



Free speech shocks in the marketplace of ideas: How speaker deplatforming incidents affect American college students

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Abstract

Theorists in law and economics have suggested that increased liability for speech could deter expression, resulting in a “chilling effect.” This paper explores whether the same phenomenon is true of *social* liability for speech, using attempts to disinvite or disrupt the events of conservative speakers on American college campuses as quasi-experimental shocks. Cross-sectional data on college students in 2022 and 2023 collected by the Foundation for Individual Right and Expression (FIRE) allows me to compare students within the same school and semester before and after a shock. Using a stacked difference-in-differences method, I find that a shock, on average, makes conservative students 11 percentage points less comfortable discussing a controversial political topic in an in-class discussion relative to liberal students, and (when one outlier school is omitted) increases self-censorship among conservative students by 8 percentage points in absolute terms. Effects are considerably heterogeneous by school, however, and depend on the details of the shock. I also examine student attitudes towards college administrators and find that, after a deplatforming incident, liberal students are 8 percentage points more likely to think their administrators would defend a speaker in a controversy over offensive speech, but are *not* more likely to think their administrators clearly protect free speech.

Deplatforming Incidents

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) tracks deplatforming attempts in their Deplatforming Database (Figure 1.1.) I study ten incidents in 2022 and 2023 that targeted conservative speakers. Treated schools include both public (6) and private (4) schools, across all four Census regions.

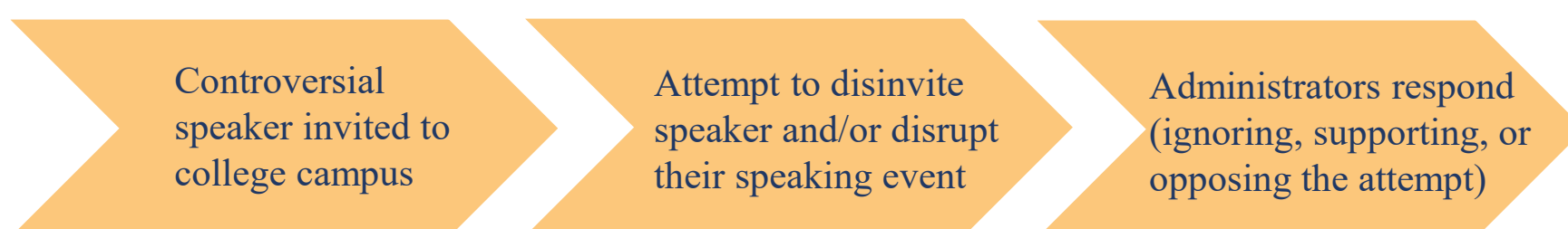
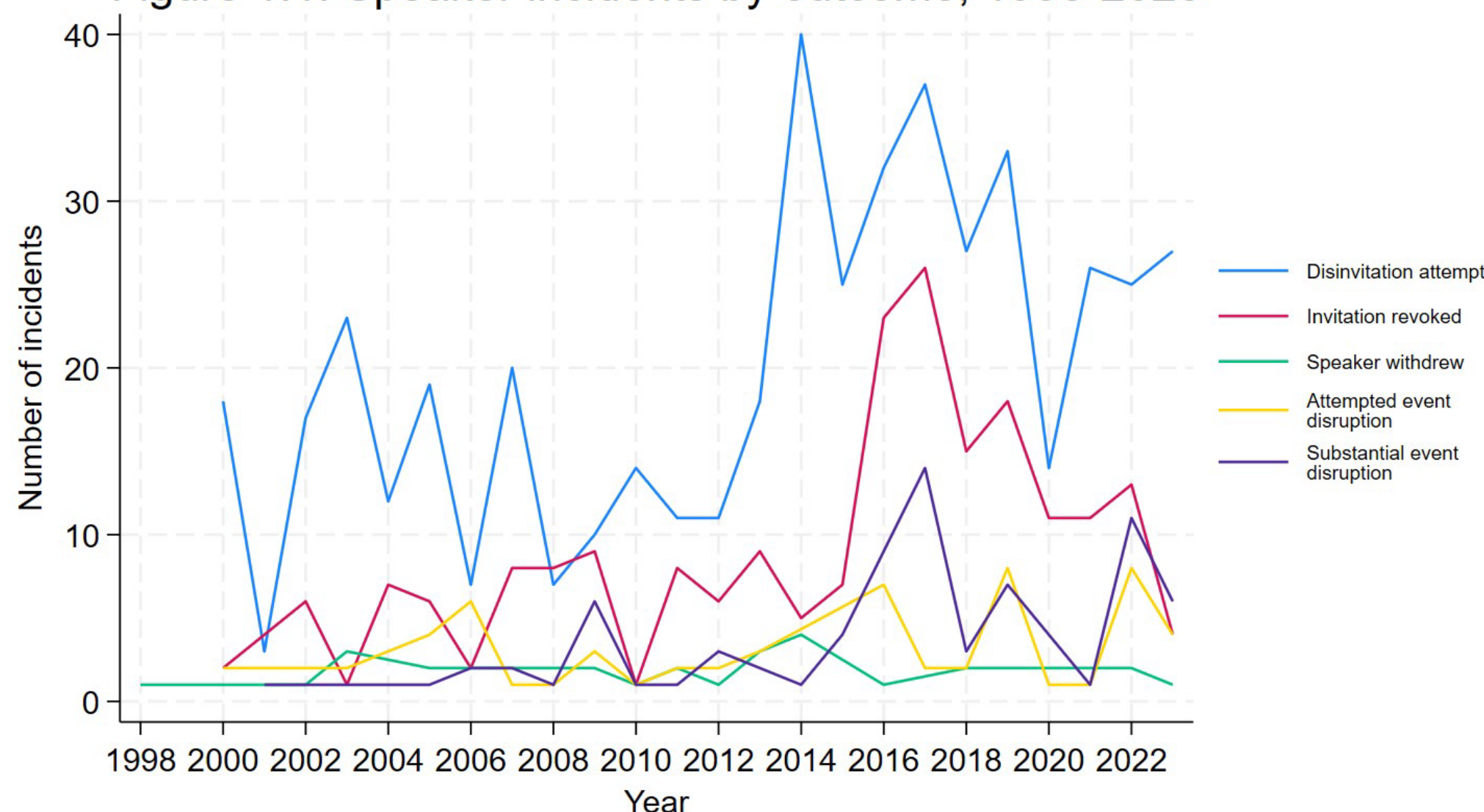


Figure 1.1: Speaker incidents by outcome, 1998-2023



Theoretical Framework

Assume political speech can be ordered on a left/right (coded blue/red) political spectrum, with bounds of acceptable discourse L and R . I model the social price of speech, $p(s_p)$, as the distance between the agent’s speech and socially unacceptable speech. That is, $p(s_p) = \min\{d(s_p, L), d(s_p, R)\}^{-1}$. Theoretically, an attempt to deplatform a conservative speaker signals an intolerance for conservative speech, shifting the boundaries leftwards. Assuming agents derive positive marginal utility from political speech, this social “price change” would “chill” speech for conservative students and “warm” speech for liberal students.

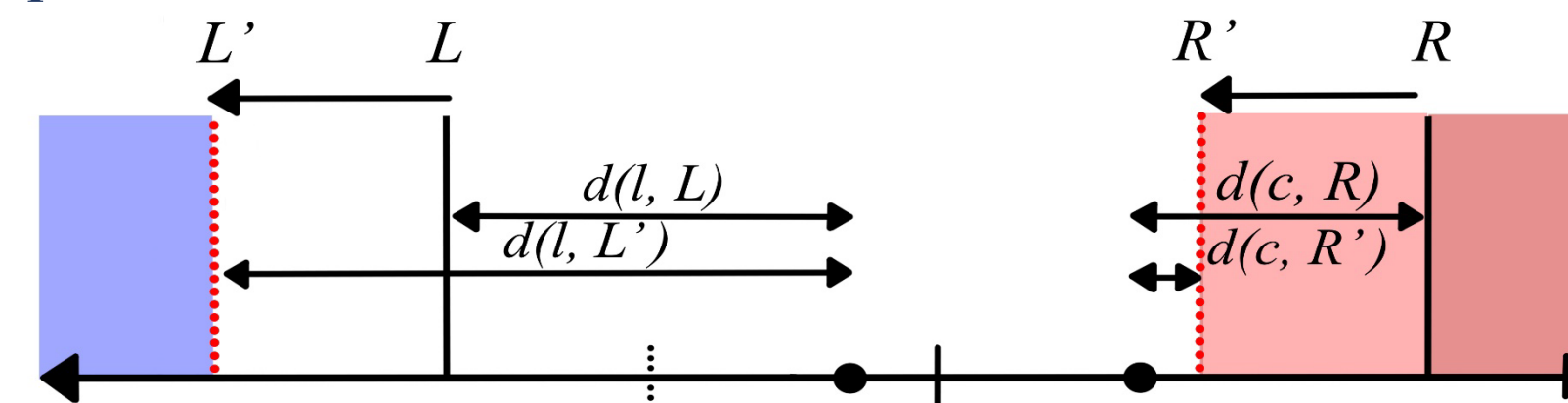


Figure 7.3: Left Shift of Boundaries

Data and Empirical Models

Data on college students come from the 2022 and 2023 waves of the College Free Speech Rankings Survey. Binary dependent variables y_{ijdt} are self-censorship, comfort expressing one’s political opinion on a controversial topic in a class discussion, confidence that administrators protect free speech, and confidence that administrators would defend a speaker in a controversy over offensive speech. I obtain difference-in-differences and event-study estimates using stacked regression models. Within sub-experiment datasets that are concatenated vertically, control units are students within nearby untreated schools who were surveyed within the same semester as the treatment incident.

$$y_{ijdt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_{jd} \times Ideo_{id} + \beta_2 P_{id} + \beta_3 P_{id} \times Ideo_{id} + \beta_4 T_{jd} \times P_{id} + \beta_5 T_{jd} \times P_{id} \times Ideo_{id} + \beta_6 X_{id} + \alpha_{jd} + \mu_{td} \times Ideo_{id} + \varepsilon_{ijdt}$$

$$y_{ijdt} = \beta_1 T_{jd} \times Ideo_{id} + \sum_{w=-3}^{+4} \tau_w \times 1(TSE_{id} = w) + \sum_{h=-3}^{+4} \tau_h (T_{jd} \times 1(TSE_{id} = h)) + \sum_{p=-3}^{+4} \tau_p (T_{jd} \times 1(TSE_{id} = p) \times Ideo_{id}) + \beta_2 X_{id} + \alpha_{jd} + \mu_{td} \times Ideo_{id} + \varepsilon_{ijdt}$$

y_{ijdt} : outcome for student i , in school j , in sub-experiment d , at year-month t .
 T_{jd} : indicator for being in the treated group (any of the ten treated schools)
 P_{jd} : indicator for being in the post-incident time-period (within sub-experiment)
 TSE_{id} : “time since event” (between survey submission date and incident date)
 $Ideo_{id}$: vector of disjoint political ideology categories (liberal, moderate, conservative, other, and don’t know)
 X_{id} : individual demographic variables (race, gender, etc.)

Results

Predicted probabilities for conservatives are in red, and predicted probabilities for liberals are in blue. Solid lines indicate the treated group; dashed lines indicate the control group. Diverging trends for liberals vs. conservatives provide some evidence of a chilling effect. While point estimates vary significantly across schools, larger effects are observed at schools where administrators were less supportive of the speaker.

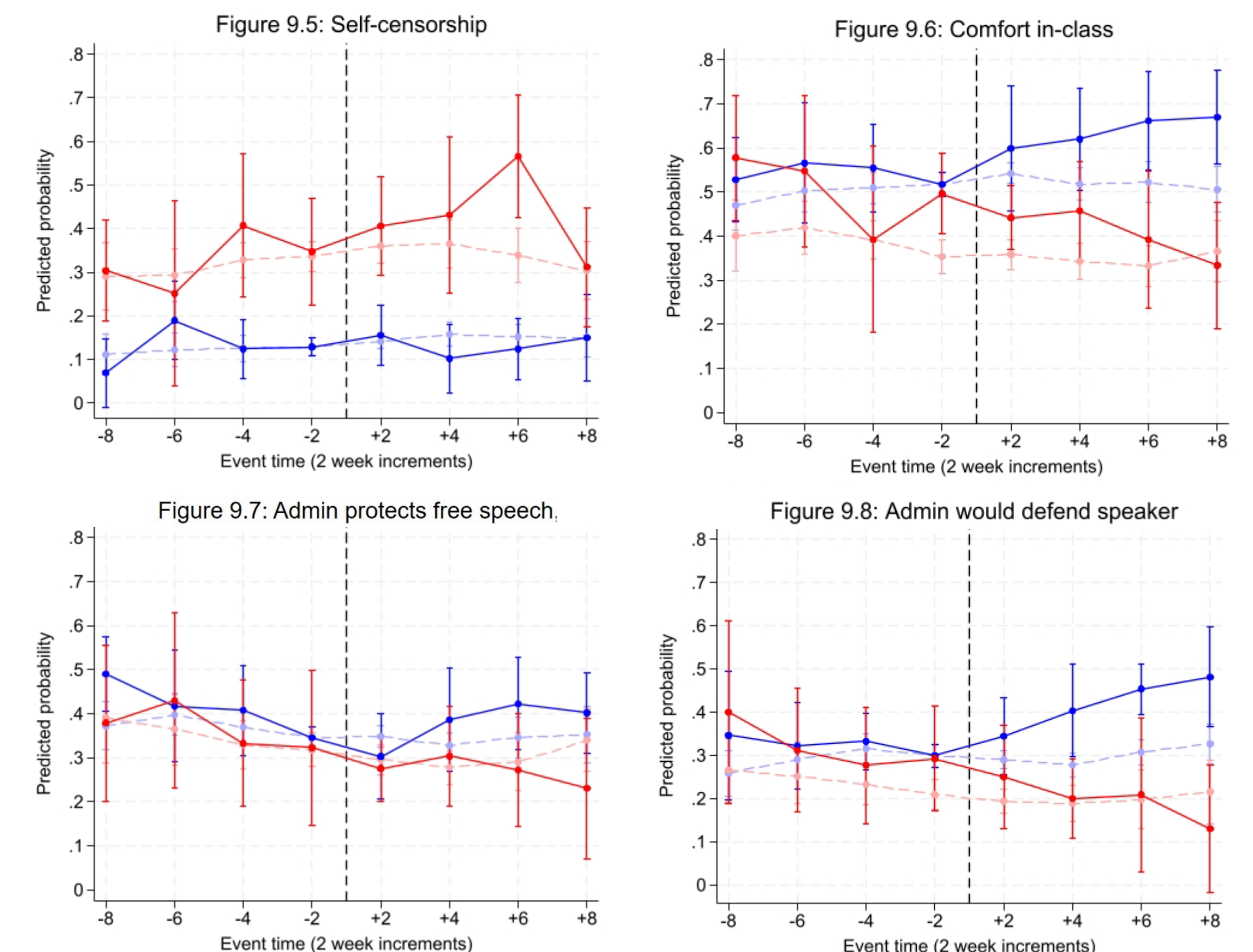


Table 9.2: Difference-in-differences results by ideology

	Self-Censor	Comfort	Admin protects	Admin defends
Ideology				
All	0.012 (0.012)	0.012 (0.019)	-0.031** (0.015)	0.017 (0.023)
Liberal	-0.016 (0.018)	0.063* (0.033)	-0.019 (0.020)	0.077** (0.032)
Conservative	0.044 (0.045)	-0.051 (0.045)	-0.029 (0.048)	-0.071 (0.053)
Difference	0.061 (0.052)	-0.114* (0.066)	-0.010 (0.055)	-0.148** (0.061)

Note: Aggregate treatment effects are calculated by stacking each sub-experiment and estimating a single DiD regression model. Standard errors are clustered by school. $N \sim 38,774$ (2,363 in the ten treated schools).

References

- Stevens, S.T. 2022. “2024 College Free Speech Rankings: What Is the State of Free Speech on America’s College Campuses? The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.” <https://www.thefire.org/news/just-released-2022-2023-college-free-speech-rankings>
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