

# **UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND ITS EFFECT ON POLITICAL IDENTITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A person's political identity is shaped and evolved from influencing factors such as family, peers, political party and education. A person's political identity impacts the way they vote and the attitudes and behaviors they have toward the government. Education is often attributed to shifting a person's political ideology to the left but a gap in the literature exists as evidence for this assertion. This paper addresses the influence of higher education on a person's political identity by quantifying any shift that may occur. I expect to find higher education shifts a person's political identity more liberally from where the person's political identity stood in high school. A pilot survey study is conducted on college students to assess the impact of their college educational experience on their political views.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A person is socialized in several different ways to form their own unique political views. Education is uncontested as a strong influence of political ideology but how or to what extent is largely unknown. Overall, little research currently exists to gauge how higher education can influence a shift in political identity. This paper will seek to examine how collegiate education influences a person's political identity. My research will serve to add to the body of literature over the impact of American colleges on political identity. A survey to students at Oklahoma State University will allow students to self identify any shift in their political ideology between high school and college. The goal is to understand how undergraduate education affects a person's political identity, either shifting it toward conservatism or liberalism. This survey is meant as a pilot study to gauge initial responses rather than create generalizable statements.

I hypothesize undergraduate education at Oklahoma State will cause students to become more liberal. I expect education to be ranked as the strongest influence to a person's political identity whenever participants are asked to rank various influences. I also hypothesize on a 10-point scale the majority of students will shift liberally at least two numbers. This study will allow for a great starting point for future research over how American Colleges influence students. Existing research has assumed students become more liberal through higher education. This has led me to survey individuals with the intent of measuring the political shift occurring.

## **DEFINITIONS**

L. Huddy defines political identity as, "the identification with a major political party or the adoption of an ideological moniker as a term of self-description" (Huddy, 2001, p. 131). I choose to use the "ideological monikers" of conservative and liberal. K. Deaux et al. establishes

“conservative” and “liberal” as appropriate labels to express political identity (Deaux, 1995).

Malka refers to the most commonly discussed ideological spectrum in the United States as conservative vs. liberal (Malka, 158). For the purposes of this paper, I render political identity as the spectrum on which someone identifies from liberal to conservative with moderate being a middle ground.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Existing literature first focuses on *what* influences political socialization. The factors that are pointed to most often are family, peers, media, education and political party (Jennings, 2007). It is also generally understood, of these factors, the strongest influence on a person’s political identity is the family (Jennings, 2007). Most academic sources do not discredit education as being a major influence, although some question its role in influencing someone’s political identity. Especially in higher education, some argue college does little to shift someone’s political views. Gordon Hewitt and Mack Mariani (2008) conclude in their research, “student political orientation does not change for a majority of students while in college, and for those that do change there is evidence that other factors have an effect on that change, such as gender and socio-economic status” (Hewitt & Mariani, 2008, p. 779). In students that did shift political orientation, Hewitt found they shifted toward the left or toward liberalism, but they did so in accordance their age group at large, meaning their educational experience had little influence (Hewitt & Mariani, 2008)

Other sources assert education, and specifically professors, are a huge influences on their student’s political identity. Ben Shapiro acted as a spy in a UCLA political science course before writing his book, “Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America’s Youth”. His findings

further the idea liberal democrats dominant the university scene and brain wash their students to think the same. A more moderate view is that of Neil Gross and E. Fosse. Gross and Fosse found the influence of university was considerable when observing the positive change in student political interest (Gross & Fosse, 2012). Gross and Fosse found family was the strongest influence on a student's political ideology and concluded: if what the student learned at college were the same as in their home, their beliefs would be reinforced (Gross & Fosse, 2012). If it were different, there would be a clash of ideals, which allows education to influence their political identity (Gross & Fosse, 2012).

In terms of which direction students are influenced in universities, the literature is consistent in concluding students shift toward liberalism. Woessner suggests students naturally shift toward identifying as a Democrat, yet without the indoctrination of their professors (Woessner, 2009). Gross and Fosse found college leads to more liberal attitudes on social issues, however college does not move people's broader political beliefs significantly (Gross & Fosse, 2012). The general consensus in university political socialization literature is education has an influence on student's political identity, however the influence may not be significant. It also concludes any shift in student political identity will be toward liberalism. I found a gap in literature over any conservative shift in student's political identities. I also found little quantitative research to support a shift in student political identity on college campuses. This has led me to further research which direction a political shift occurs in student and what may influence any shift.

## **DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY**

In order to fill a necessary gap in literature over the influence of higher education in shaping a student's political view and observing the direction of any political shift, surveys

were conducted at Oklahoma State University using a small pool of students as participants. The intention of this research is to be used as a pilot study to see what initial responses are, not to make generalizable statements. This being only a pilot study, I chose 35 as a number of surveys to produce a significant amount of data. In order to best control for confounding factors, students Oklahoma State's campus completed manual surveys on a voluntary basis. The goal was to get a demographically diverse group of students to complete the survey. It should be noted that the results might not be generalizable for all college students due to the data only being recorded at Oklahoma State. The data should give a great starting point for future research with students from various colleges.

The survey asked participants to rank themselves on where they would identify on this political scale with 1 being "liberal", 5 being "moderate" and 10 being "conservative". They were then asked to rank their political views from where they identified in high school or pre-college. Although common likert scales range from five to seven options in surveys, the choice of a 1-10 scale may allow for greater variation in someone's views. It also allows, due to the nature of the questions asked, for the participants to show a greater degree of change between their previous political views and their current political views.

The next part of the survey asked participants to rank their parents on the same political scale. This question is meant to shed light on the participant's upbringing. Due to research over the strong political influence of family, a parent's political ideology may be a significant variable in a student's political shift. It is my prediction that the participant's previous political views will closely resemble that of their parents.

Ten questions on the survey are demographic in nature. These will allow various factors to be analyzed in correlation to political views and the consistency of views in

college students. The questions asked required the participant to select their age, gender, class in school, major, what type of location they grew up in (rural, suburban, urban), if they are registered to vote, and if so which party they are registered as. The last question on the survey asked students to rank factors that shape their political identity. The options were family, peers, education, political party or media. Participants had the opportunity to rank these factors with 1 being the strongest influence and 5 being the weakest.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The findings of the survey reveal several significant observations. First, 45% of survey participants demonstrated a shift in their political ideology from high school to college, while

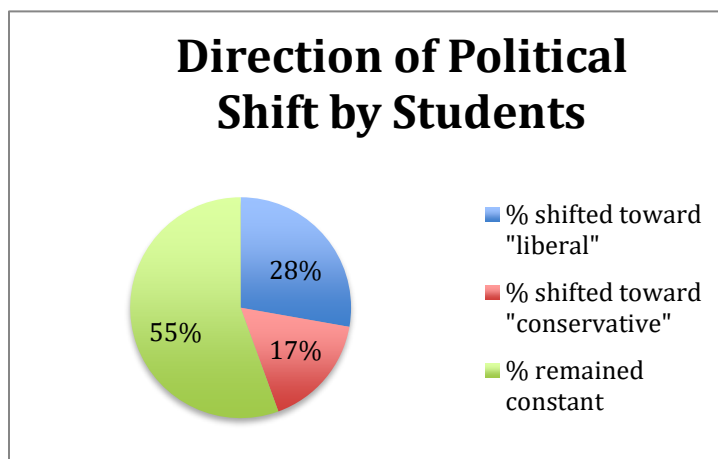


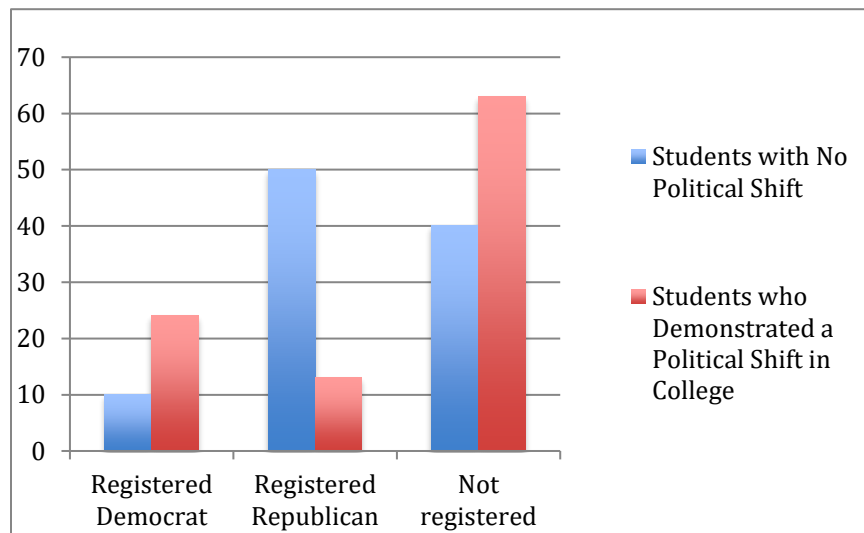
Figure 1

55% of participant's reported no shift. The breakdown by direction of shift can be found in figure one. My original hypothesis, college education influences students to shift their political identity toward liberalism, is partially supported. Of the participants who reported a shift

in political identity, it was primarily toward "liberal". There was a substantial amount of students who reported shifting toward "conservative". I find this significant because there is a gap in literature in what may cause a conservative shift in a university setting. My hypothesis is also narrowed, as 55% of college students reported no shift whatsoever. This is consistent with Hewitt and Mariani's research concluding education has no influence on most students and if it does, it most likely shifts their views toward liberalism.

Looking closer at the student group of students with no political shift in comparison to students with any direction of political shift, voter registration was a significant factor. Figure 2 demonstrates percentage of student's voter registration in comparison to their political shift.

63% student's whose political identity shifted in college were not registered to vote. Student's whose views remained constant were overwhelmingly republican. Students whose political ideology shifted at

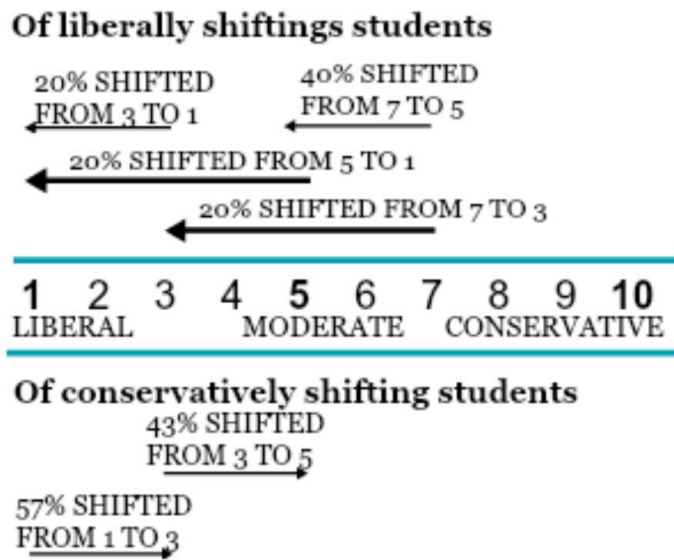


all since high school were 75% upperclassmen (juniors or seniors in school) and for student's whose identity shifted toward "liberal", 100% were upperclassmen. This

**Figure 2**

fact could serve to further the hypothesis of college influencing someone's political identity to some degree because lowerclassmen, whose college experience has been minimal, reported less of an impact.

The actual shift that occurred in both liberally shifting and conservatively shifting students was minimal. Most students recorded a shift of two points on the ten-point scale. Figure 3 demonstrates the shift as it occurred on the survey. As you can see, no students who recorded a conservative shift actually consider themselves to be conservative. This may be a result of Oklahoma State University being situated in a highly republican state influencing liberal students to become more conservative. It is interesting, however, that no students who identify as conservative shifted further toward conservative as we see with the liberal shift.



**Figure 3**

they did in high school. This percentage of students who identify as a different ideology in college is only 5.4% of total survey participants.

Lastly, students were asked to rank the factors they felt most influenced their political identity. Figures 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate the breakdown of the first ranked influence by group. Family was the overwhelming first ranked influence for shaping a person's political identity. When the groups are divided by whether or not the student had shifted in political identity, these factors sharply changed. For students who remained the same politically from high school to college, 80% said family was their primary influence. The remaining 20% ranked family as their second strongest influence. This is rationale for if an individual enters college with a strong political identity shaped from their home, it will be less likely to shift as concluded by Neil Gross (Gross, 2012). 73% of the students who had shifted politically in college placed education as the factor with the strongest influence. It is possible the lack of family influence on these students allowed for a greater opportunity for higher education to act as an influencing factor.

It can also be observed that the majority of political shifts are minor in terms of a person's political identity. Only 20% of liberally shifting survey participants jumped the median of "moderate", identifying as the opposite ideology in college as



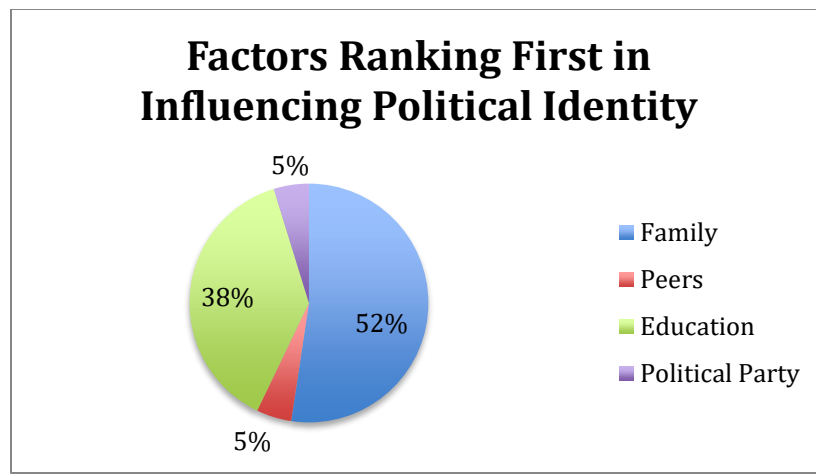


Figure 4

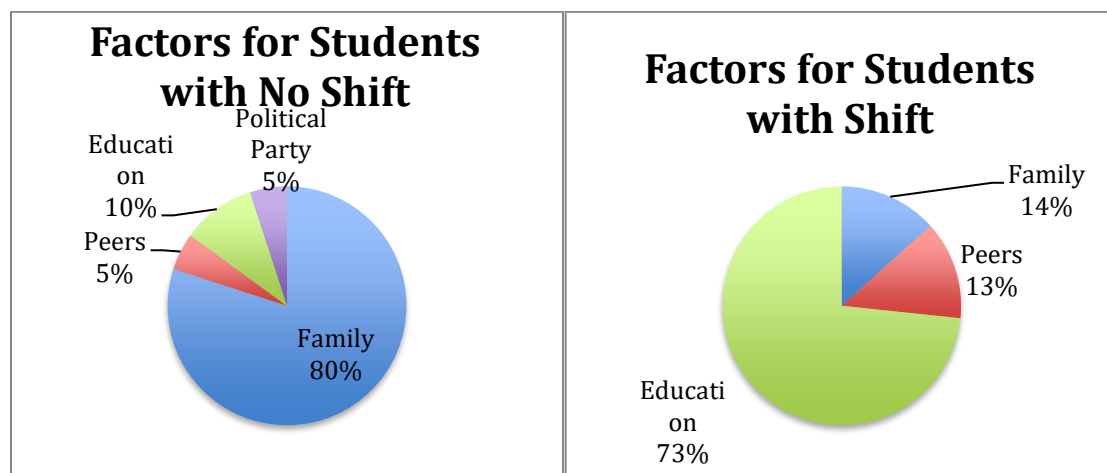


Figure 5

Figure 6

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

In summary, much of my research adds to existing research in confirming various conclusions. Family is the most often the strongest factor influencing a person's political identity. Whenever family was not a significant factor, education had a strong impact. Gross and Fosse's theory a students political identity is reinforced if it is the same as their families and challenged when it is different could explain this trend well. Especially at Oklahoma State, education may be more conservative than other Universities due to the

strong Republican state culture. Student's who entered college identifying liberally, possibly from their families influence, were likely challenge in their views by conservative culture and more apt to shift toward conservatism. This point is supported by my data of predominately liberal students shifting slightly conservative.

Education was a significant influence for small shifts in political identity rather than completely shaping a political identity or causing it to move substantially over the spectrum from liberal to conservative. I assume most students' political identities are already largely constructed by the time they enter college. Higher education likely has the potential to shift a student's identity but not to entirely shape the identity. The shift that occurs whenever education influences a student's political identity is most often toward liberalism. As scholars have assumed, this may be due to more liberal professors or possibly a greater appreciation for diversity and social causes, which persuade support for a more liberal political agenda.

My research also connected a student's political stability to their voter registration. Students who were registered to vote were more likely to remain the same politically from high school. Students who had not registered to vote were more likely to shift their political views in college. This may be because student registered to vote more thoroughly considered their political standing. Conversely, students not registered to vote had not fully constructed their political standing and were more susceptible to the influence of education.

These findings add to the current body of literature by quantifying a political shift in a group of college students and allowing for a great starting point for future research. Future research should seek to confirm the connection between voter registration and

political identity. It would also be significant to use a large sample size in several republican states to gauge the influence of conservative culture on undergraduate students. In summary, education was a significant factor for some college students in slightly shifting their political identity. Political identity shift was predominately toward liberalism, although a portion of students allow shifted more conservatively.

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