “A&M’s campus is pretty inclusive” (Austin, A&M) with regard to conservative viewpoints. However, three from the UH sample perceived UH as being institutionally biased towards the left. As Joe (UH) put it, “Only one radical side has any kind of institutional power on campus or any kind of like, sway.” Dylan (UH) said that he did not think campus was a place where everyone could express their views because of “built-in repercussions.” During his interview, Dylan mentioned being doxed (doxing refers to someone’s personal information being released to the public) where posters were placed around campus identifying him as a Nazi. In fact, several UH participants recalled being personally doxed on campus, or knowing other members of UH College Republicans who had been. Participant feedback suggested that majorities of the UH and A&M samples perceived very different opinion climates at their schools, as those from A&M reported general ideological comfort at Texas A&M, while those from UH did not.

But university opinion climates were not the only factor when it came to the spiral of silence and conservative students' political expressions on campus. Several participants from UH pointed to specific experiences, or episodes, that had a lasting impact on their political outspokenness.

I remember in 2016 I was a little bit more comfortable with sharing my opinions in class. That was before I had some experiences that just completely made me go silent. And one was in my political science class, where after I did share my opinion with the class, it was like 200 people in that class, and we were talking about Trump and Hillary and I brought up something that Hillary did that I, you know, asked the professor, do you think this is important? And there was a very negative response from the class like laughter, and after that, I wouldn't say anybody criticized me to my face, but there were certainly whispers and a different kind of atmosphere. I didn't feel comfortable anymore (Mary, UH).

Mary's experience in her political science class occurred years before our interview, but she has maintained silence on the UH campus ever since. Her episode is an example of how potent negative experiences can lead to long-term spirals of silence. This was found applicable for even the most outspoken conservatives, like Joe (UH).

Joe was, by far, the most expressive conservative in the sample. The day after the 2016 election, Joe showed up to his large algebra class wearing a MAGA hat and Trump shirt and proceeded to sing the Star-Spangled Banner to the class, despite hecklers jeering at him. Joe was also an active member of several conservative political organizations on campus, where his views were occasionally deemed "a little too right wing" for the group's taste. On a weekly basis in 2016 and 2017, Joe would hold controversial signs in front of the campus library and argue

with “10 to 50 people on a good day.” He later became involved in a far-right fringe organization that gained national notoriety during a highly publicized meeting, the details of which have been omitted for privacy purposes. Not long after the meeting, Joe learned that his affiliation with the group was becoming known around campus, and the resulting negative attention caused him to eventually withdraw from the political scene entirely. Joe deleted his Facebook account, dropped out of all political organizations, and reported no involvement in any kind of political activism aside from voting at the time of our interview.

Although specific episodes causing long-term political withdrawals were exceptional within the sample, most UH students and alumni recalled several controversial moments on campus, many of which occurred in the classroom with professors. For example, multiple UH students reported arguing with their professors about the topic of racism. Conversely, most of the sample from A&M did not directly experience political controversy on campus, with a few exceptions. The most extreme case at A&M was reported by Austin, who was tabling on campus for the College Republicans club when a passerby directed an expletive at him. However, not all participant episodes, or even most, are included in this section, as many are reserved for other sections or RQ’s, where they are more relevant or useful. The data suggests that the prevalence of the sample withholding their political views depended on the university, with interviewees reporting high levels of self-censorship at UH and little to no censorship at A&M. On the whole, it seemed that the samples’ personal developments and experiences on campus played more of a role in their political expressions than external factors like the 2020 election or the mainstream media (which the sample unanimously disapproved of).

3.2 College Contexts, Classrooms, and “The Wrong View”

In figure 1.2, I modeled “field opinion” as a mid-tier social influence that included corporations and universities. As such, this study recognized university systems as a synthesis of macro-scaled public opinion and micro-scaled reference groups. Perhaps one of the defining characteristics of field level opinion climates is their unique social composition. Institutions typically consist of people that are non-intimate to the observer, such as classmates and professors, but also not strangers, as referred to in public opinion. Additionally, this section explores how institutions (specifically, the college campuses of UH and A&M) formed their own opinion climates and the means through which they may have applied social pressure. Based on the findings, the spiral of silence was mostly reported by the UH sample, and was not applicable for the majority of the sample from A&M. Among those from UH who felt the need to censor their political views on campus, one particular setting was consistently cited as the most ideologically restrictive place—classrooms.

I think the number one event that I can recall the best and really was mind blowing, was...I think it was a social psychology class. It was required for my credit, and I remember the professor speaking about racism in one of these classes. And he said that White people were the only people that could be racist, and Black people could not be racist, or, Latinos couldn't be racist because of...I don't know what reason he gave. And so I asked him, if a group of Black people went and lynched a White person, and the specific reason they gave for killing that White person was because he was White, would that be racism? And he said, no. And he continued arguing with me and no other students said anything. I think the majority of them agreed with him, and the ones that didn't just didn't speak out about it (Gabby, UH).

While confrontational episodes like Gabby's are the opposite of the spiral of silence, they often represented exceptional moments of outspokenness, as Gabby later admitted, "I wasn't really prone to speaking out." In fact, most of the sample did not mention challenging their professors at all, and those who did tended to be selective with their engagements. As Patrick (UH) noted, "You can't just challenge them every single day in the classroom, because that's not going to be helpful. It's not going to produce good results." However, Patrick was the only consistently outspoken member in the UH sample through his college career, and this occasionally resulted in intense exchanges with professors, like the one below.

One of my professors called me one day because he said I asked too many questions in his class that he didn't like. So he made me read an essay about how asking too many questions shows that you're trying to hide racism. And then he tried to give me Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* to read, which I then made fun of him because I was actually the only student in his class who had already read it. So he was trying to give me some extra assignments and extra reading material to try to turn me...he eventually blocked me on Twitter, because he said all Republicans are Nazis and so I responded. I asked him if I'm a Nazi, and he blocked me after that (Patrick, UH).

The episode above depicts one example of how discussions surrounding political issues in college classrooms can become volatile. Typically, the social dynamic in universities involves students and a professor, but such groups were not perceived as possessing equal weight with regard to social and academic influence. Participants from both universities feared academic retribution or lower grades from their professors for presenting what Mark (A&M) referred to as "the wrong view." Participants referenced the subjective nature of grading and worried that proving the role of personal or political biases in a poorly graded assignment would be difficult.

For example, Carla (UH) said she stays quiet in class because, “I don’t want them to fail me.”

She went on to recall, “I literally had a mental breakdown because I was so scared because I don’t talk in class.” However, not all appraisals of classroom environments or professors were negative. Mark (A&M) expressed appreciation for left-leaning professors who, “Allow me to share my ideas, have my ideas challenged, and challenge other people’s ideas. I actively look forward to going to those classes, where I can engage and grow as a person.”

Professors were often recognized for their role in facilitating discussions and, for better or worse, establishing the classroom’s social climate. Mary (UH) summarized these sentiments with:

The professor set(s) the tone for what is okay and what's not, and most of the time professors are left leaning or very much left. And sometimes they'll say things like, “please feel free to speak out” but then they will ridicule some sort of conservative belief or they'll speak in such a one-sided way that it's like, even though they said that, I know I won't be comfortable.

While the UH sample widely regarded professors as the classroom’s chief influencers, they were not the only factor that contributed to the spiral of silence. Other students, especially at UH, were often viewed by the sample as ancillary influencers that mostly agreed with professors or assumed a non-critical interpretation of their lectures. These peers or fellow students were also recognized as primary social players in the second most influential university setting—campus grounds. Despite the episodes referenced earlier, the UH sample generally felt more comfortable expressing their political views on campus than in classrooms. This may have been due to a perceived lack of academic consequences (absence of professors) and the predominance of non-classmate students, whose opinions were generally esteemed as lower value due to participants’ unfamiliarity with them. In addition, participants’ experiences on campuses were mixed,

consisting of confrontations with other students but also networking with like-minded others. As Tony (A&M) put it, “Eventually you just find your circle of people, and then you’re good.” Indeed, most participants in the sample were members of conservative organizations that provided physical and intellectual spaces for conservatives to share their ideas—a comfort that some did not find anywhere else in their university system.

Niche groups and locations varied according to the university, with political organizations like College Republicans typically offering more of an ideological place than a physical one. This may have been due to student organizations having to reserve available rooms for their meetings and coordinating tentative plans based on leadership’s availability. However, several students mentioned popular areas where civil (and sometimes not-so-civil) political discourse regularly took place, denoting important aspects of university culture. For example, Mary (UH) drew an interesting contextual dichotomy, “There is this patch of grass in front of the library called like a free speech zone. And I’ve engaged with a lot of people there. It’s a very comfortable place. In class, definitely not a comfortable place.” The front of the library was also referred to by Joe (UH), Dylan (UH), and Gabby (UH) as a popular place at UH where conservatives often went to express their views. However, the sample from A&M listed a greater variety of locations on campus where they felt comfortable expressing themselves politically. Some of these included College Republican meetings (Amy, A&M), classrooms (Mark, A&M), and parts of campus near the business and science buildings, as opposed to liberal arts areas (Austin, A&M). Digital domains such as group text messaging and conservative group chats on the popular messaging application GroupMe were also mentioned by Mark (A&M) as popular mediums of conservative discourse. However, he caveated that such platforms rarely harbored well-thought-out or substantive content.

On the whole, the UH sample generally felt uncomfortable expressing their conservative viewpoints in class. The UH sample was also ambivalent about expressing their views on the greater campus setting, with few exceptions. These findings stood in contrast with the A&M sample, who reported occasional contexts that resulted in self-censorship, but generally felt at liberty to express their political views anywhere on campus, including classrooms. Findings may lend support for the notion that institutions can harbor and exert their own “public” opinions. In addition, the UH sample reported university contexts as being ideologically maintained by professors and students, such that professors who made their left-leaning political views known in class often (intentionally or not) encouraged the sample to conceal their conservatism for fear of academic retribution, and in Carla’s (UH) case, induced severe psychological distress. Classmates at UH were largely regarded by the sample as ideological proxies of their professors, and occasional nefarious actors on campus. The dual mechanisms that supplied institutional pressures at UH, professors and students, led to prominent spirals of silence (six out of seven from UH) among its sample in class and somewhat on campus.

3.3 Points of Contention

This study set out to explore the spiral of silence within the context of Trump-era college students. As depicted in the individual-level issues model in figure 1.1, I investigated whether conservatives felt pressured enough to conceal their political identities or abstain from voicing their thoughts on matters that were important to them. I also asked participants about their willingness to discuss the U.S./Mexico border wall and gun rights, as these issues were popular concerns among conservatives during Trump’s presidency. Most of the sample reported that being a conservative (but not Republican) was part of their identity, and several members (at

both universities) reported concealing their conservatism on campus. In addition, willingness to discuss the border wall and gun rights was more prevalent among the A&M sample than the UH sample. Furthermore, common issues that participants cited as being the most important to them (e.g., abortion, immigration, cultural changes) and the attributes that most in the sample associated with their identity (e.g., conservative, Christian) alluded to a possible association between conservative values and Christian faith.

In considering conservative identity as a contentious matter, participants were asked about their experiences with identifying as a conservative on their respective campuses. Most of the sample from A&M did not experience direct criticism for their conservative identity on campus. However, two students from A&M did report concealing politically-identifying attire, including College Republican club and Trump apparel. For example:

I'm in a study group for my plyometrics class and it's mostly comprised of people that are political science and gender studies double majors, so I know that they are very anti-Trump. So I have censored wearing a lot of campaign shirts on the days that we have that class (Amy, A&M).

Amy's concealment of Trump apparel in her plyometrics class was unique within the group, as others who made efforts to keep their political stances unknown typically did so to avoid confrontation with strangers on broader campus.

Whenever I go to College Republicans, we have a shirt that we wear to the meetings that has our name, and then also College Republicans on it. And I wear a jacket because I don't want to have any encounters with like the one random, crazy person (Mark, A&M).

For the UH sample, episodes regarding criticism for tabling on campus for UH College Republicans were prevalent. As Gabby (UH) recalled, "There [were] always people that [were]

upset with us when we were tabling and either just gave us bad looks or were trying to argue with us and call us bad people.” Patrick (UH) also mentioned, “Some students come up to you while you’re tabling or hanging out with some people and start just ripping into you calling you a Nazi.” Of those who recalled such episodes from the UH sample, all had since stopped wearing any kind of political attire on campus. Joe (UH), the participant who sang the Star-Spangled Banner in class and was later doxed recalled, “I would wear the red hat and people would curse at me and stuff like that passing by. But, you know, I don’t want that anymore. So I don’t wear any sort of political anything.” Another person from the UH sample related indirect criticism, “My brother was going to school, same time as I was in 2016. And he, also conservative, wore a Trump shirt on campus. And he had people spit on him. He had people say (expletive) you to his face” (Mary, UH). While most of the sample did not regularly wear political attire on campus, it was perceived from those that did that support for Trump and identification as a Republican on the UH campus could be controversial.

Participants were also asked about their willingness to discuss the U.S./Mexico border wall and gun rights both in class and on campus. These topics served as control issues for gauging participants’ comfort in expressing their opinions on controversial matters in various contexts. Findings suggested that most of the sample from A&M felt comfortable discussing the border wall and gun rights both in class and on campus, with all willing to voice their opinions on gun rights. In fact, discussing gun rights seemed like a human right to one participant, who replied, “Definitely. This is Texas” (Tony, A&M). However, most of the sample from UH reported not feeling comfortable discussing either subject in class or on campus. Participants from both schools expressed less willingness to discuss the border wall, citing the perception of strong attitudes associated with immigration. For example, Gabby (UH) recalled, “There [were]

a lot of times where I've chosen to speak out on a topic that wasn't as controversial as the border wall. And that seemed to be a big issue for my professors and my fellow students.” Participants’ willingness to discuss the border wall and gun rights mostly mirrored earlier reports of students’ political expressions—the A&M sample generally felt comfortable expressing their views while the UH sample did not.

When asked about the issues that were most important to them, participants provided diverse answers, ranging from education reform to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Interestingly, not all, or even most conservatives in the sample agreed on what issues were important to them, but those that did mostly belonged to the UH sample. In addition, the UH sample was more likely to say that traditionally contentious topics were important, i.e., abortion: Mary (UH); Patrick (UH); Dylan (UH); Gabby (UH); Susan (UH), immigration: Joe (UH); Patrick (UH); Dylan (UH); Austin (A&M), and same-sex marriage: Mary (UH); Patrick (UH), while the A&M sample listed more diverse and less controversial matters of concern, i.e., economic policies: Amy (A&M); international relations: Louie (A&M); justice: Mark (A&M); government spending: Paul (A&M); national security: Jessica (A&M); and education: Tony (A&M). When asked whether participants would be more or less likely to speak out or defend their positions (on campus) on the issues they selected, most of the A&M sample responded in the affirmative, while most in the UH sample indicated that they would not feel comfortable. This may partially be due to the A&M sample prioritizing less controversial topics than the UH sample, as several students and alumni from UH cited traditionally contentious topics like abortion and immigration.

Of the five (UH) who opposed abortion, four cited moral objections that were rooted in Christian faith, as Mary (UH) explained, “I believe that abortion is murder. So that's a really big

issue for me. It almost makes me like a one issue voter.” She continued, “A lot of my conservative beliefs stem from my religious beliefs.” Mary’s stance on abortion was not unique, as other participants from the UH sample had equally strong, or even stronger convictions on the matter.

The social ideas that the left wants to push are just flat out evil, and they need to be fought against. You know, we can't pretend that it's just a political party expressing their different ideas that we can have tea over and debate. No, their ideas are literally evil. I mean, look at abortion. Just like a week ago, in Congress, they tried to pass a bill to make abortion legal up to birth throughout the entire country, and it failed by one vote in the Senate. One vote from killing babies all the way up till birth. Like that's not something you can debate on, that's just good versus evil. And anyone who supports that is evil. And whenever every single Democrat except one voted on it. We are fighting against evil ideologies (Patrick, UH).

Patrick’s (UH) description of right vs left wing ideologies as a battle between good and evil may have had implications in him being the most enduring politically-outspoken person in the UH sample. The good versus evil dichotomy that he described seemed to imply a moral basis for his pro-life position. However, extreme paradigms like Patrick’s (UH) were not consistent in the sample. For instance, Mark (A&M) took issue with the stance that, “We (conservatives) are uniquely special and morally enlightened, as opposed to those bad people on the other side,” calling such thinking “asinine.” Nevertheless, another participant had more personal reasons for opposing abortion:

Well, I'm currently pregnant so I think that me being pregnant and soon-to-be mom made me more pro-life, not that I wasn't before, but it really just kind of tied me almost

emotionally to the cause. I can't for the life of me understand the other side, especially when going through and like seeing my unborn child. I can't wrap my head around people that think that it's okay to kill an unborn child (Gabby, UH).

Gabby's (UH) pregnancy positioned her as both identifying with and possessing an interest in the subject of abortion. As such, she reported challenging others in her (Latinx) community who identified as Democrats yet shared her pro-life stance on the basis of Christian faith. Other participants who cited abortion as an important issue also referenced their Christian faith as part of their identity, while several participants made explicit connections between the two. In fact, over half of the sample mentioned Christianity when asked about the attributes that constitute their identity. Several in the sample invoked their religious beliefs as a moral basis for their differences with the left, which were occasionally not just viewed in terms of right and wrong, but as opposing sides in a great sociological battle—a “culture war.” Cultural competition was referenced by some as a key motivation for prioritizing border security and immigration., as Joe (UH) explained:

I think that immigration is extremely important for like a myriad of reasons. I think the big crux of it is culture. The Overton Window is constantly shifting to the left. The Republicans today act like Democrats of 10 years ago, or 20 years ago, they use the same talking points, and the big cultural shift that is going on, not just from immigration, but from a sort of top down control of the media. And that's not just the people coming in, because they're different, and they have a different culture, but it's just overall, the country is becoming more atomized by consumerism. You know, politics is sometimes downstream from culture, sometimes culture is downstream from politics. It's all kind of related.

Patrick (UH) rendered a similar account:

As Andrew Breitbart once said, "All politics is downstream from culture." And if we don't fight the culture wars now, all the political issues just won't matter. You can see it since the 1900s with the sexual revolution, the advent of the pill, even now [with] the gay revolution and the transgenderism running rampant. What you see is a complete cultural shift happening faster and faster, and it's all on purpose. And it's getting bad now, it's happening so fast that everyone is being coerced into either agreeing with it or being silent. So this is the greatest issue of our time.

Cultural shifts in the U.S. aroused the concern of some conservatives in the sample, who seemed to associate increased cultural diversity (perhaps as the result of immigration) with negative social changes, i.e., support for pro-choice policies, same-sex marriage, transgender issues, etc. Findings suggested that the UH sample placed a higher emphasis on controversial matters than did the A&M sample. This marked an important distinction within the group, as controversial matters are an antecedent to the spiral of silence, which were disproportionately cited by the UH sample as being important to them. The strong opinions issued by some of the UH sample suggested an asymmetry with regard to participants' strength of views, as those from UH appeared *more politically polarized* than the A&M sample, who cited (almost entirely) less or non-controversial matters as their primary concerns. This offset accounts for the lack of A&M representation in this section, as issues without sufficient moral implications have limited applicability for the spiral of silence.

Chapter 4. Discussion

The goal of this thesis was not to generalize participants' experiences but to find nuances within and beyond the theory of the spiral of silence, particularly those which could be missed in quantitative studies. This discussion is based on the experiences of 14 conservative students and might not reflect the experiences of other students on campus. Nevertheless, the accounts rendered in this study are useful because of their implications for theory and contribution to understanding how some students negotiated and perceived their university's social climate.

In figure 1.1, I presented an individual-level issues model that merged conservative identity and active interest. Following Lasorsa's (1991) supposition that people who were interested in an issue were more likely to speak out about it, I interviewed 14 participants and asked them what they thought were the most important political issues. Findings suggested that the model's implications were partially supported as a narrow majority (all participants from A&M and one from UH) of conservatives in the sample reported expressing, or feeling comfortable expressing, matters that were important to them on campus. However, there were clear differences in the samples' perceptions of their university's opinion climates, as most of the UH sample reported self-censoring their political views, even on matters they considered important. Inconsistencies in the sample's outspokenness across A&M and UH may be attributed to asymmetrical degrees of social pressure and negative experiences on campus. Such pronounced differences in perceptions of each school's social climate indicated partial support for the context framework presented in figure 1.2.

The context framework recognized field or institutional opinion spheres as distinct entities from reference groups (such as friends and family) and broader public opinion. According to the sample, the universities featured in this paper seemed to synthesize both forms

of social influence by way of professors and other students. While state funding and other factors may prohibit universities from assuming outright political stances, as companies like Boeing and Microsoft have done in the past (Moy et al., 2001), it may be worth considering the role that cultural differences at the administrative level may have in peoples' perceptions of their respective organizations. Of course, the testimonials featured in this paper should be taken with caution, as they reflect only individual perceptions and cannot prove institutional bias or lack thereof at either university. However, they matter because top-down institutional pressures did have considerable impacts among those who reported them.

Unsurprisingly, the spiral of silence generally occurred for the conservative sample on a liberal campus and did not occur for conservative sample on a conservative campus. In this respect, the spiral of silence—as Noelle-Neumann (1974) conceived it—held up. However, the pressure that drove the UH sample into quietude was often not “public” opinion, but professor opinion. There appeared to be a two-step flow (Lazarsfeld, 1955), or chain of influence between professors' political expressions and sample's willingness to express their views. Two-step flow suggests that people take cues from opinion leaders (who interpret and contextualize media for others) rather than from media sources directly (Lazarsfeld, 1955). While professors' media consumption was backstage in this study, their roles as opinion leaders seemed palpable. Because of this dynamic in the classroom, the samples' self-censorship was pragmatic in that students did not want to risk their grade point average, be judged, or subjected to biased treatment. These findings are also consistent with studies that suggest people prioritize monetary gratifications over social gratifications (Spreckelmeyer et al., 2009), as GPA may have implications in future opportunities and employment.

Most affective social interactions in this study between professors and students—referred to in this paper as episodes—involved discussions in class about racism, but other issues of concern for several interviewees included abortion, immigration and culture. In addition, most of the individuals I interviewed self-identified as conservatives and Christians. Implicit in some participants' identities as Christian-conservatives was the moral duty to assume a pro-life stance and preserve "traditional American culture" through stricter stances on immigration. However, the samples' self-expressed identities had theoretical implications as well, as the most outspoken members in the sample, referred to by Noelle-Neumann as "hardcores" (1974, p. 48), were not immutable. For example, Joe (UH) and Patrick (UH), who regularly expressed themselves in the face of adversity, also succumbed to censorship—Joe (UH) indefinitely, Patrick (UH) on occasion. Even those who felt morally opposed to abortion in the UH sample were often selective with or abstained from voicing their stances. This suggested that social pressure might be able to whittle away at hardcores' (or people who are very reluctant to self-censor) resolves over time and silence all but the most determined individuals, and even those may be defeated by a sufficient amount of uncomfortable or intense experiences. However, this phenomenon may vary by person and institution.

Confrontations played a prominent role in some participants' willingness to express their views, and while the nature of these events varied widely, it appears that the role of episodes are largely absent from literature on the spiral of silence. This may be a consequence of survey methodology that often addresses hypothetical scenarios while excluding participants from elaborating on their lived experiences. Furthermore, the asymmetrical nature of participants' experiences on campus—despite all of them having attended a public university in Texas—supports the idea that, under certain circumstances, "micro-climates" might exist (Moy et al.,

2001). This study echoes Moy and colleagues' (2001) call to recognize the potential for institutions to harbor independent opinion climates and consider the influence of reference groups (Clemente & Roulet, 2015) within those fields.

The sample's political expressions on university grounds (particularly the UH sample) drew a distinction between classrooms and the greater campus. Whereas professor influence was often cited as the dominant social factor in the classroom, campus grounds were primarily governed by students, who—according to the sample—possessed less influence and exerted less social pressure. This finding presents a nuance to literature pertaining to free speech on campuses, which often regard students as university opinion leaders (Chemerinsky, 2017; Behrent, 2019). And although some participants mentioned free speech zones and niche areas on campus where they felt comfortable expressing themselves, e.g., outside of UH's library, several in the sample reserved their political expressions for club organizations like College Republicans. This finding may highlight the importance of student-run organizations in providing a place for ideological minorities to (if only temporarily) break the spiral of silence. However, students feeling the need to hide their Trump and College Republican apparel suggested that threats to free speech on campus (Chemerinsky, 2017; Ekins, 2017; Behrent, 2019) may still be a legitimate concern.

While the universities in this sample were recognized as ideological opposites (Levin, 2016), most colleges in the United States tend to lean to the political left (Abrams & Khalid, 2020), as even the precinct around A&M's physical address voted for Biden in the 2020 election (Park et al., 2021). And while perceptions of liberal dominance in higher education persist (Maranto & Woessner, 2012; Abrams & Khalid, 2020), there is scant evidence as to what role this dynamic may play in students' educations or social livelihoods. Given the sample's

unanimous disapproval of mainstream media, yet moderate respect for professors' opinions, I suggest that professors' lectures be recognized as a form of *grey literature*. Grey literature refers to "information produced outside of traditional publishing and distribution channels, and can include reports, policy literature, working papers, newsletters, government documents, speeches, white paper, urban plans, and so on" (McKenzie, 2022). While the spiral of silence is a media effects theory, traditional media appeared to play a negligible role in the samples' political expressions, while the content of professors' lectures appeared substantial.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

This exploratory study set out to discover nuances within the well-established theory of the spiral of silence. To achieve this, I employed qualitative interviews that fleshed out the experiences of 14 conservative students and alumni from two prominent Texas universities. The conclusions drawn here are not meant to represent the experiences of students at UH or A&M, as several of the participants featured in this study were highly politicized and expressed unusual degrees of political activism.

This study's findings suggested that the spiral of silence was present among select conservative students at the University of Houston during and after the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The seven UH students I interviewed experienced the spiral of silence at least episodically, and several reported long-term (multiyear) self-censorship of their political views. The UH sample reported experiencing social pressure through two means: professors in the classroom and other students on campus. As such, several participants from UH identified college classrooms as the most ideologically restrictive places at school, given their perceived dominance by left-leaning professors. In addition, the UH sample perceived their campus grounds as less ideologically restrictive than classrooms, but moderately hostile to conservative viewpoints and expressions, given their negative experiences with other students on campus. Conversely, most of the seven students from Texas A&M did not report experiencing the spiral of silence during or after the 2020 election, except in specific circumstances, and for relatively short periods of time. Furthermore, the A&M sample did not consistently identify ideologically hostile places on campus, and generally felt comfortable expressing their political views anywhere within the university system. The data suggested that the sample perceived substantial differences between the opinion climates of the University of Houston and Texas A&M

University, as six of the seven UH participants reported feeling uncomfortable expressing themselves on campus while all seven of the A&M participants reported feeling comfortable expressing themselves on campus.

Most members in the sample were united, however, in their identity as Christians, and multiple participants made explicit connections between their religious views and the issues that they found to be the most important. Among these, abortion and immigration were prevalent, largely due to participants' moral guidance from Christianity and desire to maintain the United States' traditional culture. Several in the sample felt that the political right was losing ground to the left, and that a "culture war" was being waged in defense of free speech, the sanctity of life, and Christian values. Given that all participants in this study identified as conservatives, and most self-identified as Christians, it may be inferred that conservative identity and Christian faith were tentatively associated in this study. However, this does not mean that Christians are necessarily more likely to be conservatives or vice versa. This observation merely points to the fact that several participants invoked their Christian faith when justifying their political stances.

This study made several contributions to current knowledge about the spiral of silence. Previous studies suggest that academia may be skewed to the left at both the administrative and student body levels (Abrams & Khalid, 2020). This study reports that the sample from UH perceived considerable liberal bias from their professors, often resulting in the spiral of silence for fear of academic and social retribution. What is more, the sample's political involvement (several were members of conservative organizations on campus) suggested that—contrary to Noelle-Neumann's assertion—even some young people with strong opinions, like several of the members in this study, may succumb to the spiral of silence if the opinion climate is powerful enough. The degree to which this is specific to the students included in the sample, or

characteristic of similar students in other contexts cannot be determined with the data collected in this study, and would require further research. What is certain for this group of students is that their perceptions of Trump and post-Trumpian political climates varied highly, depending on where they attended school. This study also explored how universities can function as social synthesizers. By hosting both reference groups and publics, universities may constitute mid-tier opinion climates capable of exerting institutional pressure on their inhabitants, as this was how the participants from UH felt. However, an institutional opinion climate was not perceived by the A&M sample, implying that institutions should be viewed as particular entities, rather than a monolith. Perhaps most importantly, however, this study found several instances of opinion leaders playing active roles in individuals' willingness to speak out or self-censor. Even though the sample in this study was small and might be defined as somewhat unique, the stories shared by participants seemed to suggest that Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow and Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence may be complicit in some outcomes. This proposition would require further study and testing, as the data referenced in this thesis is not generalizable.

While traditional spiral of silence models regard social isolation as the consequence for nonconformity, my findings suggest that institutions may render harsher ramifications than the literature conveys. Reflection upon participants' experiences of being spat on, insulted, physically threatened, ridiculed and doxed may warrant further consideration as to the factors that contribute to ideological suppression, and whether or not some of the instances recalled in this paper are desirable or acceptable in university contexts, regardless of whether the anecdotes presented here are isolated cases or not. Additionally, most participants from UH feeling uncomfortable expressing their views in class and on campus may prompt questions about broader phenomena, including the latent Republican vote share associated with Trump politics,

the “silent majority,” and cultural trends in higher education. However, it must be noted that this paper makes no attempt to inform such factors, as the data in this study *purely* reflects the select experiences of some students and alumni from UH and A&M.

Future studies on the spiral of silence may expand several areas that were touched upon in this paper. First, additional work is needed to explore the specific mechanisms that contribute to ideological suppression, as fear of isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) may be just one aspect in a range of potential social pressures. Other studies on the spiral of silence might do well to consider the theory’s possible intersection with two-step flow theory, as tremendous variability in institutional social structures implies a panoply of opportunities for studying institutional social agents. In addition, the spiral of silence might also benefit from more qualitative inquiries pertaining to real life scenarios, as survey methodology pertaining to hypothetical situations is still standard in the discipline. Finally, longitudinal studies that track peoples’ value systems and degrees of political outspokenness over time may also provide further insight into how various occurrences or episodes affect people and their expressiveness as they go through life.

Limitations of this study included a suboptimal sample size, as additional participants likely would have expanded the breadth of participants’ experiences and perhaps provided more relative weight (or lack thereof) to the sentiments issued. Similarly, too few participants may have been conducive to overrepresentation of viewpoints within the group, as most of the findings focused on the UH sample, where two members would comprise almost a third of the participants from that school. Low sample numbers may also have contributed to the lack of saturation with regard to participants’ issue concerns and low variation in the strength of participants’ conservatism, as the perspectives of more moderate Republicans were underrepresented in this study. The sample was also highly involved in politics (given that most

were involved with College Republicans groups at some point) in that several members worked with or for the Republican party, indicating an abnormal degree of political involvement. Thus, descriptions of campus cultures and participants' experiences cannot represent the experiences of conservative students in general. For example, Joe's (UH) involvement in a fringe organization and grandiose activism for right-wing causes in class and on campus mark just a few behaviors that may be considered exceptional, even for far-right conservatives. Such extreme degrees of outspokenness may have promoted higher levels of engagement and conflict with others—something that more typical students may have avoided.

Some of the timelines and episodes featured in this paper drew from participants' recollections of an increasingly distant past. Thus, it is possible that some interviewees may have unintentionally misrepresented their experiences. It is also important to point out the complexities associated with political outspokenness including personal dispositions and broader environmental factors. This thesis focused rather narrowly on just a few of the more prominent social aspects of university structures while excluding the influences of reference groups (such as friends and family) and general public opinion. None of the participants or testimonials featured in this paper are representative.

In this thesis, I set out to explore whether the spiral of silence occurred for some conservative students on select university campuses within the context of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and if it did, how exactly this phenomenon transpired. While I cannot generalize my findings, I hope this study will contribute to conversations pertaining to theory, political outspokenness, and the function of institutional social pressures. I also hope that the lived experiences of my participants raise important questions along the way.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide**[INTRODUCTION]**

- Hello (participant name), thank you for meeting with me, I really appreciate it! So where are you from? Why did you decide to come to Texas? Or, why did you decide to stay in Texas for your studies?
- What college are you attending?
- What made you choose this university?
- What are you studying?
- Tell me a bit about the activities you are involved in on campus. Do you play any sports? Are you in a fraternity/sorority? Any other activities?
- What does a regular day at school look like for you?

[BACKGROUND] Political Orientation

- Next, I'd like to ask you some questions about politics. If you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions, just let me know and we can move to the next one.
- On a scale from 0 to 10, 0 being extremely Liberal, 10 being extremely Conservative, where would you position yourself ideologically?
- If you had to use two or three words, how would you describe people who vote for the Democratic Party?
- How comfortable would you be dating/marrying/befriending somebody who votes for the Democratic Party?
- What are your views on the mainstream media?
- Would you say that the media can be trusted? Why so?
- Where do you get your news from? What do you like about them?
- Do you use social media to get news?
- You didn't mention [blank sources], why do you leave these out?
- Let's talk about former president Donald Trump.
- What is your view of him? Why is that?
- What do you think is his best quality? What about his worst?

[TOPIC 1] Political expression

- Next, I'd like to talk about how you express your political views. Some of these questions might be on topics that are somewhat sensitive, so feel free to tell me if you'd like to skip any of them.
- How often would you say that you refrain from telling others what you think about a political issue? For example, think about the border wall, gun rights etc.
- Do you consider yourself active in politics? How so?
- Do you take part in debates or any kind of activism (in person or online)?
- Do you display bumper stickers, signs, flags, or other political symbols?
- Do you make political posts on social media? If so, which platforms, and how often?

[TOPIC 2] Issues: identities, and interests

- We are making great progress. Thanks for sharing all of that with me. Now, let's turn to some other talking points.
- As a Conservative, what political issues do you consider to be the most important? Why those?
- Have you argued with someone about these issues online? What about in person?
- Why did you make a stand on these subjects?
- Would you feel comfortable discussing the border wall in class? What about on campus with a stranger?
- Would you feel comfortable discussing gun rights in class? What about on campus?
- Have you been criticized on campus for being a Republican or Conservative? If so, how?
- Would you say that being a Republican or Conservative is a part of your identity?
- What other attributes or qualities do you consider part of your identity?
- Would you say that you are more or less likely to speak out or defend your position on these matters?

[TOPIC 3] Contexts: College campuses

- How much do the opinions of friends and family mean to you?
- What about classmates and your professors?
- What about people you don't know, or people in general?
- Have you felt the need to censor your political stances on campus during or after the 2020 election? If so, what were the circumstances?
- Are there certain places on campus where you feel more comfortable talking about your political views? Why is that?
- Now let's flip the question. Are there places on campus where you do not feel comfortable expressing your political views? Why?
- On the whole, do you feel like you can express your political opinions on campus?
- On the whole, would you say campus is a place where everyone can express their views? Why or why not?

[WRAPPING UP]

- This is all I wanted to ask. Before I let you go, is there anything we did not cover that you would like to add?

Appendix B

Codebook

Code	Description
<i>(Participant Demographics)</i>	Characteristics of participants
Age	12 were between 18 and 24 years old. 1 was between 25 and 34 years old, and 1 was between 35 and 40 years old.
Ethnicity	Predominantly White, with 1 Arab, 1 Asian, 1 Hispanic
Areas of study	What the participant is studying
<i>(Political Views)</i>	Where participants fall within the spectrum of political ideology.
Conservative	Self-described strength of affiliation ranged from 6 to 10.
Affiliations	Many participants are or were in their university's College Republican group, with multiple presidents.
Feelings towards Democrats	Description of Democrats, comfort level.
Feelings towards the media	Unanimously negative sentiments towards mainstream media.
News Sourcing	Where participants get their news.
Feelings towards Donald Trump	Participants' feelings towards Donald Trump.
<i>(Political Expression)</i>	The extent to which participants expressed their political views. Outspokenness, activism, social media posts, etc.
<i>(Spiral of silence applicability)</i>	The degree to which students felt pressured into quietude.
A&M	The specific attributes that determined social pressure, i.e., conservative culture via student body, some professors, and strong military affiliations.
UH	The specific attributes that determined social pressure, i.e., liberal culture via student body, many professors, and administrators.
<i>(Contexts)</i>	Physical and social settings that influenced students' political expressions.
University Contexts	Places on campus that affected students' political expressions.
Classrooms	Cited as the most ideologically restrictive place.
Professor Influence	Cited as people of ideological influence.
Campus Grounds	Greater campus area has mixed political settings.

Hostile Areas	Particular areas that are hostile to conservative ideas
Free Speech Zones	Places on campus that were conducive to the expression of unpopular ideas.
Social Hierarchy	The degree of import associated with family, friends, professors, and strangers.
<i>(Issues)</i>	Matters that are part of conservatism and those that students felt were important to them.
Abortion	Very commonly cited issue. Strong moral component.
Border wall	Willingness to discuss in class or on campus varied by school.
Gun rights	Willingness to discuss in class or on campus varied by school.
Other	Issues brought up by the participant not previously mentioned.
<i>(Identity)</i>	The attributes that students embraced as being part of their identity.
Conservatism	Closely tied to Christian faith. Often morally compelled students to support Trump.
Christianity	Provides a moral basis for supporting right-wing policies.
<i>(Episodes)</i>	Being ridiculed in class, doxing, F—you, racist, sexist, and specific instances of social pressure sometimes resulted in permanent or long term silencing.
Transitions	How participants' feelings, thoughts, and actions have changed.
Asymmetrical aggression	The notion that the right is subject to harsher treatment than the left.