

Why do people talk politics online? Because they don't care what you think

September 7 2018, by Nils Gustafsson, Annika Fredén, Emma A. Bäck
And Hanna Bäck



Credit: August de Richelieu from Pexels

Wading into a political debate online can be a minefield. Search any comment section or thread on a social media site, and you're likely to

come across some pretty strong views. But that's not necessarily just the nature of the debate. It could also reflect the kind of personalities that are drawn to online discussions of this kind.

[In our research](#), we've found that people who don't care about what others think are more likely to engage in politics on [social media](#). This might have an effect on what they say online and contribute to the vitriolic tone that puts so many off engaging in public online conversations. It might also be decisive in selecting the political content that people come across in their feeds.

When social media first became popular in the 2000s, people thought it would enable a more diverse set of people to participate in the political debate. Anyone could post something. Anyone could see their words spread to millions of people's news feeds.

But for many people, politics is a sensitive issue, and they care about their audience. On social media, the audience is invisible unless they react by commenting, liking or sharing. So even if you are interested in politics, the chances are that if you are sensitive to being socially rejected, you will stay away from posting, sharing or commenting on political issues unless you are sure that they are uncontroversial in your social network.

We, a group of scholars from political science, psychology, and communication studies, decided to study the personality traits of people who post political content on social media compared to those who do not. We measured several traits, but found one that was especially interesting: [rejection sensitivity](#).

[Rejection sensitivity](#) is a well-established measurement in social psychology that measures social risk propensity. That means looking at how afraid you are that someone will reject you for something you have

said or done by asking how you would react to a number of hypothetical situations. How you'd feel about being rejected by a close friend, walking up to a stranger at a party, and so on, are all part of a puzzle. From the answers to these questions, we can calculate a rejection [sensitivity](#) index for every individual. A low value indicates low sensitivity to rejection and vice versa.

We then studied the relationship between rejection sensitivity and political activity on social media in a unique survey, distributed to about 2,000 Swedish residents. We then interviewed 60 young Swedes in order to get a better understanding of why they either took part in political debate online or not.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The statistical analysis showed that even after controlling for age, education, gender and political interest, rejection sensitivity has a significant effect on engagement. Above all, individuals with a high fear of being rejected avoid sharing political content to their network.

For example: a 30-year-old man or woman with a university education and an interest in politics who has a high degree of [rejection](#) sensitivity is 40% less likely to share or post political content than someone with the same characteristics but with a low fear of being socially rejected.

Thick skin

Although we found that a substantial share of the respondents in the study – 37% – had been active in [political debate](#) on social media in one way or another, it was clear that the most active group had certain characteristics.

In the interviews, it was obvious that for many people, sensitive issues are best discussed in private settings. Face-to-face with a friend or a colleague, it's easier to adjust something you have said if you realise you've caused offence or discomfort. On social media – at least under your own name – you always run the risk of being misunderstood, or silently condemned. And since you are known by the company you keep, even having a Facebook friend with controversial views might put you in a bad light.

Some people, however, simply don't seem to care about whether anyone will be offended by what they say and will gladly share their views. As a result, the content that is actually posted and shared in social media feeds is to a higher degree produced by those with a low fear of being socially rejected.

So what does this actually mean? This is still an open question. The only

thing we know is that active people are not afraid of social sanctions. That doesn't mean that they are excessively stubborn or one-sided. Nor does it mean that they are resistant to facts or harbour extreme views. It's even possible that these people have an easier time keeping to the target issue. In fact, it may be better if more people were less afraid of being rejected, since such fear has been shown in previous research to lead people to adapt to more extreme attitudes and become increasingly willing to engage with more extreme groups.

However, it could also be the case that this personality bias leads to creating an even more polarised political environment with a confrontational tone that has the effect of scaring people away from political discussion online. As social [media](#) gradually becomes the most important source for political information, discussion and news for citizens, this will have major repercussions for democracies worldwide.

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