

Summary

The purpose of this report is to present research results showing the extent to which Swedish citizens believe they cannot freely express their opinions in various contexts. Are there topics that cannot be discussed frankly? In what settings do citizens feel they cannot voice their opinions openly? And which groups among citizens feel most strongly compelled to refrain from expressing their opinions? The key concept in this study is self-censorship: the act of refraining from voicing one's views for fear of suffering sanctions. This type of self-imposed restraint has only been studied to a very limited extent in Sweden, despite an extensive debate on freedom of expression in the country. Our aim in this report, therefore, is to present new empirical findings on the prevalence of self-censorship among Swedish citizens, based on data we have collected in collaboration with the SOM Institute and its annual surveys in 2021 and 2022. Our main motivation for investigating this phenomenon is that democracy and economic progress in our country require freedom of expression.

In order to establish the extent to which self-censorship occurs, we have asked questions in the SOM surveys that deal with this phenomenon. We have asked respondents whether they refrain, given today's political climate, from openly 'expressing their opinions because others may find them offensive'. We also ask them which topics and contexts prompt them to engage in self-censorship. The objective is to find out *when people refrain from expressing their views for fear of suffering sanctions*.

Of particular importance in our view is to explore which topics, contexts, and personal characteristics are associated with people's choice to remain silent when they actually think they should be allowed to speak. We want to know when it is that individuals want to say something but anticipate being subject to some sort of

sanction, and therefore refrain from voicing their views. We also discuss what the consequences of this might be. A widespread tendency to engage in self-censorship can affect the party space, the prospects for pluralism, the conditions for collective action, a society's ability to handle crises – and ultimately a country's prosperity and the success or failure of its democracy.

The overall pattern of self-censorship we have detected gives us cause to conclude the following: Self-censorship is widespread in Sweden, and it constitutes a weakness in our democracy. Over half of those who answered our two surveys state that, in today's political climate, they cannot express their opinions openly because others might find them offensive. This points to a striking restraint in how citizens express themselves on central political issues. This is not primarily a case of refraining from speaking one's mind out of pure politeness or respect. Furthermore, the incidence of self-censorship in Sweden appears to have increased.

In the regression models we present, we find that self-censorship often correlates with low levels of education and of income, and with scarce trust in democracy, in authorities, and in other people. If we look at how self-censorship is distributed on the political left/right scale, we find it across the whole spectrum, but most densely among Sweden Democrats. Our interpretation of this is that people who self-censor are mainly those who see themselves as being on the margins of society. Self-censorship might be seen as reflective of ignorance and prejudice. It can also, however, register dissatisfaction with the state of the debate in certain areas where openly calling accepted norms into question might be thought to result in still more conspicuous exclusion from the community.

Self-censorship is found in many different contexts: on social media, at the workplace, at the school or university, and among friends and family. It is least common among friends and family, and most common on social media. Previous research on the phenomenon suggests it is about as common in Sweden as in the United States.

Slightly fewer than half the respondents in our study say they do not self-censor at all. When respondents do self-censor, they do so most commonly in connection with immigration and integration. This topic has a special status: it is the most common object of self-censorship in all of the different contexts we asked about, and

regardless of respondents' gender or party affiliation. Furthermore, the incidence of self-censorship clearly correlates with a perception of immigration as a threat. There is also a great deal of agreement among respondents about which topics aside from immigration and integration are controversial: namely religion, gender equality, equal treatment, LGBTQ issues, and political and religious extremism.

Looking at which factors can be deemed the most important for explaining the phenomenon (among the individual factors we examined), we find a significant effect from the following in both surveys: age, social trust, left/right position, satisfaction with democracy, and perceived threat from immigration and from environmental and climate change. Those who tend to self-censor the most include younger individuals, those who are dissatisfied with democracy, those who have low trust in other people, those who tend to the right in politics, and those who feel threatened by immigration. In important respects, the situation in Sweden resembles that in Germany and the US, where self-censorship is so widespread that it is considered a serious democratic problem. Furthermore, given what we know about how freedom of thought, open discussion, and the free flow of information encourage creativity and entrepreneurship, widespread self-censorship is likely to put a brake on economic progress.

At the end of our report, we discuss the relationship between self-censorship and the increasing support garnered by the Sweden Democrats in recent years. Then we discuss norm-crowding, social media, and the implications of our results for journalism. In our conclusion, finally, we consider the direction in which policy has been developing, and we offer some recommendations of a general character.

One such recommendation is that all debaters be cautious about dismissing the right of their opponents to express their views. This is important because, if such a strategy is repeatedly and casually used, it can be exploited by populist forces as confirmation that their main argument – that society is in fact run over the heads of the people by the 'elites' – is correct. This is not to say, however, that politicians should not call attention clearly and candidly to the ways in which they oppose the positions taken by their opponents.

We also discuss how self-censorship can be affected by *the amount of* norms and rules of conduct that citizens today have to

keep track of. There is much evidence that a very large number of new norms have been added to – or given a more prominent role in – politics, public debate, journalism, administration, the cultural sphere, and the educational system. We therefore warn against *norm-crowding* in various areas. In a bureaucracy, for example, there may simply be too many values and orientations which are assumed to pervade entire functions of the body simultaneously. When the list of issues that must be considered becomes very long, it can become very difficult or even impossible to know what to prioritize. Moreover, a congestion of norms can lead to increased arbitrariness in governance. Thus, in many cases where it would be desirable that employees feel they can speak freely, the result may be inhibition and silence. In the academic world, ‘cancel culture’ can take root; in the social services, a ‘culture of silence’ may prevail. In sum, given that norm-crowding contributes not only to self-censorship but also to increased arbitrariness in the governance of workplaces, schools, universities, and the public sector, we have some simple policy advice to offer here: the overgrowth of so-called norm governance needs to be thinned out.

Since self-censorship is most common in social media, one simple recommendation would be to limit social media in one way or another. In practice, however, it has proven very difficult to regulate social media.

Thus, the responsibility falls largely on individuals themselves to manage the flow of information. And the best protection against forces that seek to utilize digital channels to promote de-democratization is to be found in a well-functioning school system that fosters critical and independent thinking. This means schools to which all pupils and students have equal access, and which – rather than telling young people what they should think – encourage them to take a critical approach to various questions. This may sound obvious, but sadly there is much to indicate that school employees today are forced to deal with completely different things to far too great an extent – e.g., filling out evaluation forms, or simply keeping order in classrooms and warding off threats to teachers.

Finally, we discuss how important it is that there be access to media which carefully review both their own news reports and those of others, and that produce investigative articles which are not governed primarily by how many clicks they generate. Journalists

must not allow themselves to fall prey to self-censorship. There are good reasons why news reports and editorials should be kept separate from each other, and why journalists should focus their efforts mainly on reporting the news in a factual, neutral, and well-founded manner – rather than on taking responsibility for the consequences that might attend a given news report. We consider it critical, therefore, that news media follow the principle of ‘consequence neutrality’ enunciated by Erik Fichtelius. Journalists can set an example by showing what an open, frank, and rational dialogue looks like. But this is obviously easier said than done. Here too, then, we end up taking the view that the best thing to do is to give the youngest members of our society an ambitious and well-functioning school to which all pupils and students enjoy equal access.

With this report, we hope to start a broader discussion about self-censorship as an important social problem. Self-censorship springs from a kind of political intolerance that places limits on the rights and freedoms that people should be allowed to enjoy. For those who embrace mainstream views and adhere to accepted norms, intolerance towards others can be imposed without great cost to themselves. Indeed, it can be experienced as a freedom by those who feel they stand on solid political ground. However, people who are subject to intolerance and informal restrictions tend to clench their fists in their pockets and to fall silent. It is easy to think that those who feel this way should simply have to put up with it. But citizens who feel they cannot give free voice to their views may end up taking a cynical view of the parties, media, and friends who claim to be defending democracy. Then trust in democracy too is eroded, and authoritarian options may come to seem attractive to many.