POLITICAL BIAS: A LOOK INTO THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

A Thesis by

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Communication Studies.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, who has always listened and stood by me. Thank you for always being there throughout all of my endeavors. I could not have done this without you!
Start by doing what’s necessary, then what’s possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.
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This study examines the effects of political bias on students’ willingness to speak out. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence theory is used to test this. Convenience sampling is used in order to gain an undergraduate sample of students at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Thirty-Three students participated and were rewarded extra credit for doing so.

It was concluded that students do not see political bias as much of an issue to be concerned about. Students also feel that if they choose to speak out, they will have specific reasons for doing so and feel as though the professor has a profound impact on whether or not they will speak out. Students do not mind political leakage occurring as long as the discussion does not monopolize class time and it is relevant to the class material. There were different levels of silencing that occurred with these students. Future research should focus on differences that could affect the silencing of the students.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A university is a place for diverse ideas; a welcoming institution that invites all ideas regardless of what they entail. Stanley Fish, a Distinguished Milton Scholar, wrote in a faculty report to the President of the University of Chicago that the university exists “only for the limited…purposes of teaching and research” (Horowitz, 2006, xxv). The debate regarding the purpose of higher education dates back at least to 1934 when Robert Gordon Sprout discusses the function of a university in the University of California’s Academic Personnel Manual:

The function of a university is to seek and to transmit knowledge and to train students in the processes whereby truth is to be made known…essentially the freedom of a university is the freedom of competent persons in the classroom…in order to protect this freedom, the university assumed the right to prevent exploitation of its prestige by unqualified persons or by those who would use it as a platform for propaganda. (Horowitz, 2006, xli)

According to Eckstein and Turman (2002), “freedom of expression of controversial ideas and beliefs is therefore important for a solid liberal arts education to take place” (p. 170). Therefore, not only should students feel comfortable expressing their views inside the classroom, professors should not use their position for political purposes. A classroom environment is different from propaganda, which allows only selected views to be heard. Michael Carroll, senior logistics major, makes his opinions on political bias clear when he states, “You go to class to learn the material, not to hear the professors’ views” (Weigel, 2006). With that said, students should also be accepting of views differing from their own. Sometimes professors’ analysis of the information given to the class helps students grasp their own opinions and thoughts on the information presented. College Democrats President Lee Fang furthered this argument by stating, “If they’re attacking Bush, it’s because of certain policy. It’s not because he’s a
Republican, it’s because he’s a bad executive” (Weigel, 2006). Ben Shapiro, in his recent book *Brainwashed*, states that students attending Universities should be exposed to multiple sides of the story, not just one side. The goal is to receive a well-rounded education. According to some academic researchers, colleges and universities are mechanisms meant to give students information to make their own decisions, not force their political beliefs on their students.

One significant threat to universities fulfilling their function is the presence of political bias in classrooms. Political bias and political leakage are terms not to be used interchangeably. While political bias and political leakage can be described as a one-sided political discussion, political leakage should be thought of as a precursor to political bias. Political leakage occurs when a professor *leaks* one-sided political information. Political leakage does not occur on a regular basis. However, political bias occurs when a professor discusses his or her political views regularly. Political leakage may not affect students’ willingness to speak out, whereas political bias might. Most of the literature treats the issue of political bias in an all-encompassing manner, including both bias and leakage. With political bias occurring in the classroom, the very purpose of a University is being challenged. Several authors document political bias in the classroom from both the right and the left side of the political spectrum. For example, a professor at Harvard University was a victim of left-wing students (Wiener, 2005, 12). This is interesting because it is sympathetic to the professor, something that is not usually accounted for. In contrast, at Columbia University, students claim to be the victims of left-wing professors (Wiener, 2005, 12). Most accusations of political bias are of this variety (*The West Australian*, 2005, Alexander, 2006, Ellen-Cohen, 2005, Cowan, 2005, Lewis, 2006, Lipian, 2006, Medeiros, 2006, Pope, 2004, Raffaele, 2006, *Indiana Daily Student*, 2005, *The California Aggie*, 2005, Weigel, 2006, Eckstein & Turman, 2002).
While there is a fair amount of examples describing unpleasant experiences in the classroom related to political bias, there are those who discount the issue. Eric Foner, a prominent historian at Columbia University, states in a recent interview with The New York Sun, “I believe that the problem of bias in classrooms is grossly exaggerated” (Gershman, 2005, 3). Charles Franklin, a University of Wisconsin political science professor, says that most University of Wisconsin professors are liberal, but there is no discrimination against conservative applicants (Lewis, 2006). According to Franklin, some professors will naturally share views more than others, but it is usually based on teaching methods (Lewis, 2006). Still, others argue that bias is not a tenured professor problem. University of Wisconsin sophomore Stephanie Bergo says that while professors do not usually share their opinions, they are usually apparent by the end of the semester but that professors mainly just want their students to be informed (Lipian, 2004). Some commentators have tried to stake out a middle ground. A staff editorial for a college paper calls on professors to ensure balance when presenting their views,

Professors should be allowed to express personal political views in the classroom as long as it remains a safe zone for all students’ political persuasions. It is the professors’ job to act as the mediator or devil’s advocate. (Indiana Daily Student, 2005)

According to this same editorial, the purpose of the classroom is to foster intellectual exploration and expression and that students must construct independent ideologies (Indiana Daily Student, 2005). This is consistent with the purpose of the University. Students are not the only individuals who believe this. Recently, Federal Treasurer Peter Costello believes that while there is a political bias present in college classrooms,

teachers must always be aware that they can have a profound influence on young minds and that it would be an abuse of their authority to try to use it to get students to take ideological positions of the left or right (The West Australian, 2005).
While those in Academia have pondered the existence and effects of political bias in the classroom, the issue has also gained attention in newspapers and magazines. Some have argued that not enough credit is being given to students. Adam Lightenheld (2005) wrote a column for the *Badger Herald* that states students are quite capable of sorting out for themselves what a legitimate argument is and what propaganda is, as well as the fact that professors help shape students’ opinions without doing it for them.

It seems fair to think some political leakage occurs. After all, it seems unlikely every professor could go through every class without making any comment that revealed their personal political beliefs on a subject. What is less well known are the effects of political bias. If political leakage is affecting students in a negative way, they are not receiving the full promise of the University that they are attending. If professors are engaging in political leakage, it could affect students’ performance in class as well as their willingness to participate in classroom discussions. If political bias is silencing the students, their grade may ultimately suffer due to lack of participation.

Students believe that political bias hurts their grade. Conservative talk radio host Sean Hannity received a complaint from a caller who claimed that their professor only assigned anti-war movies such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and when asked if she could watch a pro-war video, the answer was no and her grade ultimately suffered because of it. A separate caller claimed that a run-in with a professor with a different political ideology than her own was the reason for the failing grade. Shapiro (2004) believes professors, both liberal and conservative, will inevitably have conflicts with students and will punish their students who hold different views from their own. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a national organization against political bias. Their recent research shows that 49% of professors preach rather than teach as well.
as 29% of students thinking that they must agree with professors’ political views to receive a good grade (Lewis, 2006). Preaching is defined as “to urge acceptance or abandonment of an idea or course of action ... to exhort in an officious or tiresome manner” (Merriam-Webster, 2000). Professors who are “urging [sic] acceptance or abandonment of an idea or course of action” are clearly aiding in the learning process of their students; they may also be forcing the acceptance of their beliefs. The fear is that some professors are taking their beliefs and “exhorting the ideas [sic] in an officious or tiresome manner” (Merriam-Webster, 2000) are not stopping until their beliefs are (or perceived to be) accepted by their students. If this occurs on a regular basis within the classroom, preaching could have a negative effect on students’ willingness to speak out.

The seriousness of political bias in the classroom has resulted in efforts to curb the problem. Recently, discussion of a bias in the classroom has come to a head. Many are concerned that classroom discussion is taking place under only one political ideology. Some argue that the bias is conservatively slanted, while others argue that the bias is liberally slanted. Recently, tips have been published on how to keep bias out of the classroom. Alex-Assenoh’s (2000) article in Political Science and Politics gives such tips. She suggests assigning readings that cover the entire political spectrum or have students debate opposite of what they believe in. Students are not the only ones affected by political bias in the classroom. For example, both Colorado and Indiana faculty have received hate mail and death threats regarding potential accounts of political bias in their classroom (Lewis, 2006). The fact that individuals are receiving death threats shows that this is a serious issue that cannot be ignored.

Political bias has moved out of universities and into legislatures. In 2005, Pennsylvania lawmakers held a panel discussion on the issue of political bias in the classroom. They felt it was
an opportunity to gain a better understanding of what goes on on a college campus (Jacobson, 2005). Representative Gibson C. Armstrong (R-Lancaster, PA), the sponsor of this panel, strongly believes that political bias exists in Academia on a national level and is a problem in the state system (Alexander, 2006). Political panels, while effective at drawing attention to an issue, don’t provide enough information. Additional research on the subject could shed light on the scope and effects of the problem.

While commentators disagree about political bias, the public seems to believe there is a problem. According to The Chronical of Higher Education, half of American adults agree college students are taught with a liberal bias (Lipian, 2004). The Orange County Register (2006) states that American universities are disproportionately liberal in expressing their views regardless of its relevance to the subject matter. Shauna Moser, chairman of the Young Americans for Freedom, said in an interview with the Daily Collegian (2006) that the low number of formal complaints is misleading and she has encountered bias in the classroom many times. A low number exemplifies a reflection of students’ lack of desire to publicly protest bias, instead of a lack of it (Grossman, 2006). In contrast, as Lipka (2001) makes clear in an article for The Chronical of Higher Education, students are “intelligent individuals with the capability of thinking critically about even their professors’ beliefs” (p. 12)

With these issues hot on people’s minds, politicians recently have started getting involved. In 2005, a bill was proposed to a committee in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. It reads, in part,

Exposing students to the spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints on the subjects examined in their courses is a major responsibility of faculty. Faculty will not use their courses for the purposes of political, ideological, religious, or anti-religious indoctrination (Fields, 2005).
The proposed bill is meant to eliminate political bias in the classroom between professors and students. Recently, Representative Armstrong has admitted to receiving approximately 50 complaints of classroom bias from students. Recent studies have tested this theory, such as one conducted by the University of Connecticut. The study looked at the top 50 colleges and universities ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*. Forty-nine percent of respondents said that professors mentioned political comments in non-political courses such as biology. One-third of respondents said they had to agree with their professor to receive a passing grade in the course. It is important to note that the majority of respondents were declared liberals or radicals, showing that this occurs across the political spectrum (French, 2005).

Political leakage has become such a concern that Representative Bill Morrow (R-Oceanside, FL) began work on the Academic Bill of Rights. The legislation would require universities to maintain organizational neutrality in its hiring of staff, selection of curricula, and grading of students (Driscou, 2006). The Academic Bill of Rights did not get very far, as it died in a United States House of Representatives committee. Universities responded by pointing out that these requirements are already built into academic policies. Maryland Governor Robert Ehrlich was so concerned that he visited the University of Maryland and managed to engage in a verbal spat with members of the College Democrats. Governor Ehrlich blamed this on college students tending to be more liberal (Weigel, 2006).

It is good to have your belief challenged because it reinforces what students truly believe in, and students should be willing to accept views differing from their own. By exposing new ideas to the diversity of a university, students will be able to constantly check what they believe in. Students will ultimately have a better understanding by looking at other students’ opinions.
Representative Gibson Armstrong’s panel in Pennsylvania was a precursor to a University of Rhode Island panel. Its purpose is to gain a better understanding of what goes on on a college campus (Jacobson, 2005). David A. French, President of the foundation for Individual Rights in Education, states in an interview with the Reading Eagle (2005) that proving biased grading is difficult and that he does not deny that there is a perception that grades are based on ideology (Walter, 2005). According to French, faculty have a right to challenge students and that universities do not have a right to limit students’ First Amendment rights through restrictive speech class (Walter, 2005). The University of Rhode Island panel discuss several issues. First, they discuss the possibility of professors presenting controversial ideas, but not promoting political agendas (Medeiros, 2006). It was also discussed whether patriotism is a positive or negative sentiment on college campuses. The panel discovered that patriotism is a “civic duty” of citizens and it should be taught in classrooms (Medeiros, 2006). The decision also included the possibility of a moral responsibility for students to ask questions and to encourage them to think. The panel suggests avoiding the cycle of dumbing down and silence (Medeiros, 2006). Students should feel free to speak in class regardless of their political views.

One issue often addressed in discussions of political bias in the classroom are professor activities outside of the classroom. According to Jackie Brosamer, in an article with the Daily Bruin (2006), while professors might take part in outside political activities, it should have no effect on classroom behavior. It only becomes a problem when professors’ classroom behavior starts affecting students’ performance and willingness to express their opinions in class. The bottom line is that professors are only human and should not be expected to hide what they believe in (Martin, 2004).
While there is a fair amount of research suggesting that political bias does exist in the classroom, this research suggests that there is a limited affect on students’ academic performance and willingness to speak out in the classroom. According to Lionel Lewis (2006) in an article in *The Buffalo News*, 70% of campuses report no incidents of political pressure on students. American campuses, therefore, appear to remain a healthy mix of different opinions, cultures, and viewpoints. This research will further investigate whether students believe there is a problem.

The topic of political bias is one where additional research is warranted because of the conflicting information. Rather than studying this question from the perspective of “does political bias exist in college classrooms,” this thesis investigates the range of communicative actions that could be considered political bias and seeks to uncover the effects of that political leakage. One distinct risk of political leakage that should be of concern to communication scholars is whether bias affects students’ performance, and specifically, students’ willingness to speak out. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence theory can explain the possibility of professors silencing students.

Literature

A spiral of silence is defined by Noelle-Neumann as a process in which, “people keep quiet until in a spiraling process, the one view dominated the public scene and the others disappeared from public awareness as its adherents become mute” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 3). Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993) first introduces the spiral of silence in a study of the 1965 German election involving the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Noelle-Neumann observed that as information spread, people either voiced or suppressed their views (Noelle-
Neumann, 1993). Public opinion plays a key role in this research. Individuals pay close attention to their social environment and their perceptions of their environmental influence on individual behavior and attitudes (May & Scheufele, 2000). If the individual feels that their beliefs are in the minority, then they will choose not to speak out about their beliefs. In the 1965 election, the perception was that Social Democrats were the majority, therefore enabling supporters of the Social Democrats to speak out while supporters of the Christian Democrats fell silent.

The spiral of silence theory is built on several assumptions: threat of isolation, fear of isolation, quasi-statistical sense, willingness to speak out and tendency to remain silent, as well as the spiral of silence (May & Scheufele, 2000). The first assumption, threat of isolation, was tested by Noelle-Neumann in Germany regarding the issue of nuclear energy. “There is no doubt that the threat of isolation exists and that the public knows which opinions run a high risk of triggering the threat of isolation when publicly expressed” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 204). A threat of isolation can be defined as any time that there is a possibility of isolation occurring in the classroom, whereas a fear of isolation is a feeling that the student will have. For instance, in a hostile environment, an individual might feel their opinion is in the minority and be unwilling to speak out (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). The threat of isolation is applicable in cultures other than Germany.

The second assumption, fear of isolation, is one that some Americans do not support: “The thought that Americans could experience fear of isolation so offended the students during one of my lectures at the University of Chicago that many walked out of the auditorium” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 205). The fear of isolation is important to the spiral of silence theory in that it affects students’ willingness to speak out. If the students fear isolation, they will be more likely not to speak out. Sabine Holicki in 1984 conducted experiments in the area of group
dynamics and recorded a 3-phase process. Phase one consists of when the group uses friendly persuasion to try to win back the deviant member (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 206). Phase two states that if phase one does not work, the deviant individual is threatened with exclusion from the group (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 206). Phase three is described as when “‘the group redefines its boundaries,’” meaning that the deviant individual is excluded from the group” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 206). The fear of isolation regulates individual behavior,

> the mere thought of how unpleasant a situation could be causes an individual to correct behavior divergent from the public consensus before external social control is exercised by the collective, and even before the collective learns of the intended infraction. (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 211)

It is important to note that the fear of isolation begins this spiral (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). The central idea of the theory is that people might alter or choose not to express their views because of the fear of isolation. It also may be because their views are different from the social consensus (Sparrow & Turner, 1997).

Another assumption of the Spiral of Silence concerns the “hard core” member of the minority. This individual is one that is unaffected by the Spiral of Silence, regardless of others’ views. This person will feel unaffected by the pressure of others. For instance, some have thought that the hard core is made up of people who are overly convinced of an opinion or those with a stable voting behavior (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Others believe that Noelle-Neumann simply made this term up to explain findings when they do not confirm the theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). The “hard core” can be best defined by Noelle-Neumann as, “remaining [sic] committed to the past, retaining the old values while suffering the isolation of the present” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 218).

A typical spiral of silence study investigates several characteristic elements. First, it should test the distribution of public opinion on the determined issue. Second, the climate must
be established to determine “what do most people think and what do you think.” The minority-majority opinion needs to be gauged so that the strength of each side, majority or minority, will win. For instance, if you believe that you are in the majority, but you are in the minority, you might still speak out. However, if you believe you are in the minority and you actually are, you probably will not speak out. The individuals’ willingness to speak out or to be silent should be measured to determine the effects of the climate on the expression of opinion. It is also important that the issue bears a strong emotional or moral component (Moy & Scheufele, 2000). This ensures that some pressure to conform will exist.

This study assumes the professor would initiate the Spiral of Silence when expressing their views to the class or expressing negative views about those that are different from their own and urges the acceptance of their views. If the students’ views are different than that of their professor, they could fail to express their opinions. As the professor continues to preach, the student will fall further into silence. Based on the research discussed in this literature review, there should be a noticeable effect between the professors’ political views and the students’ communication ability in class. John Mitchell, chairman of the College Republicans at the University of Maine, states that some conservative students have told him that they feel intimidated about speaking up in the classroom (Cohen, 2005). This perception is the key issue under investigation in this project.

Several scholars have successfully utilized Spiral of Silence in their research. Gozenbach and Perry (2000) look at the ways the distribution of examples affect people’s willingness to express themselves when the issue in question is controversial and morally loaded (Gozenbach and Perry, 2000). Results support the notion that those who have the cultural norms that influence expression that favor the popular issue are more likely to express them in a public
display (Gozenbach & Perry, 2000). It is important to note that a cultural bias exists on the issue, where one cultural group believes they are better than another cultural group. Because of this, the results are skewed because ethnocentrism is present. When this is present, participants will be more willing to speak out about an issue.

Glynn and McLeod (1984) conducted a meta-analysis of spiral of silence research. Overall, the correlation between perceptions of opinion support and willingness to speak out is positive. Therefore, those that feel their opinion is not supported most likely will not possess a high willingness to speak out.

Eckstein and Turman (2002) conducted one of the only studies concerning silenced students in the college classroom. The purpose of Eckstein and Turman’s (2002) study was to investigate whether students in university classrooms feel silenced regarding their religious views based upon teachers’ communicative behaviors. Religion is a topic that every student has an opinion on; every student holds religious beliefs. Even those students that are apathetic towards religion still fit into a specific religious category. Religion is considered a personal issue. An individual’s political views are extremely personal as well. While political views are not identical to religious views, they are similar. A student may not feel comfortable discussing their religious or political views if they differ from the professor. While Eckstein and Turman (2002) examine religious views in the classroom, I studied political views in the classroom. Eckstein and Turman’s (2002) findings confirm the spiral of silence theory: students may silence their views if they conflict with teachers in order to continue to “fit in” and work with the teacher (Eckstein & Turman, 2002). This study extends their application of Spiral of Silence to political bias.
This thesis specifically examines how, how much, and whether students speak out in the classroom when they view themselves as the minority in a political discussion. Specific attention is paid to how the students speak out and how this relates to their professors’ political comments. I am interested in looking at political discussion that takes place before, during, and after class.

There are several concepts that are important elements of the Spiral of Silence and that will be utilized in this research. For instance, Noelle-Neumann (1993) defines talking as more than spoken words. It also includes, “wearing campaign buttons, bumper stickers on your cars, and carrying a politically slanted newspaper.” (p. 26) This is important because if students feel comfortable enough to wear campaign buttons or carry a politically slanted newspaper, chances are a spiral of silence might not exist or that they hold the majority view.

While political bias has been discussed widely over the years, universities have not been able to define the role of political ideology in the classroom (Michigan Daily, 2005). Bias is unavoidable (Michigan Daily, 2005), but a college should create an atmosphere where the best ideas can emerge regardless of ideology (Michigan Daily, 2005). In order to test these ideas, this thesis will attempt to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the perceived political bias in the classroom affect students’ willingness to speak out?

RQ2: How does the spiral of silence develop?

RQ3: What do the students believe are the effects of not being able to speak out?

RQ4: Are there different levels of the spiral of silence?
Methodology

This project will attempt to answer the research questions by utilizing focus groups. Focus groups are the ideal method for studying this research question because I am investigating students’ perceptions. Focus groups are exploratory and are used to discover, rather than test, relationships (Keulder, 2002). They also allow for interaction between the participants. For instance, they allow for the respondent to respond not only to the moderator and probes, but also to other group members (Keulder, 2002).

Focus groups are essential to finding out whether students are being silenced in the classroom due to political bias for two reasons. First, students will be able to affirm whether this really exists and if they are being silenced. This is accomplished either through explaining their own experiences or by listening to other students. For instance, they may not have realized they were being silenced. Second, students will give us further insight into this topic in a safe environment. Students might be fearful expressing their own views when the professor is present or when they feel their name will be attached to their statements. Since students will be commenting on previous experiences, they should feel safe to discuss in this environment.

I used convenience sampling of undergraduate students. There were undergraduate students at various stages in their college career. I recruited my sample by visiting various large lecture classes on campus in order to ensure a diverse population. Individual classrooms in the Elliott School of Communication served as the location for these focus groups.

Plan of Study

In chapter one, Introduction, I will lay out the basic issue surrounding political leakage and the spiral of silence. I will use this information to posit my research questions.
In chapter two, Methodology, I will provide an in-depth description of the focus groups as methodology employed in this study as well as background research explaining the chosen method.

In chapter three, Results, I will include an analysis of the findings as well as the dimensions and effects of these findings.

In chapter four, Conclusion, I will include not only my conclusions but also the implications of the findings of this study.
Focus groups are a multi-disciplinary method. It has become widespread in many disciplines, including communication research, marketing, political science and anthropology. The main goal of focus group research is to collect concentrated discussions on topics of interest to the researcher (Morgan, 1993). A focus group can be defined as a group of individuals discussing a particular topic that is moderated by questions administered by a trained moderator.

The earliest description of focus groups is attributed to Bogardus in 1926 and is documented as the earliest published work (Morgan, 1997). Bogardus’ research was on behalf of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson, 2001). Focus groups made their next appearance during World War II. It was at this time that focus groups were first used in applied social research (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups were used to examine the persuasiveness of propaganda efforts and the effectiveness of training materials for troops, as well as the productivity of work groups (Morgan, 1997). During this time, focus groups were also transferred to marketing research by Paul Lazarsfeld (Morgan, 1997). Lazarsfeld conducted commercial market research on audience responses to radio soap operas (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson, 2001).

After World War II, focus groups fell out of favor as a research method and disappeared for about three decades. Focus groups reemerged in the early 1980’s beginning with efforts to understand the knowledge, attitudes, and practices that influenced the use of contraception (Morgan, 1997). At the same time, British communication researchers used focus groups to examine how audience members interpret media messages (Morgan, 1997). It was then that
researchers used focus groups as a first step to overcome their limited knowledge about the gay community (Morgan, 1997). In fact, health educators were improving the effectiveness of intervention programs by holding group discussions with members of their target audience (Morgan, 1997).

Focus groups are a unique method because they use more natural settings than some techniques (surveys) and less natural settings than others (participation observation) (Morgan, 1993). As previously stated, focus groups were traditionally embraced by market researchers, however today, focus group research is now adopted by a wide range of social sciences (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). In fact, focus groups often guides political campaign advertising and government image management (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). Lately, there has been a heavy increase in focus group use in academic research (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999).

Focus groups are often described based on the type of context they create. Associational Context is described as the common characteristic that brings the participants together and influences group conversations and dynamics (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). The participants of each group relay information based on the comfort they feel in their group. If the participants feel bonded with other members, they are more likely to express their feelings in the group. The second context, status context is the relative positions of participants in local or societal status hierarchies (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). For example, some participants might talk more than others. Those respondents that establish this at the beginning might silence others that believe they cannot discuss a point until the established participants have spoken. The Conversational Context describes the flow of the discussion. This simply describes the process of discussing the issues that arise in the duration of the focus group. Sharing certain topics or personal experiences may seem incongruous as each contribution reflects one’s level of thinking.
and/or maturity about the issue (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). The last context is the Relational Context and concerns the level of intimacy already established among the participants and the degree of rapport established by the moderator and participants (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). This concerns the importance of the participants feeling completely comfortable in order to disclose all of their information. Creating a comfortable climate is necessary to help participants disclose information.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Focus groups are a distinctive tool to conduct qualitative communication research. This is because a focus group can convey the social interaction that occurs between participants, and between the moderator and participants (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). The high degree of interaction between all involved makes focus groups distinct from individual interviews. According to Lehaux, Poland and Daudelin (2006), there are three interactive processes at work in focus groups for both the moderator and the participant. The first concerns establishing individuals as experienced and knowledgeable. If someone is asked to participate in a focus group, they will believe that they are knowledgeable about the subject being discussed. Furthermore, the researcher will be perceived to have certain knowledge about this subject. The second interactive process occurs when the researcher establishes him/herself as being in search of information and advice. The participants know that the researcher is seeking information from their responses. Therefore, there is a certain responsibility put upon participants to be honest and forthright in their participation. The last process stresses the validation or challenge of participants’ knowledge claims. The responses from the focus group will either assist the researcher or challenge the very notion of the information they are seeking. This interaction
process is a benefit because it encourages (ideally) discussion and enables quality data to be collected.

An additional advantage to a focus group is they can be used in several different ways. For instance, sometimes focus groups are used as a preliminary stage in order to more effectively design a questionnaire for a quantitative study (Edmunds, 1999). The focus groups will yield the information that directs the researcher to survey the right topic. Focus groups can also assist in discovering information pertinent to a pilot study for future research. Focus groups should be used when the researcher is looking to discover new aspects of a topic.

Another great advantage to focus group research is the interactive moments between participants. Lehoux, Poland and Daudelin (2006) describe such interactions as two separate processes. The first is described as “common communicative ground” and can be explained as the way the moderator initially presents the tasks to the group and invites specific participants to break the ice (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). This occurs at the beginning of the group and the interactions can be described as superficial. Through this process participants will become more comfortable in their surroundings and more willing to voice their opinion. The second is “contribution to the common ground” and can be described as referring to what has been said earlier by another participant and gradually co-constructing a narrative together (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). This is the process by which a focus group organizes throughout the discussion.

Focus groups also provide a certain quality of data. When the researcher analyzes data, he/she is analyzing actual quotations from participants. When direct quotations are used, this adds to the richness of the discussion of results because there is direct correlation between what the researcher is stating and what actually occurred. Similar to this, there is a lot of information
that comes out of focus group exchanges. For instance, when analyzing responses, there can always be multiple interpretations with various facets to each response. A simple survey could yield incomplete data. Focus groups allow research to follow up on confusing topics to clarify what really is meant.

While focus groups have unique qualities and benefits, there has been some criticism. For instance, some argue that focus groups do not yield hard data (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). While it is true they do not provide “hard” data that social scientists are accustomed to, the information is equally valuable. For example, qualitative data provides a lot of information. Focus groups could be a starting point to any qualitative study. They simply provide a general idea of what the population is thinking regarding an issue. While focus groups do not produce hard data, they provide rich information into what people believe.

Another potential drawback is that there are usually a small number of participants. Focus group recruitment is usually difficult and requires some extra time on behalf of the participants. A survey might reach hundreds of participants while a focus group would only use a few dozen. While this is a disadvantage, the results that focus group yields are highly descriptive and rich in detail. What is lost in generalizability is made up for in depth of data. Focus groups are also extremely time consuming. Not only do focus groups require the time of the moderator and the participants, but focus groups also require additional time by the researcher. The researcher is not only responsible for coordinating and recruiting participants, but is also responsible for transcribing the focus groups as well as conducting a deep analysis of the findings. Similar to this, the researcher must not only search for supporting evidence for the research questions, but also interpret issues the researcher was not necessarily looking for. Therefore, there is a certain amount of care the researcher needs to implement when analyzing results.
Another common problem with focus groups is they are not quantifiable (Berger, 1998). The responses received from focus groups provide answers to “why” questions, but not the “how many” questions (Berger, 1998). For this study, I am not examining how many students believe that political leakage effects occur, I am studying why these students believe they are affected.

One important decision in focus group research is the selection of the moderator. Edmunds (1999) describes that moderators should have the ability to learn quickly, experience, organizational skills, flexibility, a good memory, good listening skills, strong probing skills, time management skills, and a good personality. Moderators work from a predetermined set of interview questions and possible probing questions. The moderators chosen for the focus groups should be thoroughly trained. It should be noted that the quality of the focus group can be affected by the moderator. For instance, if the moderator is not successful at asking probe questions to participants, the responses may be shallow.

Previous research utilizing focus groups have informed the methodology of this project. Foubert, Gerner, and Thaxter (2006) used focus groups to examine what men perceive as normative in their behavior in regards to what is sexually acceptable and unacceptable when alcohol is involved. There were thirty-seven participants, each of which was a current member of one of the fourteen fraternities on campus. The focus groups contained nine to fourteen men which were traditional students at the university. This is a little larger of a group than what this study aims for. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006). This method will be used in this study because notes on the body language and non-verbal behavior were merged with the transcripts. Researchers read through each line and underlined key phrases or words. From there, they openly coded, paying special attention to the underlined portions (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006). This was not done in this study, as I am
only examining general emerging themes. Major themes emerged from the categories. These were the themes used for discussion in the paper. The same two tiered selection process used in the pilot study will be utilized for this study.

Focus groups are also unique in that the data can be evaluated in several ways. Edmunds (2006) lists four tips for evaluation. The first tip states that the researcher can group similar responses together (Edmunds, 2006). For example, if the researcher sees several responses that state the same issue, they can make a generalization about the issue in question. Similarly, the second tip states that researchers can identify frequently mentioned comments (Edmunds, 2006). The researcher can also discuss opposing ideas indicated by body language (Edmunds, 2006). While most focus groups are only audio taped, the researcher is able to make notes regarding nonverbal communication during the focus group. However, it is important that researchers must avoid quantifying results (Edmunds, 2006). Researchers must understand that focus groups are a qualitative method and by quantifying results, some of the richness of the text is lost.

The Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to test the preliminary interview guide questions. The questions were posed to examine the effects of political bias in the classroom on students. Piloting the guide was helpful to find weaknesses in questions and gain insight to refine the research questions. Brief focus groups were used to help decipher which questions should be used in this study.

A two-tiered selection process was used for sampling. The first tier consists of purposive sampling, while the second tier consisted of random sampling. While this will be a challenge in this study, during the pilot study, individuals were more than willing to discuss this issue. In fact,
when given this option versus the other options of focus groups in a class, plenty of them chose the political bias focus group. Thirty-six participants from introductory communication courses participated in three focus groups for the pilot study. Twelve members in each group proved to be a problem since each member did not receive adequate speaking time. There were some participants that monopolized the discussion, while others did not speak at all. Future research on the topic will strive for fewer members in each focus group.

The questions in the pilot interview guide were open-ended and were ultimately used to examine political leakage in the classroom. The interview guide contained seven questions (appendix A). The first question asked students how they felt about political discussion taking place in the classroom. This question was used to generally get students thinking about political discussion taking place in any classroom, not just a political science course. The second question asked students whether or not their professors ever discuss their political views in class. This was used to investigate the frequency of their professors discussing their political views in class. Of course, if students suggest that political discussion did not occur, there was a low risk they were being silenced. Question three concerned whether students felt as though they could express their thoughts and feelings about anything in the class. This question was left ambiguous in order to ensure that students were not limited in their answer choices. Question four asked students whether or not they felt comfortable wearing a campaign button or t-shirt to class. This question probed Noelle-Neumann’s (1993) definition of talking. As previously stated, Noelle-Neumann argued that campaign material was a relevant sign of willingness to discuss. The fifth question asked whether or not there had ever been a time when the professor made them feel uncomfortable in class. This question was directly related to the research questions. If students felt uncomfortable in class, chances were, they would not be willing to speak out in class and
therefore would be silenced due to their professor. The sixth question dealt with the issue of whether or not there had been a time when the student wanted to say something in class but did not. If the student said yes, then the follow up question asked why the student chose to remain silent. For instance, the student might state a reason that helps answer the research question. The last questions asked whether or not the student was willing to hear differing opinions. If the student replied with a yes, the student will then be asked whether or not they would be willing to accept the differing opinions even if they were different from their own.

Some problems with the guide did arise during the pilot study. A few questions were changed for the primary study. One question was omitted because it was very similar to question five. The students answered both questions with very similar answers. Question seven asked, “Have you ever emerged from a class with different views than you had at the beginning of class?” This was used to see if the political leakage is effective in changing students’ views during the course of a semester.

The pilot study yielded seventy-eight responses that were categorized as either support or nonsupport for certain tenets of the Spiral of Silence theory. Of those seventy-eight responses, there were forty-four responses supporting the Spiral of Silence and thirty-four responses not supporting the theory. This pilot study found that not only were students affected by political bias in the classroom, the bias also affected their willingness to speak out. This was found by analyzing the responses to the interview questions.

Methodology

Political bias in the classroom is a sensitive subject among students. Because the participants are ultimately discussing their professors, the chances of them feeling uncomfortable
are high. Because of this, it is extremely vital to the results of this study that the participants feel completely at ease.

I took extra precautions to ensure the success of the focus group for this project. Participants were taken from lower and mid level communication courses. The moderators are communication graduate students in which several have previous experience as a moderator. All of the moderators, regardless of their experience, were thoroughly trained before leading their focus group. The focus groups were held inside classrooms. This ensured privacy and quiet, ideal for audio tape recording.

Thirty-three students participated in seven focus groups held over a two-week period. The students were recruited from lower and mid level communication classes. The focus groups for this study were audio taped and transcribed. This is because transcriptions can lose some information related to non-verbal and verbal communication such as subtle laughter, tone, inflection, and sighs (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006). This is a convenience sample and participants were rewarded with extra credit. There were several participants that signed up but never arrived, however the focus groups still had enough students. Focus groups should ideally have 8 to 12 members (Berger, 1998). All of the participants are currently taking communication classes, however the majority of the students are not communication majors. Demographic information was not collected from the participants because the research questions do not examine leakage among certain students. The participants were a diverse group. There were both traditional and non-traditional students as well as several international students.

The interview questions were changed slightly from the initial pilot study (see appendix B). The first question concerns whether or not professors discuss their political views in the classroom and the frequency in which it occurs. The second question asks if students are willing
to take part in political discussion within the classroom. Students are then asked if they feel they can express their entire thoughts and feelings in the classroom. The third question concerns how the students feel about political discussion taking place in the classroom. The students are then asked if they challenge views unlike their own and how they feel when others partake in this activity. Question three also inquires about whether or not students want to speak up in class and have chosen not to. The last part of question three examines whether or not students are willing to hear differing opinions and if they are willing to accept these views. The fourth question concerns whether or not students have emerged with different views at the end of the class.
The topic of political bias in the classroom is a large topic to tackle in one focus group. However, the four questions in the interview guide were successful at probing the issues. The first step in analyzing the focus group responses is to determine emerging themes. Once the prominent themes were noted, the themes were discussed in regards the research questions. When this has been completed the formal discussion of the results will take place. Chapter four addresses the implications of these results.

RQ 1: Do students speak up?

The first research question inquires whether the perceived political bias in the classroom affects students’ willingness to speak out. Before explaining the results of this research question, it is first important to understand how the students feel about the occurrence of political leakage in the classroom. The majority of the students in this study agree that political bias in the classroom does exist. Political views are leaked in the classroom, and according to these students, they are leaked often.

However, very few students are actually concerned that political leakage would be a problem; they simply accept it as a fact of being at a university. Some commentators have made it sound as though professors are dropping political anecdotes in class when it is not relevant to what they are lecturing on (Shapiro, 2005). The students in these focus groups explained a rather different story. While there will always be some professors that leak irrelevant political information, the majority of students believe that if a professor goes into depth about an issue it
is related to the subject at hand. Otherwise, these students state that the professors simply mention comments in passing, and feel that these comments really have no merit. One international student discusses his experiences with a United States professor “not in the U.S., but in Malaysia yes. He is a U.S. professor teaching U.S. history over there, and he speaks Republican.” This is interesting, because political bias has only been acknowledged in the United States. No attention has been paid to what American professors are teaching abroad.

The focus groups yielded several explanations from students that consistently revealed that students do not speak up in class discussions of political issues. Several explanations were given for the lack of participation. First, students choose not to speak when the issue seems irrelevant to the class. For example, one student describes her desire for learning the material when she stated,

I think in the average classroom that is not what we are paying for. We are paying a lot of money and it keeps going up for them to tell us about whatever and show us whatever about whatever the subject is and test us on it and get us out. We don’t need to talk about politics; it’s okay. I can watch the news and talk about it with my friends if I want to.

It can be inferred from this response that if the student was paying for a political class, they might be willing to speak out. Their issue is with the fact that the political leakage has no merit on what they need to learn in the class in order to pass. While these assumptions do not focus on the fear of isolation that Noelle-Neumann (1983) discusses, it is still relevant in that it describes different reasons why the student is not speaking out, reasons that are unrelated to the spiral of silence.

A second reason students choose not to participate is their lack of knowledge. Many students feel as though they do not have the information to back up their claims, therefore they do not feel comfortable speaking out about politics. This is appealing because it takes a step
away from the spiral of silence notion of fear of isolation and moves it to the individual knowledge of the student. One student explains, “I don’t [speak out] … I just don’t feel like…I don’t watch the news as much as I should so I don’t feel like I would know enough to talk about it and um I hate politics.” While this touches on the possibility of a lack of interest in politics, it focuses on the lack of knowledge the student has of political issues as the reason he/she will not speak out. Other students expressed a similar fear of lack of knowledge,

I don’t want to say anything to my teachers because I feel like he would bring up some points where he would bring up and I have my view, but I am not quite sure of how to defend it necessarily…I’m not that deep into it yet so I would feel like I wouldn’t have very good resources to…I would lack the info needed to argue it correctly.

Students regularly expressed the fear of their lack of knowledge. It is a common fear as stated by a student, “I am not interested in politics, because I don’t have the background.” This student will not speak out as long as he has a lack of interest in politics.

A third reason students state as why they do not speak out is simply because the class moves too fast. Similar to this claim, some also posit that they are interested in getting out of class early instead of engaging in a heated political discussion. As one student explains: “If it is in a class, everybody wants to go, lets just leave it, even if I have a question, it is time to go.” Another student expresses his desire to get out of class early: “…I feel like what is the point…if I don’t say anything maybe we will get out of class early.” Much like the first claim, this reason also takes away from the fear of isolation that the spiral of silence describes about and moves it back to individual preference. Some classes move so fast, there is not time to make any comments, or raise hands for questioning. While this is partially a professorial issue, it is not based on political leakage, it is based on the dynamics of the class. A student explains her experience with this. “In my experience, things have been moving too fast to get a comment in, like you’ll have a great idea, and by the time they get around to you, it moves to another guy
who’s screwed up your argument completely.” Another student shares this same concern: “A lot of times I will speak up, and the teacher keeps speaking, and I wanted to say something but its just he went on and now he’s talking about something else, I better just forget about it.” Many classes fall behind schedule and then move at rapid pace to keep up. When this occurs, any discussion of politics would take the class off topic.

Many of these concerns culminate in a desire to remain anonymous. This provides an additional motivation against speaking up in class. In fact, some of the participants in this research study state that there have been specific times when they have had a desire to speak up in class, but for certain reasons, chose not to. Some students state the reasoning as wanting to stay anonymous. Students believe that in a large class, no one is aware they are there. Even in a small class, if the student stays quiet, they will remain somewhat anonymous. As one student describes, “It all goes back to the anonymous…you sit in the back of the class, nobody knows your there, why stand up and let everybody know that you are there. Am I going to say something stupid or sit here? I’ll just sit here.” Some students describe what can happen if you do not remain anonymous, “I think some of the other students, especially if it is time to go, and you raise your hand, people are like shut up…you get dirty looks if everybody is ready to go.” If you remain anonymous, you do not receive dirty looks. This student addresses anonymity in a large class, “I think you are anonymous in a big class, nobody knows you, but in smaller classes people know you. And then there are the people in your major, where you are going to have people in multiple classes.”

These comments raise a new and interesting issue: students’ desires to speak are not fueled by their perception of the instructor, but by perceptions of other class members. Students appear to be concerned with their lack of knowledge and fear of saying the wrong thing in front
of their peers as well as the professor. This is a new form of isolation. Most political bias debates concern the student fearing the isolation from the professor, however these students are fearing the isolation of their peers. This is an intriguing aspect and one that has not really been discussed in the literature. Several students mentioned a deep concern for the class turning against them if they did not say the right thing. The risks are larger than previously thought. Another student addresses a different aspect to this issue, “I’m afraid people are going to turn against me, so its safer if I just don’t say anything.” However, their fear of being the minority is so crippling they simply choose not to speak out without the knowledge of whether they are the majority. If this is the case, some things should be done. For instance, professors could work harder to mend this issue. However, it should be noted that while students stated professorial concerns, fear of isolation from the professor is not one of them, making the fear of isolation solely a peer concern. One student describes a fear of his peers when he states, “Because no one is going to want that many people, its like talking religion in class, nobody is going to want you to continue to argue.” Students seem highly concerned with the possibility of their peers attacking them in some way. As one student states, “I’m afraid that people are going to turn against me, so its safer if I just don’t say anything.” A different student discusses a similar feeling, stating, “…because if I feel like I say that and I am wrong, people might get mad.” Another interesting aspect is that the student is not aware of whether they are in the majority or not, they are simply fearing what their peers will do if they say anything at all. Noelle-Neumann (1983) states that the fear of isolation occurs when the individual believes that he/she is in the minority. These students are so fearful, they are choosing not to speak out regardless of what side they are on.

Similar to this fear is the fear of confrontation. While most students do not specify who they are fearful of confrontation with, I believe that the students are equally fearful of a
confrontation, with their professor as well as with their peers. One student describes her feelings about confrontation, stating, “I’m really non-confrontational, so a lot of times, I just don’t discuss politics at all for that reason.” A separate student agrees, stating, “Yeah, confrontation is usually a big issue.” A student discusses a peer concern, explaining, “I wouldn’t want to contradict his points and his beliefs and then have other people be like what is she talking about…she doesn’t know anything about the topic.” This student is clearly concerned with not only what her professor believes but also what her peers believe. A different student expresses this fear stating they are, “scared that people might turn on you or not being able to back myself up.” Fear of isolation, therefore, is driven by both a fear of other students as well as the professors. While these two fears are not directly related to the spiral of silence, it still affects students’ willingness to speak out. For example, one student describes why she doesn’t confront her professor about their political views,

I don’t want to say anything to my teachers because I feel like he would bring up some points where I have my view, but I am not quite sure of how to defend it necessarily. I’m not that deep into it yet so I would feel like I wouldn’t have very good resources to…I would lack the information needed to argue it correctly.

These students acknowledge that their professors have more knowledge than them. Professors may lack knowledge in areas outside of their fields of study. However, students are deferring to them because of their professorial status. Nevertheless, students are deferring to their professor because of their higher education experience. A different student states, “The teacher will win, though, because he has more knowledge than me, he’s more educated.” Others concur as one student states, “The teacher will win [a debate] because he has more knowledge than me, he’s more educated.”
RQ 2: How does the spiral of silence develop?

Research question two concerns whether or not students are willing to hear opinions other than their own. This is important to investigate, because if students are not willing to hear other opinions, chances are they are not affected by political leakage. This is the case because students will simply not listen if it takes place. However, it is also important to examine because these students might be in the “hard core” category (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). The majority of students state that they are willing to hear differing opinions. One student explains, “I think people are always going to develop their own opinions and you are always going to have people who have opinions that aren’t what you have, and you just learn to accept them, because you know that you can’t change them.” While they are not agreeing with them, they are accepting them as the opinions of others. A different student describes a similar point, declaring,

Yeah, I’m fine with it…accept new ideas. And you always hear something you never would have thought of. Just when you hear everybody commenting on something that you would consider as cut and dry, there is always something or somebody that says something that is totally away from what you think or close to what you think, but a different aspect.

Students also see benefits to hearing differing opinions. One student points out,

Yeah if I hear something presented in a way that I never thought of and it makes sense. Even if you don’t agree with it, you can hear their argument, and think well I haven’t heard that argument. And then wonder what you think to rebut that.

Students believe the benefit to having differing opinions is that it makes you think and recheck your own ideas. If students are willing to hear differing opinions, then there will always be the possibility of the students being affected by it and the possibility of a spiral of silence existing. While students do process the information, they are not processing the willingness to speak out. One student explains her experience with this, pointing out, “I think people are always going to develop their own opinions and you are always going to have people who have opinions that
aren’t what you have, and you just learn to accept them because you know you can’t change them.” This is the common opinion students hold on this issue. It seems as though students respect other students for stating their opinions and are willing to hear them and agree to disagree. Another student states, “We should have more respect for them for saying it out loud instead, because they are actually taking a chance.” While students may fear their peers, and choose not to speak, the reality is their classmates respect those that speak out instead of resenting them. If the students are made aware that they are respected when they speak out, they might be more apt to speak out in the future therefore working against the spiral of silence.

Many students state they are willing to hear differing opinions, and even at times, accept these opinions as different. For instance, if a student is listening to an opinion that is different than their own, they might accept that it is a different opinion. The student is willing to hear the opinion even if they do not agree with the individual. However, the majority of students have not completely changed their views after hearing these differing opinions after the course of a semester. One student explains,

You might build up more of a tolerance after a particular class, an understanding where they are coming from, it might change some small part or like she said learn to understand better, but I don’t think I’ve ever come out of a class and was like ah, now I feel left and before I was right! No, it is not a total 180, but some parts might change.

Most students would agree that they did not see a complete change in their opinion. However, some of the participants acknowledge a subtle change. For example, one student states,

I don’t think I can say I’ve been directly affected by something that was said in class, but possibly inadvertently where there might be a situation where I come across and maybe that conversation is in the back of my mind and it would make me question my polar instinct.

Even students that lack political knowledge can gain from hearing others’ opinions. As the same student further clarifies,
I found out about stuff going on that wasn’t going on until the class started talking about it. I didn’t have an opinion before, but after the discussion I had an opinion…I still want to know…you google it and there are hits after hits…you think you are pretty well educated, and then you had never heard of this thing before…and I have an opinion now, but didn’t before.

RQ 3: What do the students believe are the effects of not being able to speak out?

Research question three goes more into depth about the possible effects of students not being willing to speak out. When asked a series of questions, the majority of students stated not only what happens when they do not speak out, but listed specific reasons why they do not speak out. This is interesting because it dives further into the core of the political bias debate. When asked if the students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings in class, the majority of participants believe that they can speak out, but it is more of a question of should they speak out. This is interesting because it suggests a willingness to speak out, which is opposite from what the spiral of silence posits. The most common fear associated with the political bias debate concerns having student grades altered. However, it is interesting to note that while this was a common fear among students, the majority of students did not perceive the possibility of the altering of grades. There was not one participant that actually experienced this or has had an acquaintance that has experienced it. In fact, one participant describes a positive outcome when she gave a pro President Bush speech to a liberal professor.

I took a leadership class and we had to do a presentation about who we thought was a really great leader…so, I went in there with George W. Bush of course, and afterwards the class was totally dead silent. My teacher’s only comment was, ‘wow, you’re really brave.’ I just sat down, and I ended up getting an A in the class.

This is interesting for two reasons. First, she believed she took a chance when giving the speech on George W. Bush, thinking in the back of her mind there was always the risk that her grade
might suffer. This was a huge risk on her part, especially since it was the last project of the semester. However, it also shows that this professor did not hold it against her even though he was on the opposite end of the political spectrum. While she did assume it a chance, she ultimately was incorrect in her assessment about the professor’s willingness to punish those they disagree with. Although this is only one example, it does raise the question of whether or not professors actually alter grades, even though it is a common fear among students. Another student describes his fear of altered grades.

Opportunity/costs definitely. Kind of like what people said, I’ve been in a situation where I felt like it hindered my grade for doing it…if you do have somebody that you can get a feel for them and they aren’t biased, and you know that it won’t affect your grade and they will just accept you for your opinion, then sure, I mean if they are saying those things, they almost want to be encountered.

There is also a large emphasis on the individual personality of the professor. Another student fears their grades being altered, stating,

I felt my teacher would affect my grade based on how they have acted in the past in a class setting and the way they are handled…a lot of the participatory points were clearly docked and because of this I have definitely not shared my view because of that in certain classes.

There are some classes where political leakage occurs often, whereas other classes only focus on class material. Many feel that the effects of not speaking out are less when the professor is perceived to be open to conversation in class. However, if the professor strictly lectures with little time for comments, the student feels as though they cannot speak out about anything regarding not only political issues, but class material as well. Therefore, this suggests that there is a possibility of political leakage affecting classroom performance. For instance, a particular student states,
I think it depends on how the teacher makes the class feel...because some teachers feel okay with it and other teachers just are up there to teach, and they don’t want their [students] information, but some teachers, the way the present themselves, you know you can talk to that person.

This could be a problem because the effects are based on perceptions. A lot like previous statements, this student suggests that it is a conscious decision and that it is possible for the student to weigh the positives and the negatives before deciding on whether or not to speak out. Similarly, a different student states, “To a certain extent, I mean you always feel...like if the professor in the classroom situation is comfortable, you will feel like you can express yourself, but it is still limited, your not going to feel like you can.”

Students are also highly concerned with what their peers would think of them and their thoughts if they chose to speak out. For example, one woman explains, “I’m afraid that people are going to turn against me, so its safer if I just don’t say anything.” This woman does not know for a fact that her peers will turn against her, but the very fear of it keeps her from speaking. This is a concern and one that has not been discussed by political bias commentators. Another student states, “Judgment from your peers, I still get worried about that sometimes.” This is fascinating because the other class members have no control over the student’s grades; they have no control over the academic success of the student. Because of this, it is interesting to see that students are highly concerned with the judgment of their peers. This can be directly related to the fear of isolation component of the spiral of silence. While the students do not directly state they are afraid they are in the minority, it can be inferred because if their peers hold the same opinion, they are obviously not going to think badly of them. This goes against the popular discussion of this topic and is important because the class members have an effect on students.

Not all students share this sentiment though. One student explains, “I think you can always get ridicule from it [speaking out in class], but I think you can always voice your opinion,
its just if you are strong enough to take the criticism afterward.” This student is obviously a “hard core.” However, he puts yet another spin on the political bias debate. The professor and/or the rest of the class is not going to stop the individual from speaking out in class. This suggests that there is always the possibility of enduring some bantering afterwards. I think it is interesting this student never mentions the consequences and never mentions the risks. He simply believes that if you can endure the ridicule (either professor or student oriented), you can speak out in class. Another student discusses her experience, maintaining, “We were in this one class and they were talking about a stereotype and people were giving their opinions. People were being really rude, so I just was quiet.” This student did not choose to speak because of what her classmates were saying and how they were acting. Because of the negativity, she chose not to speak out about her opinions on the stereotype that was up for debate. How students respond to the pressure of their peers distinguishes the majority, minority, and hard core students.

There are some students that believe that unless the comments are relevant to the subject, it is not the place to discuss political ideological opinions. One student explains,

I think it would depend on what class it is and if it is relevant to the lesson. To just talk about politics in theatre seems a little odd. I mean unless you can apply it to some exercise, it just doesn’t seem relevant and it kind of seems like a waste of our time and of a good education from discussing something that is irrelevant.

Students seem to be highly concerned with receiving what they are paying for in regards to education. So, if the student is not paying for a political science course, they do not want to hear political discussions in class. When the questions were posed to the students, it was always emphasized to take into consideration that they are to draw on political leakage that may have occurred before, during, or after class. With this said, it can be inferred that if it is not relevant to the class discussion, the student does not want to hear anything regarding politics during the entire time they are in the classroom unless it is relevant. For example, one student describes, “It
kind of goes back to what we started with, is it relevant, is it necessary, is it going to take away from why we are in that class.” Other students articulate the relevancy issue, too. As one states,

Definitely if it is relevant to the class it needs to be discussed. But if it is not, to a certain degree, I feel like its not, it should, people should be aware of political issues and stuff, but I don’t think a teacher, or even other students should be the ones doing the teaching for other students.

Students are willing to hear political comments in class if they are relevant to the subject in some way.

The students do not view political leakage in the classroom as a major problem. Students believe that it is okay to have some discussion in class, but would feel most comfortable if the professor has some control over the content. “If it is controlled, and the teacher has control over it…it can get out of hand, you go to class to learn math subjects and they are talking about politics. I mean you can watch CNN for that.” This student is alluding to the concern that she has regarding non political science courses. A number of students feel that some discussion is okay, however it becomes a problem when it monopolizes class time and the topics that were to be discussed that day are never discussed.

RQ 4: Are there different levels of the spiral of silence?

Research question four investigates how the spiral of silence develops by examining the responses given. Noelle-Neumann describes the spiral of silence as beginning with a fear of isolation and as the individual gets deeper into the situation, he/she will spiral more and more into silence. The responses do not really give the sense that there is a gradual descent into silence. After thorough examination, it seems like the students simply decide whether or not they are willing to speak out. While some students may contemplate the situation more than others, most students make the decision once they are comfortable in the class and stick with that
decision for the entire semester without reevaluation. As one student describes, “yeah, you will probably have the whole class against you, so I’m not going to say anything.” He simply took it as a given and moved on. In fact, some students do not feel that it is a problem they are not speaking out. It is apparent that they are accustomed to it and are not bothered much by it. One student describes,

It was in English where a girl, we were talking about homosexuality and whether it was good. It’s kind of funny because one class was really liberal and the other was conservative. I was a Christian and I wanted to speak up, but people kept talking, so I kept quiet. It was the Christians against the rest of the class…so maybe five people against forty-five.

This student was in the minority and wanted to speak up. However, because the majority kept talking, she kept quiet. This is different from what Noelle-Neumann describes when she discusses a spiral of silence. This student never did speak up and she was aware that she was in the minority, however if it were a true spiral of silence, the student would have never wanted to speak out. Based on the findings, the spiral of silence is not something that develops over time. As soon as the student realizes the classroom situation, he/she makes a decision of whether or not to speak out in class. The student then sticks with this choice throughout the remainder of the semester.

The fear of isolation is a powerful component and one that has the potential to make students not speak out, even when they have a desire to do so. One thing that Noelle-Neumann leaves out is the possibility of there being different degrees of the spiral of silence. When analyzing the focus group results, there are several levels of the spiral that should be discussed. There were three levels that can be discussed in regards to students’ willingness to speak out. Level one is the typical spiral of silence: the student refuses to speak out due to any reason. This includes the possibility of the student not speaking out due to the fear of isolation as well as not
speaking out because of lack of knowledge and the other reasons described by the focus group participants. The important part about this level is that regardless of the situation, the student will not speak out. One student states she won’t speak out because “I’m not registered to vote…so I don’t really feel…like I have much of an opinion. I feel like if I don’t go vote than I shouldn’t talk.” This comment suggests that voting is the determining factor, not knowledge. Another student describes her desire to learn the class material. “I probably wouldn’t do it anyway [speak out] because I want to learn stuff that pertains to theatre, that is why I am taking the class, because I enjoy theatre, not because I enjoy politics.” There were several students that took this position. They wanted to learn what they were there to learn, not politics. Many are not interested in politics and feel that if they were interested in that, they would have taken a course in it. These students merely tune out any political leakage that occurs in the classroom.

Level two of the spiral of silence is when students are willing to speak out, but only when certain circumstances are present. As one student makes clear when he would be willing to speak out, “No, I don’t think so, because if I feel like I say that and I am wrong, people might get mad. If I know more about it, I might, but it depends on the situation in class.” This shows that some students are willing to speak out, but it is based on the knowledge they have about the topic. This leaves the possibility of thinking if they are in the majority, they still might choose not to speak out. While this still holds true to the initial tenets of the spiral of silence theory, it leaves the possibility for students to waver between the three levels throughout their academic career, whereas if they are in level one, they will always choose not to speak out. When the reason is lack of knowledge, the specifics of an issue become extremely important. Another student describes how he makes this decision. “I think it depends on the student. I don’t feel as strongly…I mean if I don’t feel strong about the issue than I am not going to talk. I don’t feel
strong about politics, but if I felt strongly about an issue, I would go into it.” This individual relies heavily on the situation to see what level of the spiral he will be at. He consciously thinks about it. Another student describes it as a conscious decision. “It kind of comes down to picking your battles. If you want to say something and you know in your heart that it might cause some controversy and some heated debate and you have thirty minutes left of class then it all kind of depends on factors.” This response directly explains what the second level of the spiral of silence entails. The student will evaluate specific situations to decide whether or not he/she will speak out. It is interesting that students are remaining quiet for strategic reasons by choosing the appropriate time to talk or remain silent.

Level three describes the “hard core” individuals. These individuals will choose to speak out regardless of whether they fall into the majority or the minority. One student states, “you have to stand up for what you believe in, no matter where you are.” This individual places value on speaking out. In fact, some students believe that if you do not stand up for what your true beliefs are than your beliefs must not be very strong. Another student explains, “I’ve never felt like I couldn’t be honest and felt like I couldn’t say what I would have to say.” Whether the inhabitants of level three place value on speaking out or they simply have never felt uncomfortable about voicing their opinions they all have one thing in common: they always speak out. This is a special group of students because it is the group that political leakage does not affect. All three levels are a part of the spiral of silence theory; they all simply are different degrees and have different places within the spiral of silence.
Tentative Additional Results

While this project set out to address four research questions, a review of the transcripts highlights several other issues that deserve attention.

First, there is a possibility that gender differences play a role in political bias in the classroom. For instance, are female professors more apt to making political comments in class or are male professors the ones that have political leakage occurring most in their classrooms? While this is not a topic originally meant for exploration in this thesis, the gender dimension deserves attention. Students mentioned both male and female professors throughout their responses. However, when mentioning these professors, most students stated them as a group (e.g. they, their, them). Without further questioning, it would be impossible to infer whether they meant male or female professors. When the students mentioned a specific gender, there was more attention to detail in the description of the male professors. While there were not enough references to make certain judgments, it does appear that students mentioned male professors more often.

It is also important to note the possible differences in the position of the instructor. For example, there may be differences between a graduate teaching assistant and a tenured professor or an experienced professor. Most students simply refer to the professor as, “the teacher.” At times they refer to them as the professor, and there was only one time that a student referred to their “general eds.” Graduate teaching assistants usually teach general education courses. There could be questions asking actual differences between the classes taught by the different levels of faculty.

Finally, most examples used by students in the focus group were humanities courses. For example, students discussed political leakage in classes such as theatre, philosophy, and English
courses. Some popular political bias discussion has mentioned that political leakage occurs in classes such as biology and generally assumes leakage in non-political courses. In this study, students did not mention political leakage occurring in hard science course. It is possible that different levels of political leakage might occur within different types of classes.
A university is a place of extreme diversity. Students hold different views about many different things. Because of this, there has been popular discussion regarding the topic of political bias in the classroom. While concerned politicians and various media have voiced opinions about what needs to be done, they do not understand the full issue. They claim that it is the professor that is silencing students; however, this thesis found that while the professor may play a role, there is a possibility that other members in the class silence the students. This popular discussion also does not account for the many different reasons why students are not choosing to speak out. For example, they never address the issue that students are willing to hear differing opinions. This is important because if they are not willing to accept differing opinions, it might lead to the silencing of students. Academic bills of rights have been drafted, students have complained, and books have been written however without a solid knowledge of why the students are choosing not to speak out, all of these measures cannot do what they were intended to do: help the students.

Summary

The focus group results yielded powerful responses regarding the effects of political leakage on students. The research questions and interview guide were designed to extract the innermost thoughts of students on the political bias in the classroom issue. Research question one dealt with whether the perceived political bias in the classroom affects students’ willingness to speak out. While the majority of students agree that political bias in the classroom does exist,
few seem to view it as a major problem. Results show that political leakage occurs often in the classroom, but most students view it as part of the university experience and are not concerned about the possible effects. The students also believe that if a professor goes into depth about a political issue, it is related to the subject being discussed. In all other situations, the professors will mention these comments in passing and the students feel as though these comments really do not have any merit. There are several reasons why students choose not to speak. The most common reason given is a lack of political knowledge. The second reason students give is because the class moves too fast. Similarly, they are interested in getting out of class early instead of engaging in a heated political discussion. The third reason stated is a fear of their grades being altered, though no evidence of this was discussed by the focus group participants.

The second research question concerns whether or not students are willing to hear opinions other than their own. Students believe they are willing to hear differing opinions because they believe that it makes the individual think and recheck their own ideas. Students also had respect for the students for stating their opinions. While students are willing to hear differing opinions, they usually do not change their views, though some may have seen a moderate amount of change over the course of a semester.

Research question three went more into depth about the possible effects of students not being willing to speak out. The majority of students feel that they can speak out, however it is a question of should they speak out. The students are also in fear of their grades being altered. Students feel that the effects of not speaking out are lessened when the professor is perceived to be open to conversation in class. However, students mentioned that if the professor strictly lectures, students feel as though they cannot speak out about any topic, including political comments made in class. This suggests a possibility of political leakage affecting classroom
performance. If students fear repercussions for voicing their opinions, they might not ask questions pertaining to classroom material. If questions are not asked when the student is having trouble, they may fall behind in class. As stated in previous research questions, students are highly concerned with what their peers would think of them if they chose to speak out. A handful of students believe that the classroom, unless it is a political science course, is not the place to discuss political ideological opinions. Students also care about the financial cost of their education. For instance, students believe that if they are not paying for a political science course, they should not be hearing political discussions in class. Lastly, students believe that political discussion becomes a problem when it monopolizes class time and the topics that were to be discussed that day are never discussed.

The fourth research question exemplifies how the spiral of silence develops. There is not a gradual descent into silence. Rather, students quickly decide whether or not they are willing to speak out. While some may contemplate the situation more than others, some may make the decision once they are comfortable in the class and stick with that decision for the entire semester without reevaluation.

Research question four asks whether or not there are different levels to the spiral of silence. Three levels of the spiral were found. Level one is the typical spiral of silence: the student refuses to speak out due to any reason. The important part about this level is that regardless of the situation, the student will not speak out. Level two of the spiral of silence is when students are willing to speak out, but only when certain circumstances are present. Level three can best be described as what Noelle-Neumann calls the “hard core” individuals. These individuals will choose to speak out regardless of whether they fall into the majority or the minority.
Implications

The first implication concerns pedagogy. When professors and graduate teaching assistants go through their university orientation, there always is time devoted to proper conduct and creating awareness on sensitive issues of race and gender. For instance, training may occur with topics such as diversity and sexual harassment, and inclusive language choices. In fact the American Association of University Professors (AAUP and the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) have drafted guidelines concerning harassment, exploitation and discrimination (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). There are also explicit examples of intellectual, religious, racial, and sexual abuses of power in most university codes of ethics (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). As this research suggests, a new topic for consideration in these codes is political bias. Political bias in the classroom, while obviously not as serious as sexual harassment or racial discrimination, is still a serious issue. With political bias becoming an increasing issue of concern in college classrooms, it should be discussed whether or not it should be included in codes of ethics as well. As previously stated, state legislatures believe it is a serious problem. They have drafted academic bills of rights. Some universities already have their own clauses in their rules and regulations about the issue. Political bias is an issue that demands special attention. All of the previously stated types of discrimination would affect students’ academic performance, and political bias is different.

There have been several academic guides to dealing with these traditional types of concerns. There have been specific case studies exemplifying what and how a professor should act in the classroom regarding racial issues (Flowers, 2004). In a particular book, each chapter is devoted to a different type of discrimination. For example, one case study explains an Asian student in a class of all Caucasian students. The professor only addressed issues familiar to
Caucasian students, without ever addressing the Asian student (Flowers, 2004). The case study then goes on to ask a series of questions aiding the professor in making a decision of dealing with a diverse class.

These issues have even made it into academic research. For example, Giroux (2003) states,

the meaning of race and the challenges of racism change for each generation, and that the new challenges we face demand a new language for understanding how the symbolic power of race as a pedagogical force as well as a structural and materialist practice redefine the relationship between the self and the other, the private and the public.

As codes must adjust to new forms of racism, professors and universities should be aware of new forms of bias beyond race, gender, and class. As this study explains, “new” racism can be defined as proclaiming things such as race neutrality, asserting culture as a marker or racial difference, or marking race as a private matter. When considering this, the question arises of if people are adjusting to “new” racism, if they should also be adjusting to political bias in the classroom, which is also new.

Something else that needs to be investigated further is examining why a spiral of silence is present when discussing religion in the classroom instead of political views. This could be because students are more likely to have an opinion on religion. Even if a student isn’t strongly religious, they likely will hold opinions on religion opinion. From birth, people constantly have been inundated with religiosity. Because of this, most people have a stance on religion, including those that are apathetic. Politics are different because there are many college students that are apathetic towards politics; students that have no working knowledge of the political system or opinions on any issues. Because of this, political leakage in the classroom might not affect students in the same way as it was observed for religious discussions. Therefore, there are certain
preconditions for a political discussion to take place in the classroom. The most important of those being that the students involved in the discussion must have a working knowledge of political issues.

When Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann first developed the spiral of silence theory, it tested how the media silence the minority. This thesis extended the theory beyond the media and into a new realm. This became a challenge because there was a serious lack of literature using the spiral of silence in a similar way. Eckstein and Turman’s (2002) research on religious discussions is the only academic study to apply the spiral of silence theory to a classroom setting. They focused on how students were being silenced in regards to their religious beliefs.

There are several strengths to applying a theory in a new way. Noelle-Neumann did not mean for the theory to stay limited to the media. Therefore testing its broader applications has value. This allows for the possibility for cross-disciplinary ventures with this theory. By testing in a new area, it provides new rigor to the concepts. The discipline should not be closed off. Media theory and dialogue should be tested.

While there are strengths, there are weaknesses as well. The first weakness is that when a researcher uses a theory outside of its original purpose, there is the possibility of certain tenets of the theory being used in less than ideal ways. If a theory is tested in a new way, there is always a chance that the theory in its entirety will not transfer. There needs to be effort used to avoid forcing the theory when it doesn’t fit. Along these lines, the theory can also lose its original purpose when applying it to a new context. The risk is that the application is not useful.
Limitations

There were two major limitations to this thesis. The first is the small sample size. There were 33 students that participated in this study. Recruitment for focus groups was satisfactory. There were some individuals that signed up for the focus group and failed to show. The recruitment eventually ceased due to a saturation of material. There was no need to recruit further because students were not introducing anything new; they were simply reinforcing what has already been said by other participants. There is a certain lack of generalizability with such a small sample size. However, because of the saturation of material, there was no need for a larger sample size.

The second limitation concerns methodological issues. Focus groups are ideal for studying this topic, however there are other methods that can either be used in conjunction or separately to test the effects of political bias in the classroom. Individual interviews would be an effective way when used in conjunction with focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of individual effects on students. However, this thesis was merely interested in if there were any general effects versus heavily focusing on individual effects.

Teachers should work hard to foster discussion within the classroom. For example, there should be a large amount of probing to urge a well-rounded discussion of politics. Teachers must work to prevent level one problems.

Based on the results of this thesis, students are willing to speak out in some situations and not willing to speak out in other situations. There is a possibility of a new spiral of silence regarding political bias in the classroom materializing that makes some students less likely to talk than others. This is different from what Noelle-Neumann discusses with her original spiral of silence theory. Care was taken to make students comfortable and willing to discuss the issue.
Future Research

Political bias in the classroom is a broad topic and one that has a lot of potential for future research. There are several ways to gather data that this thesis did not touch upon. For instance, the researcher could focus on age differences and their perceptions of different aspects of political bias. Older students might not view political bias as such a strong issue as younger students. This could be because they are more willing to speak out due to their life experiences whereas a younger student might be more scared to speak out against a professor. The researcher could focus on the perspective differences as well as the strength of ideological views between an untenured professor, a tenured professor, and a graduate teaching assistant or instructor. There is also a possibility of gender differences between students and faculty members. The researcher could focus on either or both student or professorial gender differences.

Public policies affect many different disciplines. Future research could examine the specific content of the political leakage. There could be different levels of political leakage occurring in different settings.

There is also a quantitative portion that could be accomplished. For instance, a survey could be administered to either students or professors to gain a larger perspective. The students could provide specific answers to very specific questions. On the other hand, the professors could give their perspective on the political bias issue, something that this thesis does not address. There could also be some observation. This would provide the perspective of the researcher and it would leave a place to interpret what is actually happening in the classroom from an outside source.
Future research could also focus on conducting focus groups, interviews, and observation in a triangulated study. For instance, the researcher could compare data from the three methods to better determine the scope, extent and effects of political leakage in the classroom. The research could also explore not only what students believe about bias, but also what is actually occurring.

Research could take another direction by looking more at the relationship between state legislature decisions and public universities, since there have been academic bills drafted to assist in protecting against political bias in the classroom. Also, not a lot of attention has been paid to the media that is shown in class, so maybe a researcher could look further into the possible effects of what media the professor chooses to show in the classroom. Lastly, this could be examined nationally instead of at one university. A researcher could examine the differences between small versus large universities and colleges as well as the differences between private versus public institutions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

PILOT STUDY INTERVIEW GUIDE

1) Do your professors ever discuss their personal political views in the class?
   a) Does it happen often?

2) Are you willing to take part in political discussion within the classroom?
   a) Do you feel as though you can express your thoughts and feelings in their entirety about anything in the classroom?
   b) Have you ever felt like you could express your feelings within the classroom?

3) How do you feel about political discussion taking place in the classroom?
   a) Do you challenge these views if they are unlike your own political views?
   b) How do you feel when this occurs?
   c) Has there ever been a time when you wanted to speak up in class, but you did not?
      i. If yes, why did you choose not to speak up in class?
   d) Are you willing to hear differing opinions, from either your professor or other students in the class?
      i. If yes, are you willing to accept the differing opinions even if they were different from your own?

4) Have you ever emerged from a class with different views than you had at the beginning of class?
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1) How do you feel about political discussion taking place in the classroom?
   a) Does it happen often?
   b) Are you willing to take part in a political discussion within the classroom?

2) Do your professors ever discuss their personal political views in the class?
   a) Do you challenge these views if they are unlike your own political views?
   b) How do you feel when this occurs?

3) Do you feel as though you can express your thoughts and feelings in their entirety about anything in the classroom?
   a) Have you ever felt like you could express your feelings within the classroom?

4) Would you feel comfortable wearing a campaign button or t-shirt to class?

5) Has there ever been a time when you wanted to speak up in class, but you did not?
   a) If yes, why did you choose not to speak up in class?

6) Are you willing to hear differing opinions, from either your professor or other students in the class?
   b) If yes, are you willing to accept the differing opinions even if they were different from your own?

7) Have you ever emerged from a class with different views than you had at the beginning of the class?