

# **Change in Partisan Ideology Among University Students**

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Political Science Senior Thesis  
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April 2020



## **Abstract**

*Throughout modern history, people have sought to understand the causes behind political identities and how they're formed. These factors began to be known as the agents of political socialization. As these factors shift, so do political beliefs. But how do these factors directly apply to university students? To answer this question, I studied how these factors applied to university students as well as new factors specific to their time in university, such as the control of the institution (whether it's private or public), as well as the effect of campus culture and climates on their ideology, and what role extracurriculars played in this. To examine these, I used data from the Higher Education Research Institution, from a survey they conducted for seniors in college. The results varied tremendously and didn't pinpoint a clear answer as to why ideology shifts during college. This study emphasizes the need for more exploration into this topic.*

## **Literature Review**

There are many factors that could lead to the development of political identity among university students and the shift in alignment with a political party ideology. Understanding how university students form their political beliefs is crucial to understanding how to educate students holistically. It is understood that higher education is more than just academics and that universities shape the identities of students through experiences both inside and outside of the classroom (ACPA & NASPA, 2004; Johnson, 2018). Understanding how political beliefs are formed is important for preparing students for life after university, including promoting civic and political engagement (Johnson, 2018). Many have studied factors that impact political beliefs on a wider scale. Building upon these factors, I also seek to understand how the beliefs of university students are impacted by their time in college: through involvements and experiences, including attitudes and beliefs held by their university, and whether the university is considered public or private. It is clear that the political beliefs of students changes from prior to university and through their time in university, but there is not necessarily a clear answer as to how much these views change or exactly why they change.

## **Agents of Political Socialization**

There are many factors that can be looked at when examining the formation of political beliefs: religion, family, peers, and mentors, among others. As these factors shift, beliefs may change as well. As someone grows up, goes to different schools, meets new people, gets a job, they are exposed to new agents with each experience. While there are many other factors that may impact political beliefs, the factors religion, family, peers, and mentors can be looked at more closely in order to examine how the beliefs of college students may change. In order to later study the other factors that students experience during their time in college, such as various experiences, we must first look at the foundation that shaped their beliefs: Agents of Political Socialization. Once we understand how these factors impact political ideology, we can look deeper into other factors.

Religion is a factor often associated with political beliefs, and identity as a whole. While religious beliefs are often formed early in life, things may change as people mature; they may believe more in politics that more closely align with their religious beliefs, or vice versa. Whether their beliefs are more solidified during their time in college, or even if they shift, there is still an ideological difference. Knoke (1974) outlined the likely political affiliation of different religious groups. “Protestants are the most Republican group, with Jews and Catholics the most Democratic” (Knoke 705, 1974). More recently, however, more political beliefs were studied based on how religious groups voted. Within the World Economic Forum, they compared how groups voted in 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018. In 2018, they observed that Protestants and other Christians were more likely to vote Republican; Catholics were more evenly split but leaned towards Democrat; Jewish people were by far more Democrat; other faiths were more Democrat; and religious unaffiliated voters were still also more likely to vote Democrat (Smith, 2018). Smith (2018) looked at these religious groups as a whole, they pulled out one particular group

that voted differently than their religious would maybe suggest: Evangelical Christians who are also white were more likely, by far, to vote Republican. As people align with a particular faith, they may also align with the political ideology associated with it.

A university student's understanding of religion may change as they are exposed to new beliefs and ideas. Hunsberger (1978) found little support for the notion that students become less religious in college; they did, however, find that as time in university went on, students were less likely to attend church as frequently as they might have as freshmen. Another theory is that beliefs change based on being away from the church that they grew up attending and have fewer incentives to find a new church (Friedersdorf, 2011). Church or other religious obligations often also promote community and other values like this, where people may gain new understandings of political beliefs as well: if everyone from your church is supporting a certain candidate, you might be more willing to support that candidate too. Though religious beliefs may shift in college, this piece is crucial to understanding the foundations of their beliefs.

Family is another factor that is often associated with the formation of political beliefs. Much like religion, it has been assumed that first beliefs regarding politics will mirror family members' beliefs. Niemi (1977) reviewed many studies that examined the correlation between a parent's political beliefs and their child's political beliefs. They found positive correlations. It is also worth noting that through encouraging children to be "independent, responsible, and self-expressive" that interest in politics and activism could be promoted, regardless of the parents' beliefs (Niemi 219, 1977). This would stand to reason that even if politics are not really discussed in a household, it would still have an effect based on the values and other beliefs promoted by the parents.

Though family is commonly included as a factor of forming political beliefs, it is important to include it here as well as it can be extended to the background of university

students. Although there is support for students having similar political beliefs to family members, there is also support for their political beliefs expanding as they experience things differently from their family (Niemi, 1977). Family does not function as the driving force for developing political beliefs; as university students are exposed to new experiences, their views may shift away from the views of their family. Like the other agents of political socialization, family views serve as a foundation for students forming their beliefs but a question we can ask is how much will university students stray from this foundation?

Once in university, students are subjected to new social groups and their beliefs can be impacted through these new connections. In a new environment, students' beliefs can be influenced by the beliefs of their peers, as well as building upon the beliefs they have formed previously. The literature differs on the impact of the peer political identification on an individual. University life might be students' first experience with many people that are different than them, as well as the first time that students are subjected to many different opinions.

One argument is that political identification of peers impacts an individual's political beliefs. People will follow their peers, citing peer pressure and social norms as reasons that people may fall into peer effects (Feld, 2017). This is definitely relevant when examining young adults who are often more susceptible to the opinions of others.

Another argument is that political identification of peers does not impact an individual's political beliefs but that an individual's political beliefs are impacted by how engaged their peer group is (Campos, 2017). This is saying that while their beliefs are not affected, they are probably more willing to vote based on their peers' willingness to vote.

Umbach (2005) studied how the beliefs of mentors, both professors and other faculty, impact the beliefs of the students that study under them. They study the impact that faculty can

have on student engagement and holistic learning, declaring that faculty play a vital role both in and out of the classroom. Mentors can change the ways students perceive information which ties into how they make decisions.

This could also be extended to other authority figures within the university as well. Outside of professors, there are also plenty of faculty whose job it is to support students, whether it is on-campus housing, student activities, health services and more. Though it is clear that faculty make a difference in the lives of students, it is not known how they affect their political beliefs. Even Umbach (2005) said their study was raising more questions than it was answering. They concluded that further research would have to be done to look at other factors in students' environments. A faculty member definitely has the ability to impact student experience inside and outside of the classroom, but we don't know to what extent this impacts political beliefs.

### **Involvements & Experiences on a College Campus**

In order to understand how university students develop their political beliefs past demographic factors and agents of political socialization, it's important to understand how their involvements and experiences during their time in university can further alter their beliefs. When campuses give students opportunities, students are able to learn and develop new ideas. The general idea is that students will get more out of their time in university when they put more time in, and that this extra effort leads to positive outcomes (Webber, 2013). Other experiences could also include the university as a factor, including whether it is public or private.

If the university itself is a factor, the impact on the experience of university students could potentially be affected by whether the university is public or private. One thing worth noting about private institutions is that the students are likely to have more similarities than students at public institutions (ACPA 2004). This may mean that they would report less change

in political beliefs than students at public institutions because they're less exposed to different beliefs.

Campuses can be examined even further to understand the potential differences. Involvements can be broken down into two areas: academic experiences and cocurricular activities. Academic experiences include classes, majors, and more. Cocurricular activities encompass everything outside of the classroom. Experiences like studying abroad, taking ethnic studies or women studies classes, discussing racial issues, and more have an effect on political views (Saenz, 2007; Lott, 2012). There is a lot more that can be studied within this. There are so many options for students to get involved and to have different experiences on college campuses; there would need to be an in depth study to see how each involvement could potentially impact them.

Another factor that can impact the experiences of university students is the overall campus environment, made up of the different attitudes and beliefs held by the university students and faculty. College campuses have been associated with greater diversity and research is showing that there are many educational benefits to diverse campuses (Hurtado, 2007; Saenz, 2007). If universities are focusing on holistic growth of students, ensuring that students have understanding about races and cultures is a big piece for preparing students for life after college. This would make sense then that campuses with greater diversity, and universities that value diversity, would lead to students developing more change in their political beliefs as they are exposed to more and more ideas.

Though there is a lot of evidence that involvements and experiences impact students, there could be more research to understand how it affects political beliefs and even how those beliefs change over their time in university. In *College Student Development*, Volume 54 Number 6, the author explains not having enough evidence to accurately define the relationship

between student engagement on campuses and related outcomes (Webber 2013). Moreover, there is not enough information on the development of political beliefs from time in university.

## **Methods and Analysis**

The data I studied comes from a survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institution (HERI) targeted towards college outcomes; this data includes respondents to the College Senior Survey from 1994 to 2006. While this survey focuses on seniors, it also includes responses to The Freshmen Survey, also conducted by HERI.

My unit of analysis is university students that completed the College Senior Survey in 2006 and also completed The Freshmen Survey in 2002. My dependent variable is the overall change in political ideology of this group of students. In order to measure this dependent variable, I computed the variable POLIVIEW\_5 from their political ideology results in the College Senior Survey and in The Freshman Survey to calculate the change from their freshmen year to their senior year. I then recoded this into 5 categories: Most Change Towards Liberal, Moderate Change Towards Liberal, Limited/No Change, Moderate Change Towards Conservative, and Most Change Towards Conservative. Table 1 shows the frequencies ran on the variable POLIVIEW\_5.

**Table 1: Change in Political Ideology from Freshmen to Seniors**

	Frequency	Percent
Most Change Towards Liberal	484	3.9%
Moderate Change Towards Liberal	3076	25.1%
Limited/No Change	6418	52.3%
Moderate Change Towards Conservative	1996	16.3%
Most Change Towards Conservative	292	2.4%
Total	12266	100.0%

I tested the following independent variables to understand their potential impact on the change in political ideology: institution control (public vs. private), the students' perception of the tolerance and inclusiveness of their campus climate, and extracurriculars and involvements. I



formulated these into hypotheses with the independent variables corresponding to specific variables from the data set to test them accordingly.

### **Institution Control Hypothesis**

Among university students, those from private institutions will report less change in their political beliefs than students from public institutions will. In this hypothesis, the independent variable is INSTCONT, which examines whether the universities of the respondents are public or private.

**Table 2: The Effect of Institution Control on Change in Political Ideology**

	Public		Private		Total	
Most Change Towards Liberal	68	3.9%	416	4.0%	484	3.9%
Moderate Change Towards Liberal	393	22.5%	2683	25.5%	3076	25.1%
Limited/No Change	945	54.0%	5473	52.0%	6418	52.3%
Moderate Change Towards Conservative	305	17.4%	1691	16.1%	1996	16.3%
Most Change Towards Conservative	39	2.2%	253	2.4%	292	2.4%
Total	1750	100.0%	10516	100.0%	12266	100.0%

Chi-Square: 8.578  
 Asymptotic Significance (p-value): .073  
 Phi: .026  
 Cramer's V: .026

As demonstrated in Table 2, the effect of institution control is actually the opposite of what my hypothesis predicted. Students from private institutions showed more change in their political beliefs than students from public institutions did, not less as Hypothesis 1 suggested. Though, students from either type of institution both showed more change towards liberal than conservative. Unfortunately, after running significance tests, the p-value of the Chi-Square tests being .073 suggests that this result is not significant, and could be due to random sampling error. Though, because Phi and Cramer's V are both .026, this means that as the independent variable (institution control in this case) goes up, the dependent variable goes down. This isn't necessarily the case.

While I hoped to see if private vs. public institution control was a factor in the other hypotheses as well, because of the lack of significance within this variable, I decided not to test this against the other hypotheses.

### Campus Climate Hypothesis

Among university students, those from more tolerant and inclusive campus climates will report more change in their political beliefs. While there are many variables that examine different factors of a campus climate, I chose 3 that I believed would be the most telling: CLIMATE3, CLIMATE4, AND CLIMATE9. In CLIMATE3, students observe how intolerant of diversity or accepting of diversity their campus is. In CLIMATE4, students say how sexist or nonsexist the campus is. In CLIMATE9, students say how homophobic or nonhomophobic they believe their campus is. I created cross tabulations between these variables and the independent variable POLIVIEW\_5.

**Table 2: The Effect of Perceived Tolerance of Diversity on Change in Political Ideology**

	Accepting of Diversity		2		3		4		Intolerant of Diversity		Total	
Most Change Towards Liberal	86	3.3%	131	3.3%	124	3.7%	95	5.6%	47	9.7%	483	4.0%
Moderate Change Towards Liberal	588	22.4%	1018	25.7%	860	26.0%	450	26.5%	122	25.1%	3038	25.1%
Limited/No Change	1410	53.6%	2133	53.9%	1712	51.7%	839	49.5%	218	44.8%	6312	52.2%
Moderate Change Towards Conservative	474	18.0%	593	15.0%	561	16.9%	254	15.0%	84	17.2%	1966	16.3%
Most Change Towards Conservative	72	2.7%	79	2.0%	57	1.7%	58	3.4%	16	3.3%	282	2.3%
Total	2630	100.0%	3954	100.0%	3314	100.0%	1696	100.0%	487	100.0%	12081	100.0%

Chi-Square: 111.785  
 Asymptotic Significance (p-value): .000\*  
 Phi: .096  
 Cramer's V: .048

The results were again the opposite of what I expected. Hypothesis 2 suggests that those from campuses that were more accepting of diversity would experience more change. The most

change actually takes place in campuses that students rated the least accepting, the most intolerant. While 53.6% students from campuses accepting of diversity reported little to no change in their political ideology, only 44.8% of students from campuses intolerant of diversity reported little to no change. The significance tests of Table 2 showed that these results are very significant in that the effect of perceived tolerance of diversity did play a role in change in political ideology. Phi and Cramer's V are both positive; this means that as the independent variable goes up, the dependent variable goes down. This isn't necessarily seen here either.

**Table 3: The Effect of Perceived Sexism on Change in Political Ideology**

	Sexist		2		3		4		Nonsexist		Total	
Most Change Towards Liberal	22	10.6%	84	6.6%	169	3.9%	140	3.6%	66	2.7%	481	4.0%
Moderate Change Towards Liberal	70	33.7%	379	29.9%	1078	25.0%	974	25.1%	546	22.3%	3047	25.1%
Limited/No Change	76	36.5%	579	45.7%	2270	52.6%	2065	53.2%	1343	54.9%	6333	52.3%
Moderate Change Towards Conservative	33	15.9%	190	15.0%	702	16.3%	627	16.1%	422	17.3%	1974	16.3%
Most Change Towards Conservative	7	3.4%	35	2.8%	95	2.2%	78	2.0%	69	2.8%	284	2.3%
Total	208	100.0%	1267	100.0%	3884	100.0%	3884	100.0%	2446	100.0%	12119	100.0%

Chi-Square: 111.539  
 Asymptotic Significance (p-value): .000\*  
 Phi: .098  
 Cramer's V: .049

Again, the hypothesis is not supported. Students that showed the most change reported their campuses being more sexist than students that had less change. These results in Table 3 are also very significant according to the results of the significance tests. . Phi and Cramer's V are both positive; this means that as the independent variable goes up, the dependent variable goes down. Again, this isn't necessarily shown here either.

**Table 4: The Effect of Perceived Homophobia on Change in Political Ideology**

	Homophobic		2		3		4		Non-homophobic		Total	
Most Change Towards Liberal	87	8.0%	124	4.7%	126	2.9%	84	3.2%	476	4.0%		3.9%
Moderate Change Towards Liberal	337	31.1%	694	26.1%	1016	23.2%	660	25.2%	3041	24.5%		25.1%
Limited/No Change	471	43.5%	1362	51.1%	2402	55.0%	1371	52.3%	6328	53.0%		52.3%
Moderate Change Towards Conservative	159	14.7%	429	16.1%	719	16.4%	447	17.1%	1969	15.8%		16.3%
Most Change Towards Conservative	29	2.7%	55	2.1%	108	2.5%	59	2.3%	286	2.6%		2.4%
Total	1083	100.0%	2664	100.0%	4371	100.0%	1361	100.0%	12100	100.0%		100.0%

Chi-Square: 116.219  
 Asymptotic Significance (p-value): .000  
 Phi: .098  
 Cramer's V: .049

Again, these results were significant but like Table 2 and Table 3, there was the opposite effect that the hypothesis predicted. Students from campuses that were perceived to be homophobic had the most change. Phi and Cramer's V are both positive; this means that as the independent variable goes up, the dependent variable goes down. This isn't necessarily seen here either.

Overall, this hypothesis was not supported but the cross tabulations yielded a lot of interesting results that the literature doesn't support. Campuses that were less tolerant produced students that showed more change in their political ideology.

### **Involvement Hypothesis**

Among university students, those with more involvements in university will report more change in their political beliefs. In this hypothesis, the independent variable studies activities that students are involved with. To get an idea of this, I looked at the variable HPW16, which looks at how many hours per week students spend in student clubs or organizations. HPW16 had 8 categories of different hour combinations. To get a better idea of students being involved vs. not being involved, I recoded HPW16 into the variable HPWCLUBS with 5 categories.

**Table 5: The Effect of Hours Per Week in Extracurriculars on Change in Political Ideology**

	None		Up to 2 hours		3 to 10 hours		11 to 20 hours		Over 20		Total	
Most Change Towards Liberal	120	3.3%	176	4.1%	142	4.2%	28	4.8%	11	4.9%	477	3.9%
Moderate Change Towards Liberal	858	23.2%	1095	25.5%	905	27.0%	137	23.7%	57	25.6%	3052	25.1%
Limited/No Change	1935	52.4%	2257	52.5%	1734	51.7%	301	52.1%	120	53.8%	6347	52.3%
Moderate Change Towards Conservative	668	18.1%	684	15.9%	504	15.0%	97	16.8%	26	11.7%	1979	16.3%
Most Change Towards Conservative	110	3.0%	88	2.0%	69	2.1%	15	2.6%	9	4.0%	291	2.4%
Total	3691	100.0%	4300	100.0%	3354	100.0%	578	100.0%	223	100.0%	12146	100.0%

Chi-Square: 43.809  
 Asymptotic Significance (p-value): .000  
 Phi: .060  
 Cramer's V: .030

These results are significant according to the results of the significance tests, however the results aren't as dramatic as they were in some of the previous tables. . Phi and Cramer's V are both positive; this means that as the independent variable goes up, the dependent variable goes down. This isn't necessarily seen here either.

The category that had the most change was in students that participated in student clubs or student organizations for 3 to 10 hours a week so this would still support the hypothesis to an extent: they did experience more change than those that participated less. The hypothesis could be shifted to say that those with involvements would experience more change than those without to be more supported by the data.

## Conclusion

The results vary quite a bit and the hypotheses are not all supported. Many of these could still be factors into why students alignment to a political party shifts during their time in college. This should be a topic that's examined further at a larger scale in order for universities to be able

to holistically educate students as talked about in the literature review. All of the results showed somewhat of a bell curve but Phi and Cramer's V both indicated on all of the tests that as the independent variable goes up, the dependent variable goes down. This wasn't shown through the tests I completed.

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