KNOW YOU, NO ME: PEOPLE SEEK OTHERS’ POLITICAL LEANINGS BUT WITHHOLD THEIR OWN IN FIRST ENCOUNTERS

by

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Know You, No Me: People Seek Others’ Political Leanings but Withhold their own in First Encounters

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Abstract

In a first conversation with a stranger, people choose what information they want to seek from others and reveal about themselves. How do they make these choices with political information? One guiding factor might be how much political identity represents the true self, who someone really is. The true self has moral content, and because peoples’ political identity unveils their moral worldview, people might use political identity to understand others’ true self. A first between-subjects study (N = 187, 1122 observations) found that people thought political identities, compared to other identities (e.g., religion, occupation, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity), was the most representative of the true self. Study 2 (N = 217, 868 observations) replicated Study 1’s findings using a relationship app context: people chose to both seek others’ politics and reveal their own politics more on the app when they prioritized the true self (vs. superficial self). Study 3 (N = 111, 1539 observations) found that people preferred to seek others’ politics (to know others’ true self) more than reveal their own politics (to not reveal their own true self) in a first conversation. Study 4 (N = 592 participants, 5920 observations) established that the true self is the mechanism underlying the asymmetrical political information exchange in first encounters—when people see a true self prompt (vs. a superficial self prompt vs. no-prompt) on a relationship app, they reveal more political information. We discuss implications and future directions.
Lay Summary

We investigated how people exchange political information in a first encounter. Compared to other identities (e.g., occupation, gender, etc), people thought political identity was the most representative of the true self, of who people really are, for both themselves and others. Likely for that reason, in a first conversation, people seek others’ politics (to know who they really are) more than they reveal their own politics (to avoid sharing who they really are). Using a relationship app context, we found that people will reveal more political information when we tell them to prioritize their true self (vs. their superficial self vs. what they would naturally do), establishing that politics being a window into the true self explains why people seek others’ politics but not reveal their own politics in a first encounter.
Preface

This thesis is my original intellectual product. In collaboration with another graduate student, Gordon Heltzel, and under the supervision of Dr. Kristin Laurin, I developed the ideas for the line of research, designed the studies, and analyzed the data. I wrote the thesis, and Dr. Laurin contributed feedback throughout the process of writing. None of the research presented here has been published at the time of this thesis. UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board approved this project under the project title “Forming Impressions Study” (certificate number H21-03091).
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1 Introduction

Sex, religion, and politics—three topics the well-mannered avoid in conversations with new people. Yet, few topics make for more compelling discussions. Here, we look at one of the forbidden three—politics. It dominates every part of modern life, popping up on new shows, social media timelines, and even uncomfortable family gatherings. In this thesis, we examine whether and how people want their first conversations with others to involve the exchange of political information. I hypothesize that in first encounters, people seek to learn others’ political identities, while not revealing their own, in both cases because they think political identities are especially revealing of the true self.

1.1 Political Identities Expose Morality and the True Self

What does a person’s political identity say about them? Political identity involves categorizing oneself as part of a political group as well as adopting the beliefs common to that group (Brown & Hohman, 2022). In modern times, political identities have become increasingly homogenized and clustered (Finkel et al., 2020). This means any one political affiliation or belief is a strong cue to many others: How someone feels about abortion is an increasingly accurate predictor of what they think about other issues (environmental policies, immigration, social security, etc.), and of what political party they belong to (Finkel et al., 2020; Pew, 2014).

Political identities can also cue information outside the political realm. Political identity is conceptualized as a mega-identity that encapsulates other identities, like demographic characteristics as well as racial, religious, educational, and geographic identity. For example, a Democrat is especially likely to be a minoritized individual, to live in a city, and to pursue higher education; a Republican is especially likely to be White, to live in a rural town, and to subscribe to a religion (Finkel et al., 2020). In fact, political identity can be a key driver of many other
chosen identities: People will change their religion or where they live to align with their political convictions (Mondeaux, 2022).

Most importantly, political identities provide strong cues to moral worldviews and priorities. For example, someone’s views on capital punishment point to the value they place on human life, what they think about the role of the state in administering justice, and the relative balance they strike between retribution and reparative justice. People’s general ideological orientation is also linked to whether they mostly prioritize harm and fairness in their moral judgments, or care similarly about authority, loyalty, and purity (Graham et al., 2009, Haidt & Graham, 2007; Krull, 2016; Milesi, 2016). And when judging moral violations, conservatives (liberals) are more likely to attribute them to dispositional (situational) factors; as a result, conservatives assign more blame to wrongdoers and endorse more punishment (Carroll et al., 1987; Everett et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2010). In other words, a person’s political identity signals a lot about their morality.

Because politics is related to morality, people might think that political identity provides a window into who a person really is—their true self. The true self includes the deeper aspects of the self as opposed to more surface level-information, like hobbies and preferences. Most central to the true self is morality information (Knobe et al., 2017), even more so than other important dimensions like personality, desires, and cognitive abilities (Hartley et al., 2016; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). People see someone being a habitual liar as more part of their true self, more so than that they are extroverted, that they want to be a professor, that they have an exceptional memory, and certainly that they are a habitual chess-player. Because political identity represents someone’s opinions on a host of moral issues, people might see political identity as especially representative of the true self, more so than other identities or other information.
1.2 But does MY Political Identity expose MY Morality and True Self?

The findings reviewed above make a straightforward case that people will see others’ politics identities as representative of their true selves. People are comfortable using stereotyped broad identities to make snap judgements to understand others (Fiske, 2018; Grant & Holmes, 1981; Hamilton et al., 1990), and politics are no exception: People rely on exaggerated stereotypes about their political outgroups to assume members of these outgroups are prejudiced, endorse extreme policy positions, and seek to undermine democracy (Chambers et al., 2006; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Pasek et al., 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2021). And they readily use others’ policy preferences (e.g., on capital punishment or the use of torture) to infer moral traits—like compassion, trustworthiness, dishonestly, and unkindness (Bruchmann et al., 2018; Clifford, 2014). Given they see others’ political identity as exposing their morality, they likely also see others’ political identity as representative of others’ true self.

It is not as clear that people necessarily consider that their own politics exposes their true self. On one hand, they might well: They do see their own political beliefs and affiliation as connected to their moral beliefs (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka et al., 2015). They might therefore see their political identity as providing a window into their own true self, similarly to how it does for others—providing a better indication into who they really are compared to other identities that are not morally-laden, like socioeconomic status, occupation, or gender.

On the other hand, people may resist the idea that their own complex and multifaceted self can be reflected in any one piece of information. People do not see stereotypes as applying to themselves, because stereotypes seem too broad and general to encapsulate who they really are (Schmader, 2010; Spencer et al., 2016; Schumpe & Hans-Peter Erb, 2015). And it is not simply that people want to avoid being associated with exaggerated negative stereotypes of their
political in-group (Chambers et al., 2006; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Pasek et al., 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2021): People do not even like when others use broad identities, like their gender or race, to attribute to them positive personality traits or high competence (Siy & Cheryan, 2012; Siy & Cheryan, 2016). Together, these findings suggest people might not think that their political identity, and the moral assumptions others might make on its basis, represent their true self.

1.3 Seeking Political Information in a First Encounter

Humans have evolved to seek information about others through observation, socializing, gossiping, etc, because this information can demarcate who is friend and who is foe (Dunbar, 2004). People are also driven to seek as much information about others to reduce uncertainty, which is distressing to experience.

But not all information is equal in value. People especially prioritize moral information. Presumably because it is especially revealing and actionable, it supersedes other dimensions, like warmth and competence. Moreover, morality qualifies how people interpret these other dimensions: A person being sociable and competent is attractive only to the extent that they are also moral (Abele et al., 2016; Brambilla et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2013; Landy et al., 2016). Accordingly, people see moral traits (e.g., honesty, compassion, fairness) as the most important for knowing, liking, and respecting a person (Hartley et al., 2016; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). By finding out more information about others’ true selves and morality, people can better predict others’ behaviors and know how intimate they want to be (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). We hypothesize that people will seek others’ politics to understand their true selves. Existing evidence provides indirect hints that people are indeed eager to learn others’ political identities. They surmise others’ political identities even based on innocuous cues, like the car someone owns or their preferred coffee brand of choice, to identify them politically (Lee, 2021). They use
others’ political identities as a basis for inferring their personality, intelligence, and their warmth (Clifford, 2014; Clifford, 2020), and as a basis for similarity-based liking (Mallinas et al., 2018). Together, this suggests people might actively try to seek this useful information about others. Hence, in a first encounter, if people have the opportunity to learn their conversational partner’s politics, we propose they will take it.

1.4 Revealing Political Information in a First Encounter

It is less clear whether people will want to quickly reveal their political identity to others. Most obviously, they may conceal their political identity to avoid conflict with someone they know or suspect is a political opponent. But even setting this aside, and focusing on contexts when people have no reason to suspect this, we see three possible predictions.

1.4.1 Prediction 1: People Reveal Politics because it Represents the True Self

Humans have a deep desire to affiliate and belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; French & Chadwick, 1956; Gable & Bromberg, 2018; Operario & Fiske, 2004; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014; Valcke et al., 2020), which makes self-disclosure inherently rewarding (Davey et al., 2010; Tamir et al., 2012). By disclosing, people can clarify who they are, validate their sense of self, form positive impressions of themselves, and strengthen their relationships with others (Rosenfeld, 2000). People also enjoy encounters where there is reciprocal disclosure: Conversational partners who disclosed reciprocally liked each other more, enjoyed their interaction more, and perceived more similarity than those who do not disclose reciprocally (Sprecher et al., 2013). If people are motivated to share their true selves, and see their political identities as a window into that, disclosing politics might be an especially powerful way to connect with others.
1.4.2 Prediction 2: People Withhold Politics because it Represents the True Self

However, people might not want to reveal their true self, particularly in a first encounter. People have an underlying need for privacy, which is a "dynamic process of interpersonal boundary control", in which people are sensitive to the intimacy of the relationship, the context, and a myriad of other factors that regulate what they disclose (Altman, 1977, p. 67; Westin, 1967). Upholding privacy boundaries is also theorized to increase autonomy, identity, and self-esteem (Altman, 1977). Accordingly, individuals prefer to start by disclosing broad, superficial information about themselves, and only later over time reveal deeper, more intimate information (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Greene et al., 2006; Taylor, 1968).

Because people open up their privacy boundaries usually when they trust someone, they might not want to disclose their political identity in first encounters. Instead, they might prefer to reveal their political identity, exposing the true self, once a relationship has become more intimate.

1.4.3 Prediction 3: People Withhold Political Identity because it does not Represents the True Self

Finally, people are not likely to want to reveal political identity if it misrepresents their true self. If they think others would assume incorrect characteristics on the basis of their political identity, they might prefer to share other kinds of information in first encounters (and beyond) to provide more accurate information about their true self.

1.5 Study Overview

Four studies examined political information-seeking in first encounters. Study 1 tested the prediction that political identity is more representative of the true self compared to other identities, like religion, gender, ethnicity, SES, and occupation, for both oneself and others.
Study 2 reexamined Study 1’s finding about political identity being representative of the true self in a novel context: on a relationship app, we predicted that those who prioritized the true self (vs. superficial self) will choose to both seek and reveal more political information. For Study 3, we predicted that people will be more interested in seeking than revealing political information, and that this effect would be specific to political information, such that it would be weaker, eliminated, or reverse with nonpolitical information. Study 4 replicated the design of Study 2, with the crucial addition of a no-prompt condition. This no-prompt condition offered an opportunity to conceptually replicate the findings from Study 3. It also served as a baseline against which to compare the two prompts (i.e., true self prompt and superficial self prompt), allowing us to test whether people’s spontaneous seeking behavior already resembled their true-self-seeking behavior, and whether their spontaneous revealing behavior already resembled their superficial-self-revealing behavior.
2 Study 1

In Study 1, participants rated how much political identity as well as five other identities (gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, occupation, and religion), each represented the true self. Half the participants reported how much the identities represented their own true selves; the other half reported how much the identities represented others’ true selves. In other words, Study 1 was a 2 (target: self vs. others, between-subjects) x 6 (identity: political identity vs. gender vs. ethnicity vs. socioeconomic status vs. occupation vs. religion, within subjects) design. Study 1 examined two questions: 1) Do people think political identity is especially representative of the true self, more than other identities, and 2) Is this equally both for oneself and for others? Pre-registered predictions, materials, and analysis plans are available at https://osf.io/dfmp2/.

2.1 Study 1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

We recruited and compensated 241 participants from Prolific Academic. We excluded 54 participants for failing either an English comprehension check or any of two attention checks, leaving 187 participants who together provided 1122 ratings of the six identities. The sample (age $M = 38.53$, $SD = 14.47$) included 48% men, 49% women, 0.5% Transgender men, 3% non-binary, and 0.5% two-spirit individuals. The sample was comprised of participants who were White (73.2%), Black (3.8%), East Asian (7.1%), Indigenous (0.5%), Latin American (4.4%), Southeast Asian (2.7%), South Asian (0.5%), Pacific Islander (0.5%), and multiracial (7%).

2.1.2 Procedure

After consenting and completing an English comprehension check, participants read that the study investigated how people understand themselves and others with different kinds of information. They then rated how well different identities (political affiliation, gender, ethnicity,
socioeconomic status, occupation, and religion), represented the true self. Study 1 used political affiliation to represent political identity; in subsequent studies, we broadened our conceptualization to also include political beliefs.

In the Self condition, participants saw a series of items beginning with the stem “If someone knew your [identity]…”. Each participant saw 24 items beginning with that stem: The four items are listed in Table 1 were asked for each of the six identities included in the study. In the Other condition, participants also saw 24 items, but with the stem “If you knew someone’s [identity]…”, and the phrasing in Table 1 adapted to refer to what the identity would tell them about another person.

The four items hung well together (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$), above our pre-registered threshold (.7) for combining them into a single index of true self representativeness. At the end of the survey, participants completed exploratory and demographic measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“…how much would this tell them about who you truly are as a person?”</td>
<td>1, Nothing at all, to 7, A great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…they would know a deep-rooted part of your personality that lies deep within them and underlies your behavior”</td>
<td>1, Strongly disagree, to 7, Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…how many of your traits, beliefs, and other characteristics would this give them an idea of?”</td>
<td>1, None at all, to 7, A great many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…how much would this tell them about your moral character (i.e., whether you are a good or bad person)?”</td>
<td>1, Nothing at all, to 7, A great deal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Study 1 Results

We predicted participants would rate political identity as more representative of the true self than other identities, both for themselves and others. Following our pre-registration, we ran a multilevel model predicting true self representativeness from target (Others = -1, Self = 1), identity type (dummy coded with Political Affiliation as the reference category), and a random intercept for participants (see Figure 1). We first ran this model with no interaction term, to
obtain the key main effect of identity that we hypothesized (Table 2, middle columns), and then as a fully interactive model (Table 2, rightmost columns).

The hypothesized main effects of identity type were generally significant: Participants thought political identity was the most representative of the true self, more so than any other identity (though the comparison with religion was only marginally significant).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Effects and Interactive Models Results</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Predictors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion × Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation × Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity × Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender × Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES × Target</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The reference group for the identity variable is political affiliation for both models. Significant effects (p < .05) are **bolded**.
Figure 1

Identities’ Representativeness of the True Self

Note: Error bars represent standard error.

Most comparisons with political identity interacted with target (see Tables 3 and 4 for simple effects). People thought that political and religious identities, but not the other identities, were more representative of others’ true selves than of their own. Viewed differently, people thought their own political identities were the most representative of their own true self. However, they thought others’ political identities were even more representative of their true self—the one exception being others’ religious identities.
Table 3
Simple Effects comparing Political Affiliation to all other Identities separately for each Target

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self condition</th>
<th></th>
<th>Others condition</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-2.15</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-3.87</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>-0.99</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-7.27</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.88</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-6.45</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>-1.05</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-7.69</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-1.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant effects (p < .05) are **bolded**.

Table 4
Simple Effects of Target for each Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Affiliation</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
<td>.538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>.548</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant effects (p < .05) are **bolded**. The reference group for target is self.

2.3 Study 1 Discussion

Participants rated political identity as the most representative of the true self above and beyond other identities like gender, occupation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and (marginally) religion. This is notable because these identities are important ways people understand themselves. Gender is an essential way people identify, and some argue that cognition itself is fundamentally gendered (Martin & Slepian, 2021). People’ socioeconomic status affects them in important ways, including lifestyle, social circles, and even physical and mental health (Cote
et al., 2014; Feinstein, 1993; He et al., 2010). Ethnicity entails a rich tapestry of family connections, history, and culture (Verkuyten, 2004).

Perhaps, political identity is seen as especially reflective of the true self because it is an identity that one chooses. Compared to ethnicity, which one inherits, or social class, which is influenced by the family one is born to, people are free to choose their political identity—hence, people might see others’ politics as more representative of who they are compared to any of their unchosen identities. A cross-national study, examining Great Britain, the United States, Belgium and Spain, found people both favor and discriminate others more on the basis of political party than religious, linguistic, ethnic or regional identities (Westwood et al., 2018). Perhaps, the chosen nature of politics is why people think it is acceptable to discriminate based on it—that if someone chose to identify with their politics, it must really represent who they are (Skitka, 2010; Westwood, 2018).

However, political identity being chosen does not explain why it is more representative of the true self than occupation, which is a chosen identity as well (though not always), one to which people dedicate a substantial portion of their time, energy, and social efforts: The average person spends 84,365 hours at work in their lifetime (Martin, 2023). And yet people did not see it as representative of the true self to the same degree. Our theorizing is that political identity seems so representative of the true self not because it is chosen, but because of its moral content (Goodwin, 2013; Landy et al., 2016). Consistent with this reasoning is the fact that religion, another morally laden identity, was the next most representative identity, and in fact people saw religion and politics as equally representative of others’ true selves.

One might have expected, based on the stereotype literature, that people would have thought all individual identities were more representative of others’, rather than their own, true
selves. One would predict a bigger self-other difference for gender, ethnicity, occupation, and SES. But this does not emerge. Perhaps, this is due to the questions being on the true self of a person, not just if one knows something about a person from knowing a broad identity about them. Whereas people might feel comfortable broadly applying stereotypes to make snap-judgments about others, certain identities hold more weight in judging someone’s true self.
3 Study 2

Study 2 reexamined the findings of Study 1 using a relationship app, testing whether political identity’s representativeness of the true self underlies how people seek and reveal political information.

We told participants that we were helping a company develop a cutting-edge relationship app. Participants completed profiles for themselves, choosing from different kinds of political and nonpolitical information what they wanted to reveal (i.e., share about themselves to potential relationship partners) and seek (i.e., use to filter potential partners).

Before participants completed their profiles, they saw one of two prompts about what they could do to attain the best results on the app: One prompt told them they would be most successful if they focused on the superficial self; the other told them instead they would be most successful if they focused on the true self. In other words, Study 3 was a 2 (target action: revealing vs. seeking, within-subjects) x 2 (prompt: superficial self vs. true self, between-subjects) design. We expected that, in accordance with what people explicitly reported in Study 1, they would choose to both seek and reveal more political information following the true self prompt than following the superficial prompt.

3.1 Study 2 Method

3.1.1 Participants

We recruited 340 undergraduates from a major Canadian university. An English comprehension check and attention check excluded 124 participants, leaving a sample of 217 who together provided 868 observations (age $M = 20.98$, $SD = 3.04$), including 22% men, 75% women, and 2% non-binary individuals. The sample was European (24.9%), East Asian (36.8%),
African (2.1%), Hispanic (3.1%), Indigenous (1.6%), Middle Eastern (5.7%), South Asian (15%), Southeast Asian (7.8%), and multiracial (3.1%).

3.1.2 Procedure

After participants consented to the study, we told them that they would help researchers beta-test a relationship app. Participants first chose whether they wanted to use the friend finding version of the app or the romantic partner finding version. Although we were not interested in examining differences between friends and romantic partners in this study, this choice mirrors the actual decisions people make on many relationship apps. Participants then created private profiles by answering questions about themselves—basic demographics as well as more personal questions about their relationship preferences, lifestyle choices, and moral beliefs.

Next, participants saw our key prompt manipulation. Those in the superficial self condition read that people have better results on relationships apps when they “they start slow when getting to know others,” and when their own profiles “reveal superficial facts about themselves.” Those in the true self condition read that people have better results when “they look for someone who appeals to them at a deeper level” and when their own profiles “reveal their deeper self.”

Following these prompts, participants built the public component of their profiles, and selected filters to apply to potential matches. They learned that everyone’s first name, gender, and age would be publicly displayed by default, along with their hobbies (if they were finding friends) or their sexual orientation (if they were finding romantic partners). From the questions they had answered in the first part of the survey, they chose five additional pieces of information about themselves that they wanted to display on their public profile. This served as our measure of revealing.
They also chose five additional pieces of information to filter others’ profiles by, even information other people were not revealing publicly. This served as our measure of seeking. We acknowledge that this operationalization is imperfect: Filtering involves seeking information with the additional step of using it to include or exclude people as potential interaction partners. Nevertheless, this operationalization captures a realistic behavior closely tied to seeking.

Table 5  
Study 2 Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Affiliation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Ideology (e.g., liberal, conservative)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Area (e.g., urban, rural, suburban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horoscope Sign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Relationship Preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Service Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking Habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking Habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages Spoken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Political items are bolded.*

3.2 Study 2 Results

Our original analysis plan, in this study and pre-registered for Study 2, examined participants’ binary decision (chosen versus not chosen) across all pieces of information, and used information type (political versus non-political) as a predictor. However, we later realized that because participants chose a fixed number (five) of pieces of information to both seek and reveal, this approach did not make sense: The number of their political choices would be perfectly correlated with their number of non-political choices. For this reason, we instead
analyzed their binary decision (chosen versus not chosen) for the political information only, predicting that participants would choose to both seek and reveal more political information when motivated to focus on the true self rather than the superficial self.

To test this hypothesis, we ran a multilevel logistic regression model predicting participants’ decision for each of the three available pieces of political information (chosen = 1, not chosen = 0) from target action (Revealing Self = -1, Seeking Others = 1), prompt (Superficial self = -1, True self = 1), their interaction, and a random intercept for participants (see Table 6 and Figure 2).

The predicted main effect of prompt type was significant: Participants chose more political information when they saw the true self prompt than when they saw the superficial self-prompt. There was also a main effect of target action: Participants sought more political information than they revealed it. The two-way interaction was not significant, indicating this was generally true for both seeking and revealing: Indeed, participants revealed significantly more and sought marginally significantly more political information when motivated to focus on the true self (see Table 7).

This pattern aligns with Study 1’s finding that people perceive political identity as unveiling the true self. In that study, though, participants thought religion was also quite representative of the true self, especially for others. We therefore wondered whether a similar pattern would emerge in Study 2, and tested this using the same model described above, but on participants’ choices for each of the two available pieces of religious information. In this analysis there was neither a main effect of prompt, $b = -0.22$, SE = 0.18, $z(217) = -1.20$, $p = .230$, nor an interaction, $b = -0.10$, SE = 0.13, $z(217) = -0.75$, $p = .455$. Simple effects confirmed that the prompt influenced neither how much participants sought, $b = -0.62$, SE = 0.44, $z(217) = -1.41$,
\[ p = .160, \text{ nor how much they revealed religious information, } b = -0.22, \ SE = 0.47, z(217) = -0.46, \]

\[ p = .645. \]

**Table 6**

*Interaction between Action and Prompt for Political Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>( b )</th>
<th>( SE )</th>
<th>( t )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.72</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-10.54</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Action</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompt</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Action × Prompt</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.98</td>
<td>.329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Significant effects \((p < .05)\) are **bolded.**

**Figure 2**

*Participants’ Chosen Political Information on Relationship App*

*Note:* Error bars represent standard error.
Table 7

_Simple Effects of Action and Prompt for Political Information_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeking (1) versus Revealing (0)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficial Self</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Self</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>.195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>True Self (1) versus Superficial Self (0)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Others</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing Self</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant effects (p < .05) are _bolded_.

3.3 Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 provides further evidence that political identity is seen as most representative of the true self. Motivating people to focus on the true self rather than the superficial self resulted in them revealing more, and seeking somewhat more, political information. Similar to Study 1 but using a completely different design, this suggests that people see political information as connected to the true self, more so than religious information, and similarly for themselves and for others. Although Study 1 found that people especially thought that others’ political identity, represented their true self, in the present study, the true self manipulation had a stronger effect on people’s political revealing (rather than seeking) behavior. Perhaps, the thrust of the impact of the true self manipulation is in decreasing resistance to revealing political information.
Building on our findings from Study 1 and Study 2, we predicted that people would be more interested in seeking political information about others than in revealing their own political information in a first encounter. We predicted both effects on the basis of political identity being especially representative of the true self, but we investigate this potential mechanism in Study 4. Participants imagined meeting people in different social roles (e.g., in-law, friend) for the first time. For each new person, half the participants reported how interested they would be in seeking information about that person; the other half reported how interested they would be in revealing information to them. Participants answered these questions about a mix of political (e.g., political affiliation, abortion beliefs, immigration beliefs) and nonpolitical (e.g., income, gender, horoscope sign) information. In other words, Study 3 used a 2 (target action: seeking vs. revealing, between subjects) x 2 (information type: political vs. nonpolitical, within-subjects) design. Study 3 examined two questions: 1) Do people seek more than they reveal political information? 2) Is this effect smaller, eliminated, or reversed when it comes to nonpolitical information?

**4.1 Study 3 Method**

**4.1.1 Participants**

We recruited and compensated 145 participants from Prolific Academic. An English comprehension check as well as two attention checks excluded 34 participants, leaving 111 who together provided 1539 observations. The sample (age $M = 34.14$, $SD = 12.99$) included 36% men, 58% women, and 6% gender diverse identities. The sample was White (71.8%), Black (4.5%), Asian (10%), Hispanic (6.4%), Indigenous (0.9%), Latin American (4.4%), and Pacific Islander (6.4%).
4.1.2 Procedure

After consenting, participants completed a comprehension check, which they had to pass to proceed with the rest of the survey. We told participants that the study examined how we understand ourselves and others based on limited information. Each participant read scenarios in which they imagined meeting seven people in different social roles for the first time: roommate, friend, co-worker, teacher, neighbor, in-law, and romantic partner. Participants saw the scenarios in a random order, with two scenarios for each social role, for a total of 14 scenarios. We did not make specific predictions about how social roles would influence people’s responses, but varied it within subjects to increase both power and generalizability.

In the Revealing condition, for each scenario, participants reported how interested they would be (1 = Not interested at all, 7 = Extremely interested) in revealing two different pieces of information about themselves. These pieces of information were drawn from a pool of 37, without replacement within each social role, but with replacement between social roles. In other words, participants could and often did see the same piece of information multiple times across different scenarios, but they never saw the same piece of information paired with the same social role. Table 8 presents all 36 pieces of political and nonpolitical information. Participants in the “Seeking” condition underwent the same procedure, except they reported how interested they would be in seeking two different pieces of information about the hypothetical person, rather than revealing it to them.
Table 8
Study 3 Political and Nonpolitical Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political affiliation</td>
<td>Fashion style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration beliefs</td>
<td>Area they are from (rural, suburban, urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun regulations and rights beliefs</td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred candidate in the next election</td>
<td>Horoscope sign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether they support liberal, moderate, or conservative policies</td>
<td>Wealth and Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion beliefs</td>
<td>Racial origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital punishment beliefs</td>
<td>Whether they have a medical condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether they typically vote in elections</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation</td>
<td>Biological sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship status</td>
<td>Body appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages spoken</td>
<td>Physical disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td>Their position on GMO's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether they exercise regularly</td>
<td>Genre of music they prefer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hygiene habits</td>
<td>Belief in free will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet</td>
<td>Romantic relationship preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural background</td>
<td>Preference for pets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering for charitable organizations</td>
<td>Religious service attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much they use social media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Political items are bolded.

4.2 Study 3 Results

We predicted people would be more interested in seeking others’ political information than in revealing their own, but that this effect would be reduced, eliminated or even reversed when it came to nonpolitical information. To test this hypothesis, we ran a multilevel model
predicting participants’ interest ratings from target action (Seeking Others = -1, Revealing Self = 1), information type (Nonpolitical = -1, Political = 1), their interaction, and a random intercept for participants (see Table 9 and Figure 3).

The significant interaction unfolded as expected (see Table 10 for simple effects): People were more interested in seeking than revealing political information, but showed no preference with nonpolitical information. Viewed differently, participants were more interested in seeking political than nonpolitical information but more interested in revealing nonpolitical than political information.

| Table 9
Interaction between Action and Information Type | b    | SE   | t    | p   |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>41.67</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Action</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.99</td>
<td>.320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Type</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>.523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target Action x Information Type</strong></td>
<td><strong>-0.21</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.06</strong></td>
<td><strong>-3.47</strong></td>
<td><strong>&lt; .001</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant effects (p < .05) are **bolded.**
Figure 3
People’s Interest in Seeking vs. Revealing Political and Nonpolitical information

Note: Error bars represent standard error.

Table 10
Simple Effects of Target Action and Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revealing (1) versus seeking (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political information</td>
<td>-0.60</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>-2.37</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpolitical information</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political (1) versus nonpolitical (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Others</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing Self</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant effects (p < .05) are bolded.
4.3 Study 3 Discussion

In Study 3, participants preferred to seek others’ political information more than they wanted to reveal their own political information. In light of Study 1 and Study 2, one explanation for these findings is that political identity provides a window into the true self: This explain both why they want to know others’ politics (to gauge who they are) and why they do not want to disclose their own (because they do not want to be vulnerable). We test this idea directly in the next study by examining political seeking-revealing behavior when participants are told to prioritize the true self (vs. superficial self vs. no-prompt) in a first encounter.
5 Study 4

Study 4 used the same relationship app design as Study 2, but with an additional no prompt condition. In other words, Study 4 was a 2 (target action: revealing vs. seeking, within-subjects) x 3 (prompt: no-prompt vs. superficial self vs. true self, between-subjects) design. The no-prompt condition allowed us to replicate the findings of Study 3, whereby people’s natural tendency was to seek more than they reveal political information.

The no prompt condition also allowed us to better understand the specific effects of the other prompts. On the one hand, we reasoned that people naturally want to seek others’ true self. We therefore expected the superficial condition to decrease political seeking, compared to the no prompt condition. But we did not necessarily expect the true self condition to increase political seeking, as we expected that without prompting, people would already be inclined to seek others’ politics.

On the other hand, we reasoned that people naturally do not want to reveal their own true self. We therefore expected the true self condition would increase political revealing, compared to the no prompt condition. But we did not necessarily expect the superficial condition to decrease political revealing, as we expected that without prompting, people would already not be inclined to reveal their politics. Pre-registered predictions, materials, and analyses plans are available at https://osf.io/dfmp2/.

5.1 Study 4 Method

5.1.1 Participants

We recruited and compensated 734 participants from Prolific Academic. An English comprehension check excluded 130 participants, leaving 604 participants. We excluded an additional 12 participants because of a survey error: participants were supposed to either select
“romantic partner” or “friend” on the app, but we accidentally allowed participants to select both. Those who selected both saw both the romantic partner and friend version of the survey at the same time. We excluded these 12 participants, leaving 592 participants in the sample. The sample (age $M = 39.87$, $SD = 13.78$) included 50% men, 47% women, 0.5% transgender men, 0.1% transgender women, 1% non-binary, 0.5% Transgender man, and 1 participant who preferred to not provide a gender. The sample was European (70.5%), African (6.7%), East Asian (5.2%), Indigenous (0.8%), Hispanic or Latinx (6.2%), Middle Eastern (0.8%), Southeast Asian (1.2%), South Asian (1.3%), and multiracial (7.1).

5.1.2 Procedure

The procedure for Study 4 was identical to Study 2, but an additional no-prompt condition in which participants went directly from answering questions about themselves to choosing what to feature on their profile and what to filter potential matches by without seeing recommendations on how to use the app.
### Table 11

**Study 4 Items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Affiliation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Ideology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Climate Change Beliefs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abortion Beliefs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gun Beliefs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alien Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterlife Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Service Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking Habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking Habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages Spoken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Area (e.g., urban, rural, suburban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horoscope Sign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Relationship Preference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Political items are bolded.*

### 5.2 Study 4 Results

Study 4 allowed us to conceptually replicate findings from Study 3 by examining participants’ baseline seeking and revealing behavior (i.e., in the no-prompt condition). It also allowed us to test how Study 2’s prompts would influence participants’ behavior relative to this baseline: Does motivating them to focus on the true self selectively increase how much they reveal political information, bringing it closer to the generally high rate at which they spontaneously seek it? Does motivating them to focus on the superficial self selectively decrease how much they seek political information, bringing it closer to the generally low rate at which they spontaneously reveal it?
Our pre-registered analysis plan yielded conclusions similar to those we report here, but as noted above it did not account for the fact that participants’ choices of political information were perfectly correlated with their choices of nonpolitical information. We therefore deviated from our plan and, similar to Study 2, conducted a multilevel logistic regression model predicting participants’ choice for each of the five available pieces of political information from target action (Revealing = -1, Seeking = 1), prompt (dummy coded with no-prompt as the reference category), their interaction and a random intercept for participants (see Table 12 and Figure 4).

The predicted two-way interactions were not significant. Nonetheless, our pre-registration stipulated we would explore simple effects (see Table 13) even in the absence of significant interactions. In the no prompt condition, as in Study 3, participants sought more than they revealed political information.

In the superficial self-condition, we had expected this difference to be smaller because participants would seek less political information; however, we saw no trace of such an effect: The difference between seeking and revealing was if anything larger than in the no-prompt condition, and the comparison between seeking in the superficial condition and seeking in the no-prompt condition was far from significant.

In the true self condition, we likewise expected a smaller difference between seeking and revealing, this time because participants would reveal more political information. Partially meeting this expectation, participants in the true self condition sought and revealed political information similarly, and they specifically revealed (marginally) more political information compared to the no prompt condition and significantly more compared to the superficial condition, $b = -0.38$, $SE = 0.16$, $z(592) = -2.31$, $p = .021$. Thus, motivating participants to focus
on the true self inspired them to share more of their own political information than they otherwise would have.

### Table 12
*Interactive Models Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.06</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-17.31</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target Action</strong></td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficial Self</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.66</td>
<td>.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Self</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficial self × Target</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>.383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Self × Target</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>.624</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The reference group for the prompt variable is no prompt for both models. Significant effects (*p* < .05) are **bolded.**

### Figure 4
*Chosen Political Information on a Relationship App*

*Note:* Error bars represent standard error.
Table 13
Political Information: Simple Effects of Target Action and Prompt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeking (1) versus Revealing (0)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-Prompt</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficial Self</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Self</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison with no prompt reference group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking, comparison with superficial</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking, comparison with true</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing, comparison with superficial</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.66</td>
<td>.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing, comparison with true</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.096</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant effects (p < .05) are **bolded**.

As in Study 2, we conducted additional (non-preregistered) analyses to see whether the prompts had any effect on participants’ choices of religious information. There was no effect of prompt, (No-prompt vs. Superficial Self, $b = -0.06$, SE = 0.17, $z(217) = -0.33$, $p = .743$; No-prompt vs. True Self, $b = -0.05$, SE = 0.18, $z(217) = -0.290$, $p = .771$; Superficial Self vs. True Self, $b = -0.01$, SE = 0.18, $z(217) = 0.04$, $p = .971$) or interactions (True Self × Target Action: $b = -0.08$, SE = 0.27, $z(592) = -0.30$, $p = .761$; Superficial Self × Target Action: $b = -0.04$, SE = 0.27, $z(592) = -0.16$, $p = .870$), further suggesting the specific link between political information and the true self.

5.3 Study 4 Discussion

Study 4 replicated the results of Study 3, finding that, with no prompting, people sought more political information about others than they revealed it about themselves. The superficial self condition looked very similar to the no-prompt condition, in that both conditions, people
wanted to seek political information more than they wanted to reveal it. This suggests that at baseline, people want to know others’ political information but remain superficial with the disclosure of their own political information.

However, when people are encouraged to reveal their true self, people revealed more political information than if they saw a superficial prompt or if they saw no prompt at all (marginal trend). The true self prompt might thus have again been decreasing resistance to revealing one’s own politics in first encounters: While people do not naturally reveal their politics in first encounters, they will disclose their politics when they want to share their true self. This suggests that people do view their politics as being a reflection of their true self. It is also in line with privacy and self-disclosure research that finds people generally do not self-disclose private intimate information, but they will loosen privacy boundaries if motivated to do so (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

The prompt manipulations did not alter seeking behavior. People desire to know others’ true selves, so they already naturally seek others’ political information. Manipulating peoples’ desire to do so by asking them to seek others’ true selves more did not have a substantial effect. As for the superficial prompt, because people desire to seek others’ true selves, even when they are told to seek more superficial information, they might override the instruction and seek others’ political information anyway.

Most people understand intuitively what it means to be “true to yourself” so the true self manipulation is consistently producing the same effect across studies. But, the superficial prompt had somewhat different effects across studies: unlike Study 4, we found that in Study 2, the superficial prompt did decrease seeking behavior compared to the true self prompt (trending effect). Perhaps, this is a result of the differing samples between studies: Study 2 used a
primarily undergraduate population (age $M = 21.35$) and Study 4 used online survey workers who were older (age $M = 40.04$). Undergraduates have more familiarity with relationships apps, and the concept of being “superficial” on them might be something that they understand more than the older survey workers—leading to the differing effects of the superficial prompt across Study 2 and Study 4.
6 General Discussion

The present research examined how people seek and reveal political information in first encounters. Across four studies, we found that a) political identity is perceived as representative of the true self, both for oneself and others, b) people prefer to seek others’ political identity more than they want to reveal their own, and c) people’s preference for revealing political identity aligns with their goals for sharing their true self.

These four studies highlight the tension between self-disclosure and privacy, between being known and withholding information (Petronio, 2002). It is not that people always want to be private as possible. Privacy boundaries are flexible, meaning that people can choose who to disclose information to for different levels of intimacy (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). However, with revealing political information in a first encounter, the balance between these two forces tips in the direction of privacy.

6.1 Religion vs. Politics

In our studies, we found that religion often overlapped with politics in being representative of the true self. Political identity emerged as the stronger of the two: people saw their own political identity as more representative of their true self than religion (although not for others), and political identity was more sensitive to the true self manipulation.

As mentioned before, both identities speak to someone’s moral worldview, how they distinguish between right and wrong, and so both provide information about the true self. The dominance of political identity over religion could be reflective of shifts in recent decades in the U.S. Political identities have become more important, causing deep divides between people (Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). At the same time, religious identities have waned, with the religiously-disaffiliated—the religious nones—proliferating, especially among the young
(Lipka, 2015; Pew, 2018). If religion continues its decline, perhaps political identity will come to more clearly dominate religious identities as the most useful heuristic for the true self.

6.2 Moderators that Increase Political Seeking-Revealing Behavior

In our investigation, we found that people prefer to seek others’ political information more than they want to reveal their own—and this was due to political identity unveiling the true self. We do not think that the true self is the only mechanism underlying political information exchange in first encounters. There might be other moderators that increase people’s desire to both seek and reveal political information.

One such moderator might be perceived similarity. Part of the vulnerability of sharing the true self via political information is that people do not know how others will react to their disclosure. People are sensitive to social rejection and ostracism (DeWall & Bushman, 2011), so they will selectively self-disclose. People seem to use other identities (e.g., ethnicity), nonverbal behaviors, personalities’, and even coffee preferences to ascertain others’ political identities (Clifford, 2014; Clifford, 2020; Finkel et al., 2020; Lee, 2021), so if they guess that another person might be similar to them, this might change the default political seeking-revealing behavior. It might feel safer to both seek and reveal political information: If one’s conversational partner is similar to oneself, then one will likely not find out aversive information if one seeks their politics; if they are similar to oneself, then one will also feel safer to reveal one’s own politics because they will likely agree.

Another relevant moderator might how much one trusts a conversational partner. We found that people were averse to sharing their true self in a hypothetical first encounter—perhaps this is because they are dealing with a hypothetical partner they do not know. This uncertainty might hinder revealing their true self (Berger & Calabrese, 2006). With the longer the
conversation goes on, partners get to know and potentially trust each other more, and likely, people will seek and reveal more political information (Altman & Taylor, 1973). We might find differences in political information exchange in a first encounter across the hours a conversation takes place, with people both seeking and revealing more political information at hour 3 compared to hour 1 of a conversation.

6.3 Moderators that Decrease Political Seeking-Revealing Behavior

On the flip side, there are also certain factors that might decrease political seeking-revealing behavior. Our studies used vignettes to examine our questions. But, political seeking-revealing behavior takes place in a conversation between two people. Hence, the conversational partner’s level of disclosure might be a relevant factor.

People vary on how much they tend to self-disclose in conversation (Cozby, 1972), so, if one’s partner is a low self-discloser, it will likely decrease both one’s political seeking and revealing behavior. If one seeks information, the low self-disclosing partner will likely rebuff the attempt. And since the low self-disclosing partner is not sharing their politics, one might also feel uncomfortable in revealing one’s own politics. On the other hand, a high self-discloser would likely respond positively to one’s efforts to seek their politics, and their self-disclosure might also motivate one to reveal one’s own politics (Ehrlich & Graeven, 1971). Future studies can examine how peoples’ dispositional disclosure tendencies affect political information seeking and revealing in first encounters—how information is exchanged when a conversational partner is a high vs low self-discloser, what kind of political information high vs. low self-disclosers seek and reveal, etc.

Another potential moderator that decreases political seeking-revealing behavior might be if one knows or suspects that the other person is a political opponent. People think that
conversation with politically-dissimilar others will lead to conflict. In fact, people are more likely to self-censor their politics when they are exposed to diverse political opinions because they anticipate disagreement (Kwon et al., 2014). Conflict is also deeply psychologically distressing because it threatens peoples’ belonging and acceptance needs (DeWall & Bushman, 2011; Rosenfeld, 1979; Wesselman et al., 2015), so people try to avoid it.

In a first encounter, people do not have a bank of trust built up with their conversational partner, and so, conflict is especially a threat. Because people want to avoid conflict, they will likely not reveal as much political information when they suspect their partner is an opposing partisan. They might also be reluctant to seek the other person’s politics because they might be exposed to information they disagree with. Future studies could examine how a conversational partner’s political identity affects political information seeking-revealing tendencies. In a conversation with a co-partisan, we might see similar findings to our study, where people are interested in seeking political information but not revealing it—because political identity unveils the true self. In conversation with an opposing partisan, we might see lower rates of political information seeking and even more depressed political information revealing behavior due to the additional barrier of potential disagreement.

6.4 If Everyone Seeks but No One Reveals, Does Political Information Get Exchanged?

The findings of our study have an ironic implication for conversations: In any given first encounter, both partners want to know the other person’s politics but neither wants to disclose. Multiple outcomes are possible in this case. If people go so far as to directly ask their partner’s political identity, the partner might feel pressured to answer (Laursen & Faur, 2022). Alternatively, the partner might deflect or reject the question. Or perhaps, conversational norms might override the desire to seek their partner’s political identity. There is a taboo against people
delving into too-intimate topics in a first conversation (Cozby, 1972). So, whereas people might respond in our surveys that they are interested in seeking others’ political information, they might not express that in the actual context of a conversation. Even if people choose not to express their desire to seek others’ politics, if it is information they are interested in, they are likely to seek and use other types information to guess their partner’s political identity. Future studies could examine political information seeking-revealing behavior within a conversation to better understand these conflicting motivations: if people organically seek or reveal political information, when people accept vs. reject others’ attempts to seek their politics, and how people potentially indirectly seek political information using other types of information.

Using a study design in which participants are conversing with each other would also help account two limitations of our studies. First, most of our studies used vignettes with hypothetical individuals who didn’t have any identity markers, like age, race, or gender. Testing our hypotheses about political information disclosure in first encounters with actual people would make the study more ecologically-valid. Second, we chose what comprised of nonpolitical vs. political information across the four studies; although we did our best to select a broad range of information, there still is some artificiality introduced by our top-down selection of the information. Hence, seeing what conversational partners organically talk about that is nonpolitical or political in nature will make the study more generalizable to real-world conversations.

6.5 After the First Conversation

Beyond first interactions, examining political information seeking-revealing behavior within established relationships would be interesting. One might ask if it is easier to seek and reveal political information in established relationships.
On one hand, people might feel safer to both seek and reveal political information because of the established trust in a relationship. Because of the intimacy they share with the partner, people might also feel comfortable seeking political information about them. They have less risk of offending their conversational partner by seeking too-intimate information because of the pre-existing relationship. People might also feel safer to disclose their own political information to their partner because they trust that they will not be rejected. Some pieces of political information may be categorically damning, like if they support the Ku Klux Klan, but for less extreme information, people have defenses against unsavory information about those they are close to. People enhance close others’ good qualities, excuse moral wrongs, and reframe negative information about them (Morry et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2002; Weidman et al., 2020). Even if one reveals something about one’s politics that is displeasing to a partner, they will likely be more tolerant than a stranger. So, within established relationships, people might both seek and reveal more political information.

On the other hand, it could be even more fraught to seek and reveal political information within an established relationship because it could damage the relationship. This is what happened to Gayle McCormick, a left-leaning septuagenarian, who after finding out her husband of 22 years voted for Trump in the presidential election, promptly divorced him. She knew her husband was right-leaning when she married him, but she cited feeling betrayed by him voting for Trump (Powell, 2017). Gayle is not alone. In the contentious times of the Trump Presidency, a representative survey of U.S. adults found that 11% of Americans dissolved relationships over political fights (Wakefield, 2017). These people had established relationships, but finding out a new piece of political information, that their partner supported one candidate over the other,
disrupted the relationship. Perhaps, this is because they saw it as reflective of who the person really is, of unveiling an immoral part of their true self.

It likely that length of the relationship is relevant to whether people will want to seek potentially aversive political information about their significant others. Relationships that are relatively new (1-year or less) are more prone to dissolution and are vulnerable to discoveries about differing politics (Balsam et al., 2017); however, partners in these shorter-length relationships might be more open to seeking out potentially aversive information about their significant other’s politics because they are still deciding on how committed they want to be. But, as relationships go on longer, partners share more social networks and financial capital, which leads people to being less likely to hastily terminate a relationship (Hogerbrugge et al., 2012). So, for partners that have been together for a longer time, who share a social network and resources, they might be less interested in seeking political information that is disruptive, choosing instead to seek and reveal information on areas of perceived political agreement. Future studies could examine the dynamics that motivate or hinder political information seeking-revealing behavior in established relationships.

6.6 Political Polarization

Scaling up from individual relationships to society at large, people perceiving political identity as representative of the true self could be important to understanding America’s political polarization problem. If people think politics represents who someone really is, this may be why they find it acceptable to use it as a basis for judging others. In fact, political identity is one of the few demographic characteristics that people see as acceptable to discriminate on the basis of (Skitka, 2010). Because politics represents the true self in people’s minds, they do not just think that the other party has bad ideas—but instead that they are bad people. This fits in with other
work that finds that political polarization is less about substantive policy disagreement but more of an affectively driven, moralized identification against the other group (Finkle et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). It is difficult to be a harmonious society if people see others’ true selves as being bad as a result of their political identity.

One consequence of this polarization is that people are not being open about their politics: Americans’ feelings of not being safe or comfortable to express their political views has tripled in recent years, with more than 4 out of 10 people actively self-censoring because of the conflict-ridden political landscape (Gibson & Sutherland, 2022). If people are not interested in revealing political information within first encounters, then it is likely that one does not even know who one’s opponents are, if there are no obvious indications. There is a large body of research that finds that people have extremely negative and inaccurate perceptions about opposing partisans’ commitment to democracy, the extremity of their beliefs, and as well as their moral character (Moore-berg et al., 2020). Because of the lack of cross-cutting political conversations, one’s political opponents are an amorphous group of monsters—not the nice stranger in the grocery store or the intriguing person at the Pilates class.

Political polarization is the highest in countries like America, Spain, and Sweden, so political identity might be especially prominent in peoples’ minds in those countries (Pew, 2002). In other regions, other identities might be more important, and hence, might be seen as more representative of the true self: regional identity, religion, occupation, for example. But, perhaps not. Maybe, political affiliation is equally seen as representative of the true self across different cultures, and people show the same political information seeking-revealing patterns in a first encounter. One of the limitations of our studies was that we primarily used western samples, and furthermore, most of our participants were White. Hence, future lines of research could
examine political information exchange in first encounters in different countries as well as use diverse populations to determine if our findings are generalizable to other populations.
7 Conclusion

Across four studies, we discovered an asymmetry in political information exchange in a first encounter: People want to keep their political cards close to their chest but want to know others’ political cards. The key mechanism that underlies our findings is that people perceive political identity as representing the true self. As politics continues to be a dominant force, it is important to understand how people conceive of political identities, and how this tracks to the ways people relate to each other, with its consequences for the conversations people have, the relationships they build, and the societies they create.
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Appendix: Additional Figures for Studies 2-4

Figure A1

*Study 3: Difference Scores of Political and Nonpolitical Items across Target Action*

Note: The figure displays difference scores: items to the left of 0 represent items people wanted to seek more than reveal, whereas items to the right of 0 represent items people wanted to reveal more than seek. Political items are in yellow and nonpolitical items are in black. People were more interested in seeking than revealing political information.
Figure A2

*Study 2: Superficial Prompt’s Chosen Information across Target Action*

*Note:* Error bars represent standard error. The gold box highlights the political items.

Figure A3

*Study 2: True Self Prompt’s Chosen Information across Target Action*

*Note:* Error bars represent standard error. The gold box highlights the political items.
Figure A4

*Study 4: No-Prompt’s Chosen Information across Target Action*

Note: Error bars represent standard error. The gold box highlights the political items.

Figure A5

*Study 4: Superficial Self Prompt’s Chosen Information across Target Action*

Note: Error bars represent standard error. The gold box highlights the political items.
Figure A6

Study 4: True Self Prompt’s Chosen Information across Target Action

Note: Error bars represent standard error. The gold box highlights the political items.