

# Megaphone or Muzzle? The Spiral of Silence and Candidate Support on Social Media during Presidential Elections

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Recent polling results suggest voters might be hesitant to express their voting intentions in presidential elections, despite the vibrant social media activity of candidate supporters. Using a national, representative survey, this study sought to determine if the spiral of silence influenced social media sharing, or if other factors encouraged the sharing of political endorsements. Based on the

study findings, the best predictors of social media sharing intentions were opinion leadership and bridging social capital, with social capital exerting the greatest influence.

*Keywords: political campaigns, spiral of silence, social capital, opinion leadership, presidential election*

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**I**n both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, pollsters failed to anticipate the election outcome, with much of the blame being put at the feet of Trump voters hesitant to share their endorsement of the candidate (Linge & Lewak, 2020). While much of the discourse on “shy” Trump voters, hesitant to share their actual endorsement of the candidate, has focused on inadequacies in national public opinion polling (Coppock, 2017; Enns et al., 2017; Kennedy et al., 2018; Stanton, 2020), a poll by the CATO Institute found that almost two-thirds of Americans (62%) believed the current political climate was such that they were afraid to share their political opinions for fear of offending others (Ekins, 2020). This was more acute for conservatives (77%), which supports the “shy” Trump voter conceptualization; however, it is worth noting that the majority of liberal voters (52%) were also hesitant to be outspoken about their political opinions.

However, while pollsters and national polls suggest the existence of “hidden” Trump supporters, Trump’s network of outspoken social media influencers and devoted followers have been credited with fueling his campaign and political messaging (Dvoskin & Timberg, 2020). In 2020, both the Trump and Biden campaigns made use of networks of influencers -- including prominent media personalities and much less widely known “nano-influencers” -- to actively promote their campaigns and spread their messaging (Bredava, 2020; Goodwin et al., 2020; Starbird et al., 2023). Beyond influencers, average social media users were also willing to discuss presidential candidates, with discussions frequently focused on Donald Trump. To this point, 62% of Americans suggested Trump came up often in social media conversations (Pew Research Center, 2018).

While much has been said about “shy” Trump voters and a general hesitancy to share political opinions by many in the current political context, social media engagement during the campaigns suggests individuals may not display the same level of hesitancy when it comes to engaging in political discussions in the online social media environment. This study seeks to better understand individuals’ social media sharing activities in the recent presidential elections.

The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) suggests individuals are not willing to share opinions when they feel they are in the minority opinion climate. However, according to two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), those who perceive themselves as opinion leaders in their networks are willing and expected to share their political opinions. Finally, regular users engage in social media activity to build social capital in their networks, (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Putnam, 2000), which may hold true for political opinions.

This study employed a nationally representative online survey to better understand potential voters’ social media sharing intentions in regards to their preferred political candidates in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Spiral of Silence**

According to spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), individuals who feel their opinion is in the minority are less likely to voice their views out of fear they will be socially rejected and isolated. This isolation is seen as a threat because, according to

Noelle-Neumann (1974), it can manifest in several negative social outcomes, ranging from loss of status to exclusion from decisions and opportunities. Perceptions of opinion climate can be influenced by portrayals in the media and social media, as well as by everyday conversations with others.

The perception of having one's opinions in the minority, also called opinion incongruence, and its effects on suppression of expression have been studied by public opinion scholars for its serious implications to the normative marketplace of ideas, where a diversity of viewpoints, even unpopular or objectionable ones, is seen as essential to a healthy democracy. Chen (2018) argues that public opinion is in fact a process of social control. The spiral of silence is problematic because, according to the theory, majority opinions are more likely to be perpetuated and gain strength in a perceived supportive opinion climate, whereas minority opinions are increasingly stifled under the tyranny of the majority, hence resulting in a spiraling process where many individuals self-select out of sharing their viewpoints.

The spiral of silence theory has found recent support regarding politically charged issues, such as abortion, immigration, and gay marriage (Gearhart & Zhang, 2018) as well as in elections (Kushin et al., 2019). Perceptions of opinion-climate incongruence have been shown to negatively impact people's willingness to express themselves both in day-to-day conversations and in online forums (Kim, 2012), but especially in high-visibility scenarios, such as talking on television. In a project dedicated to the spiral of silence online, the Pew Research Center (Mitchell et al., 2014) found that Facebook users were more likely to share opinions on the platform if they thought their followers shared their views.

During the polarizing and controversial election campaign of 2016, Kushin et al. (2019) found that a perceived incongruent opinion climate led to fear of isolation among both Clinton and Trump supporters along with a reduced willingness to share their support for their preferred candidate both in face-to-face interactions and on Facebook. We predict the same dynamics stayed true in the 2020 election, when the incumbent candidate continued to be seen as controversial as when he first ran for presidency. We focus here on opinion expression on social media, where, despite the possibility to remain anonymous or cultivate networks of like-minded individuals, the spiral of silence has been

shown to persist in both experimental (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014) and survey research (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015).

Kwon et al. (2015) argue that studying willingness to speak out on social networking sites is important not only because of the increasing popularity of the platforms, but because of three key characteristics of SNS interactions that differ from in-person communication: diminished privacy, meshing of disparate personal and professional contexts in one space, and an increased exposure to various unsolicited and possibly counter-attitudinal opinions, also known as incidental exposure (Weeks et al. 2017). Analyzing patterns in the 2016 election cycle, Olson and LaPoe (2017) further point out that trolls and digital harassment, which often target vulnerable populations like women, LGBTQIA community members, and disabled people, are another feature of social media that can exacerbate the spiral of silence.

Based on previous research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H<sub>1</sub>: Individuals who perceive themselves to be in the majority opinion climate will be more likely to share opinions on social media.

**Political Information Sharing and Partisanship.** In addition to fear of isolation and perceived opinion climate, spiral of silence scholarship has explored the importance of individual differences in people's willingness to express opinions. Noelle-Neuman (1993) particularly identified women, the elderly, and people of lower economic status as being less inclined to express their viewpoints. More recent research has examined the importance of partisanship. On either side of the ideological spectrum, strong partisans are more likely to vote, to donate to the campaigns of candidates they support, and to engage in politics (Mitchell et al., 2014).

According to Kwon et al. (2015), strong partisans are also more likely to spend time monitoring the opinion climate around them to ascertain if their specific views are in the majority. Research suggests that social media users who are strong partisans are more inclined to cultivate homogeneous networks of like-minded individuals, and thus less likely to encounter dissonant views (Bakshy et al., 2015). This has important implications on information sharing, as Weeks et al. (2017) found that strong partisans are more likely to share political information on social media after they are exposed to congruent opinions on such platforms.

As such, our next hypothesis predicts the following:

H<sub>2</sub>: Strong partisans will be more willing to share political opinions on social media.

Research from Pew (Mitchell et al., 2014) found that strong conservatives are more likely than strong liberals to be exposed to congruent opinions on Facebook and to have friends who share their views. On the other hand, strong liberals are more likely to unfriend someone on a social network because of incongruent political views. Both groups of strong partisans tend to see themselves as leaders in online and offline political discussions, however.

Given these mixed findings, the following research question poses:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How does political affiliation affect willingness to share opinions on social media?

### **Two-Step Flow and Opinion Leadership**

Recent research suggests that the spiral of silence may not hold true in certain contexts. For instance, when individuals have high levels of certainty about their attitudes, they are willing to express their opinions regardless of the opinion climate (Matthes et al., 2010). Much like those with attitude certainty, perceived opinion leaders – the key concept of two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) – see themselves as trusted sources of information regarding a topic within their networks. Opinion leaders influence their peers' opinions directly via their interpersonal relationships within their social networks, acting as filters and liaisons between the mass media or prominent community leaders. Opinion leaders help shape community opinions through day-to-day interactions, operating on the edges of social networks, rather at the top of networks (Burt, 1999; Wright & Cantor, 1967).

Within online social media networks, opinion leaders take an active role, with high levels of involvement (Karlsen, 2015; Park, 2013). Social media opinion leaders follow prominent figures' social media presences, actively engage in social media conversations, and encourage participation within their social networks. Social media opinion leaders also actively engage in the social media information sharing in hopes of increasing their own social media prominence through increased follower counts (Hwang, 2015). In fact, social media opinion leaders may represent a special class of opinion leadership,

The Spiral of Silence and Candidate Support on Social Media during Presidential Elections navigating a diverse repertoire of media channels and networks to both inform themselves and interact with and influence others (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015). Furthermore, information shared by opinion leaders via social media may amplify trust in the media network from which the information was shared (Turcotte et. al, 2015).

In regards to political influence within online networks, opinion leaders have been identified as important assets to digital campaigns due to the ease of creating actionable metrics to measure the success of campaigns (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Opinion leaders have been shown to influence political conversations on social media, even having an agenda-setting effect that shapes perceptions of public opinion (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). Social media opinion leaders are also more likely to be reliable sources of information regarding information of public interest, as they are more likely to trust credible news sources, are more likely to fact-check information, and are more likely to avoid echo chambers (Dubois et al., 2020). Self-identified opinion leaders within social media networks are more likely to both directly and indirectly attempt to persuade their peers' political attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (Weeks et. al, 2017). As such, we put forth the following hypothesis:

H<sub>3</sub>: Perceived opinion leaders may be willing to share political opinions on social media despite the opinion climate.

### **Social Capital**

Beyond opinion leadership, social capital may be an important contributor to individuals' online sharing of political information. Defined as "the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 14), social capital refers to the investment we have in our network of social connections (Lin, 1999), including our level of trust and the associated norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 2000).

Putnam (2000) describes two types of social capital: bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital refers to our intimate family and friend circles we depend on to "get by," while bridging social capital refers to our extended networks of acquaintances we used to "get ahead." Putnam connects our bonding capital to

Granovetter's (1973) notion of strong ties within our networks, while bridging social capital is related to our weak ties, which are essential for the flow of new information.

Within online social media networks, while both forms of social capital have been found to be supported by these networks, social media is especially effective for cultivating the bridging type of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 2011). Online social capital has been associated with information sharing and positive word-of-mouth promotion (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Chu & Kim, 2011), as well as extra-network behaviors and activities, such as consumer purchase intentions (Kwahk & Ge, 2012).

With regard to political opinions and matters of public interest, users with high levels of bridging social capital are willing to share opinions on controversial and political issues despite perceiving their opinions as being in the minority, a counter to the spiral of silence. (Sheehan, 2015). Online social capital also contributes to offline civic participation (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), thus we propose the following hypothesis:

H<sub>4</sub>: Individuals with higher levels of bridging social capital may be willing to share political opinions despite the opinion climate.

While it is anticipated that bridging social capital contributes to the sharing of political opinions via social media, it has been suggested that social capital could serve as an important possible moderator in communication research (Lee & Sohn, 2016). Therefore, it may be possible that social capital could positively moderate the relation between perceived opinion climate and social media sharing. As such, we ask the following research question:

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Does social capital positively moderate the relation between perceived opinion climate and social media sharing?

**Key Predictor of Candidate Opinion Sharing on Social Media.** Given the hypothesized relations between the study variables, we seek to understand which variable (opinion climate, opinion leadership, social capital) best predicts social sharing, as expressed through the following research question:

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Of affiliation, partisanship, majority opinion climate, opinion leadership, or social capital, which variable best predicts social media sharing?

## METHODS

To address the hypotheses and research questions, a national cross-sectional survey was conducted using a nationally representative panel provided by market-research company Dynata. The online survey was conducted in July 2020 after the presidential primaries. After discarding incomplete answers and the responses of participants who failed the attention checks, the final sample consisted of 1,260 respondents who match the U.S. population by gender, income, race, education, and age. The study was reviewed by the university's institutional review board and determined to be exempt of ongoing review.

In terms of gender, 50.2 percent of the participants identified as women ( $n = 632$ ). As for age, 13.9 percent of the sample were between 18 and 24 years old ( $n = 175$ ). 33.6 percent were between 25 and 44 years old ( $n = 423$ ), 35.2 percent were between 45 and 64 years old ( $n = 444$ ), and 17.3 percent were older than 64 years old ( $n = 218$ ). With regard to race, 51.7 percent of respondents identified as white ( $n = 652$ ), 18.9 percent identified as black ( $n = 238$ ), 15.2 percent as Hispanic ( $n = 191$ ), 9.6 percent as Asian American ( $n = 121$ ), 1.7 percent as Native American ( $n = 21$ ), and 3 percent as other ( $n = 37$ ).

In terms of education attainment, 30.3 percent reported having a college degree ( $n = 382$ ), 29.8 percent had some college or technical training ( $n = 376$ ), 19.5 percent had a high school diploma, including GED ( $n = 246$ ), and 18 percent had post-graduate work or degree ( $n = 227$ ). Only 2.3 percent reported having an education of less than high school ( $n = 29$ ). As for household income, 22.3 percent made less than \$25,000 per year ( $n = 281$ ), 28.6 percent reported making between \$25,000 to \$50,000 ( $n = 360$ ), 16.5 percent fell between \$50,000 to \$75,000 ( $n = 208$ ), 13.9 percent reported an income between \$75,000 to \$100,000 ( $n = 175$ ), and 18.7 percent made more than \$100,000 annually ( $n = 236$ ).

Regarding respondents' political affiliations, 31.6 percent intended to vote for Donald Trump in the upcoming election ( $n = 398$ ), 52.4 percent intended to vote for Joe Biden ( $n = 660$ ), and 15.6 intended to vote for an independent or third-party candidate ( $n = 195$ ). The sample was 24.4 percent Republican ( $n = 308$ ), 40.8 percent Democrat ( $n = 514$ ), 29.7 percent Independent ( $n = 374$ ), and 5 percent ( $n = 64$ ) with an unidentified affiliation.

## Measures

**Spiral of Silence.** Perceived opinion climate regarding the 2020 presidential race between Joe Biden and Donald Trump was measured in a manner consistent with

Matthes et al. (2010). First, respondents were asked to indicate their preference in the upcoming presidential election, either Joe Biden, Donald Trump, or an independent or third-party candidate. Based on their selection, respondents were then asked how likely it was their preferred candidate would win the election, using conditional formatting to insert their previously indicated choice into the statement. For example, participants who indicated their choice was Joe Biden would have been asked, “How likely do you think it is that Joe Biden will win the general presidential election?” Responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from “extremely unlikely” to “extremely likely.” This measure represented perceived opinion climate ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

**Opinion Leadership.** Perceived opinion leadership was measured using a scale utilized by Schäfer and Taddicken (2015) adapted from Childers (1986). The scale consisted of six items scored using five-point, semantic differential scales. Sample statements include, “In general, do you talk to your friends and neighbors about politics,” with responses ranging from “Never” to “Very Often,” and, “Compared with your circle of friends, how likely are you to be asked about politics?” with responses ranging from “Not at all likely to be asked” to “Very likely to be asked.” The scale ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) was reliable,  $\alpha = .91$ .

**Social Capital.** Social capital was measured using the 13-item measure (Su & Chan, 2017) adapted from Williams (2006). The measure consists of two subscales for bonding (6 items) and bridging (7 items), measured on five-point, Likert scales ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Examples of bridging items include, “Interacting with people on social media makes me want to try new things,” and, “On social media, I come in contact with new people all the time.” Examples of bonding items include, “There are several people on social media I trust to help solve my problems,” and, “When I feel lonely, there are several people on social media I can talk to.” Both the bridging ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) and bonding ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) scales were reliable, with  $\alpha = .94$  and  $\alpha = .89$ , respectively.

**Political Affiliation, Partisanship, and Voting.** Respondent’s political affiliation was ascertained by asking whether respondents’ identified as Republican, Democrat, independent or third party, another affiliation, or not sure. Participants’ voting intention

The Spiral of Silence and Candidate Support on Social Media during Presidential Elections in the upcoming presidential election ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) was measured using a five-point scale ranging from “extremely unlikely” to “extremely likely.”

Partisanship was measured in a manner similar to Chan (2014) and Gerber et al. (2012). Respondents were asked to indicate their political views on a 7-point scale ranging from “extremely conservative” to “extremely liberal.” Those indicating their views were extremely conservative and conservative, as well as those indicating extremely liberal and liberal viewpoints, were coded as highly partisan, with the remaining respondents coded as having low partisanship. Highly partisan respondents constituted 43.3 percent of the sample ( $n = 545$ ).

**Key Dependent Variable.** The key dependent variable, social sharing intentions, was measured using a three-item scale (Huang et al., 2013). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement on five-item, Likert scales ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Items were, “I am likely to pass along my views on political candidates to others on social media,” “I am likely to tell others about my views about political candidates on social media,” and, “I am likely to talk about my views on political candidates on social media.” The scale ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) was also demonstrated to be reliable, with  $\alpha = .95$ .

## RESULTS

To address the hypotheses, RQ1, and RQ3, a hierarchical regression was modeled with social media sharing of political candidate information as the criterion variable. Correlations between the independent variables and the dependent variable are presented in Table 1, and the hierarchical regression is presented in Table 2. No variable variance inflation factor exceeded 4, and no tolerance was less than .2, suggesting no risks of multicollinearity.

The first step of the regression entered the control variables, specifically the respondents’ likelihood of voting in the 2020 presidential election and candidate support, as well as the political affiliation and partisanship variables. Candidate support was dummy coded as Biden (1) and Trump (1) with the independent or third party choice as the reference (0). Affiliation was dummy coded as Republican (1) and Democrat (1) with other affiliations as the reference (0). The entrance of the voting, affiliation, and partisan

variables in step 1 was statistically significant,  $F(6,1246) = 6.67, p < .001$ ; however, this step only explained 3% of the variance.

Table 1

*Pearson Correlations of Independent and Dependent Variables (N= 1,260)*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Republican							
2. Democrat	-.47 <sup>+</sup>						
3. Partisanship	.21 <sup>+</sup>	.11 <sup>+</sup>					
4. Perceived Opinion Climate	.22 <sup>+</sup>	.05	.18 <sup>+</sup>				
5. Opinion Leadership	.06	.10 <sup>**</sup>	.19 <sup>+</sup>	.17 <sup>+</sup>			
6. Bonding Social Capital	.02	.02	.03	.09 <sup>**</sup>	.36 <sup>+</sup>		
7. Bridging Social Capital	-.03	.07 <sup>*</sup>	.02	.09 <sup>**</sup>	.34 <sup>+</sup>	.74 <sup>+</sup>	
Social Media Sharing	-.004	.13 <sup>+</sup>	.07 <sup>*</sup>	.10 <sup>+</sup>	.50 <sup>+</sup>	.60 <sup>+</sup>	.62 <sup>+</sup>

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , +  $p < .001$

H1 posited that individuals who perceive themselves to be in the majority opinion climate would be more likely to share opinions on social media. The entrance of perceived positive congruence in step two of the regression was statistically significant,  $\Delta F(1, 1245) = 11.75, p < .001$ . Popular opinion climate was a significant predictor of social media sharing when compared to the controls,  $B = .12, SE = .04, p = .001$ , though its introduction only explained an additional 1% of the variance. In addition, it was not significant in the complete model,  $B = .03, SE = .03, p = .17$ . This suggests partial support for H1.

H2 argued that strong partisans will be more willing to share political opinions on social media. The introduction of partisanship in step 1 was not statistically significant,  $B = .10, SE = .08, p = .19$ , which was also true of the variable in the complete model,  $B = -.04, SE = .05, p = .49$ . H2 was therefore not supported. RQ1 asked if political affiliation was associated with willingness to share political opinions on social media. The relationship between being Republican and social sharing was not significant in step 1,  $B = .08, SE =$

.11,  $p = .49$ , nor in the overall model,  $B = .05$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .55$ ; however, being a Democrat had a statistically significant relation with social sharing in the complete model,  $B = .31$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ . To address RQ1, Democrats are more willing to share political opinions on social media.

Table 2

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression of Variables Predicting Social Media Sharing (N = 1,260)*

Variables	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3			Step 4		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Voter Intention	-.08	.03	-.09**	-.11	.03	-.12 <sup>+</sup>	-.14	.02	-.15 <sup>+</sup>	-.08	.02	-.09 <sup>+</sup>
Trump Voter	.31	.12	.12*	.14	.13	.05	-.07	.12	-.03	.02	.09	.01
Biden Voter	.11	.11	.04	-.04	.12	-.02	-.23	.10	-.09*	-.17	.09	-.07
Republican	.08	.11	.03	.04	.11	.02	.04	.10	.01	.05	.08	.02
Democrat	.43	.09	.17 <sup>+</sup>	.42	.09	.17 <sup>+</sup>	.35	.08	.14 <sup>+</sup>	.31	.07	.12 <sup>+</sup>
Partisanship	.10	.08	.04	.08	.07	.03	-.10	.07	-.04	-.04	.05	-.02
Op. Climate				.12	.04	.12**	.09	.03	.09**	.03	.03	.03
Op. Leader							.62	.03	.51 <sup>+</sup>	.37	.03	.30 <sup>+</sup>
S.C. - Bonding										.25	.03	.22 <sup>+</sup>
S.C. - Bridging										.38	.03	.35 <sup>+</sup>

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , + $p < .001$ . Op. = Opinion. S.C. = Social Capital  
 Step 1:  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(6, 1246) = 6.67$ ,  $p < .001$ .  
 Step 2:  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 1245) = 11.75$ ,  $p < .001$ .  
 Step 3:  $\Delta R^2 = .24$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 1244) = 415.64$ ,  $p < .001$ .  
 Step 4:  $\Delta R^2 = .24$ ,  $\Delta F(2, 1242) = 312.84$ ,  $p < .001$ .

H3 posited perceived opinion leaders would be willing to share political opinions on social media despite the opinion climate. The introduction of the perceived opinion leadership variable in step 3 was statistically significant,  $\Delta F(1, 1244) = 415.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , and it explained 24% of the variance. Perceived opinion leadership was a statistically

significant predictor of social sharing in the overall model,  $B = .37$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ . As such, H3 was supported.

H4 suggested individuals with higher levels of bridging social capital would be willing to share political opinions on social media. Both bonding and bridging social capital were introduced in step 4, which was statistically significant,  $\Delta F(2, 1242) = 312.84$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining an additional 24% of the variance. Bridging social capital was a statistically significant predictor of social sharing in the overall model,  $B = .38$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ . H4 was supported.

RQ3 asked which variable would best predict social media sharing of candidate political opinions. Based on standardized betas, bridging social capital exerted the most influence ( $\beta = .35$ ), followed by opinion leadership ( $\beta = .30$ ), and bonding social capital ( $\beta = .22$ ). To address RQ3, bridging social capital best predicts social media sharing of political candidate opinions.

RQ2 was addressed using model 1 of the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013). The research question asked if social capital positively moderated the relation between perceived opinion climate and social media sharing. The overall model, which included the variables analyzed in the previous regression as covariates, was statistically significant,  $F(11, 1241) = 123.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, the interaction between perceived popular opinion and bridging social capital was not significant,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .55$ , suggesting social capital does not moderate the relation between popular opinion and social sharing.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this current investigation was to determine if the spiral of silence was present in online social media conversations focused on the 2020 presidential election, and if hesitancy to speak out due to an individuals' presence in the minority opinion climate was overcome by perceptions that users were opinion leaders or their perceived social capital. Using a national, representative survey, study results suggests that the spiral of silence may not impact social media sharing for opinion leaders and those with strong social capital in their extended networks. There was marginal support for the influence of the spiral of silence in online conversations regarding political candidates; however, while partisanship did not predict social sharing, being a Democrat exerted more

influence on sharing candidate opinions online than being in the majority opinion climate. The best predictors of social media sharing intentions were opinion leadership and bridging social capital. Notably, bridging social capital exerted the most influence on willingness to share, surpassing the influence of perceived opinion leadership. Political supporters with strong networks of trust and reciprocity may feel confident expressing political opinions on social media despite the perceived opinion climate.

Past research suggests the presence of the spiral of silence regarding controversial issues and elections (e.g., Gearhart & Zhang, 2018; Kushin et al., 2019), and that key characteristics of social media networks might fuel the spiral of silence; specifically social media's diminished privacy, meshing of personal and professional contexts, and increased exposure to opposing political views and opinions (Kwon et al., 2015). However, the study reported here did not find strong support for the spiral of silence on social media. In fact, the investment an individual has in their social network -- conceptualized as bridging social capital -- may have an opposite effect, increasing an individual's willingness to share. Bridging social capital, which describes an individual's extended network of acquaintances, is useful as a resource to "get ahead" (Putnam, 2000), and its presence would appear to encourage political sharing, rather than stifle it. Rather than stifling political conversation, it would appear that the decreased privacy and meddling of extended networks thought to potentially strengthen the spiral of silence actually *emboldened* individuals to more actively engage in social media sharing of political endorsements.

Bridging social capital has shown to be an important predictor of online sharing in digital networks (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006), including consumer word-of-mouth (Chu & Kim, 2011). Research suggests that social sharing is an important aspect of building and maintaining social capital, with social media users utilizing social media posts to groom relationships via social media as well as capture the attention of those in their networks (Ellison et al., 2014). Social sharing thus becomes a means of building and maintaining social capital as a resource available to the user.

In fact, self-disclosure has been shown to build social capital, which in turn encourages increased social media use leading to even greater self-disclosure (Treppe & Reinecke, 2012). Social capital is created by social media sharing, which in turn increases

social capital, including self-disclosure. As such, it is not surprising that sharing political opinions and endorsements -- even controversial ones -- is an important part of building and maintaining one's social network. The gains in social capital fueled by personal disclosure may be worth any perceived risks. In fact, social capital influences social sharing directly, as this study determined social capital did not moderate the relation between perceived opinion climate and social sharing. Past research suggests social capital is an important predictor of sharing political opinions on social media despite the opinion climate (Sheehan, 2015), and the current investigation suggests social capital's influence is also applicable to elections and political candidates.

While not exerting as much influence as social capital, perceived opinion leadership is an important predictor of social media sharing. This supports past research emphasizing the importance of opinion leadership in online conversations (e.g., Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020; Weeks et. al, 2017). However, the current study suggests that even perceived opinion leadership was less important than bridging social capital. Users are willing to share their opinions on political candidates regardless of whether or not they perceive themselves to have specialized political knowledge or influence in their online communities, if they feel it will help them build and maintain their healthy social networks.

### **Implications for Media Platforms and Campaigns**

While much media attention has been paid to the presence of "shy" Trump voters, the current study did find that in general, Democrats were more willing to share their candidate opinions on social media than Republicans. However, the current investigation did not determine there was a spiral of silence, at least in social media contexts. As far as social media sharing is concerned, there is little evidence of "shy" conservative voters. Rather, other factors are more important in predicting political endorsements in social media environments.

The identification of opinion leaders should continue to be an important objective for organizers and campaign leaders during elections, as they are willing to share political opinions and support despite the candidates' perceived popularity (or lack thereof). The role of opinion leaders in the dissemination of information and the influence of attitudes and opinions within social networks continues to be an important consideration, both

theoretically and practically in communication campaigns. However, opinion leaders alone need not be the focus of social media outreach efforts. Given the importance of social media social capital, this study suggests that those with robust networks of trust and reciprocity in their social media are more than willing to share political opinions. Rather than focusing exclusively on influencers at the macro and micro level, campaigns should devote resources to encouraging their supporters to actively and frequently engage in their social networks to form positive and beneficial relationships, regardless of their political activities, as having robust social networks will encourage political participation, regardless of the opinion climate.

The past several political elections have revealed the importance of social media in shaping and continuing the national conversation regarding political candidates. The current study suggests social media users are willing to express their opinions regarding their chosen candidates regardless of the opinion climate, and users do not need to perceive themselves to be influencers in order to speak out, though influencers still operate as such. The trust and reciprocity an individual user perceives within their network will ultimately predict whether or not they are willing to engage in political conversations surrounding elections. As such, understanding an individual's use and level of engagement in their networks will provide clues to their willingness to engage in online political sharing, supporting political campaigns, and providing insights into their potential voting behaviors.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The current study has several limitations. Specifically, as the survey was carried out during the 2020 presidential election cycle, it may be influenced by particular factors related to the election. For instance, given the lockdowns and uncertainty related to COVID-19, social media engagement and involvement may have been at different levels than other recent elections. Future research should seek to replicate the current study in future presidential elections. In addition, the current study examined presidential elections, specifically. Care should be taken in applying the results to other types of elections, including both federal elections and elections at the state and local level. Future research should also seek to examine specific social capital built in particular networks. While the current investigation examined social media broadly, presidential elections

employed different strategies for different networks (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, etc.). A more granular approach to understanding social capital in specific networks could be desirable to help augment and further round out the findings reported here.

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## **Funding and Acknowledgements**

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

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