

Political Climate on College Campuses: A Comparative Analysis of Recent Findings

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Abstract

The political and social climate on college campuses has become an increasingly salient issue. Private polling companies and state governments alike have taken measures to quantify viewpoint diversity and freedom of expression in university settings. This project analyzes recent survey findings to assess whether political ideology and partisan motivated reasoning impact student views on campus climate.

Two approaches were taken to answer this question. First, descriptive statistics from seven recent surveys on campus climate were aggregated and compared across demographics. Second, OLS regression was used on data from the 2019 Campus Expression Survey—a national poll of undergraduate students with 1,580 respondents—to isolate the causal relationship between political ideology and three measures of respondent opinion on campus climate.

This assessment of recent findings indicates that students who identify as conservative are more likely to engage in self-censorship than those who identify as either moderate or liberal, but that conservative students are less likely to experience mistreatment than other ideological groups. Regression results—controlling for a host of demographic characteristics—confirm the statistical significance of these associations, but the relationship is strongly affected by the strength of a respondent’s ideological identity.

These findings support the theory that party attachment expressed through self-assessed ideological identification causes students to view the climate of their campus differently. This study does not explain why this is the case; more research is needed to uncover the root cause. The researcher plans to conduct a similar survey on the Florida State University Campus to assess whether these results hold.

Introduction & Background

In recent years, the sociopolitical climate and atmosphere on college campuses have received increased attention. Numerous surveys have attempted to ascertain whether students feel comfortable, accepted, and able to express their sincerely held beliefs in a university setting. Most commonly, these polls assess respondent views on the state of free expression, constructive dialogue, and campus climate at their respective institutions.

This project examines how student opinion on these issues differs across demographics, focusing on the effects of political ideology. Political ideology can be defined as a set of stable, interrelated beliefs that organize views on political and social issues. The concept is often measured on a scale ranging from "liberal" to "conservative."

Much of the contemporary political science literature suggests that the American public is not particularly ideological and that these preferences are instead motivated by group loyalty to a political party and the strong correlation between ideology and party identification.⁷ Partisans tend to engage in motivated reasoning, whereby individuals interpret information through the lens of their party commitment.⁹

Across multiple surveys, party attachment, expressed through self-assessed political ideology, appears to have an outsized impact on respondent opinion on some aspects of campus climate.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the Florida State University College of Social Sciences and Public Policy, the DeVoe L. Moore Center, the Center for Undergraduate Research and Academic Engagement at Florida State University, the Heterodox Academy, Dr. Samuel Staley, Dr. Crystal Taylor, Kevin Gomez, and Shawntia Nicholson.

Methods

Descriptive Comparison: Aggregated descriptive statistics from seven surveys of campus climate conducted between 2016 and 2021 to assess common findings and the extent to which public opinion has changed over time. Six of the seven are national surveys, while one deals with a single school. Sample sizes ranged from 800 to 37,000.

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression:

- Utilizing data from the national 2019 Campus Expression Survey, political ideology—measured on a 7-point Likert scale—was regressed against respondent opinion on campus climate, stratified by self-reported importance of ideology. The model employed three measures of the dependent concept:
 - Responses to the question “how often does your university encourage students to consider a wider variety of viewpoints and perspectives?”
 - An expression-comfort index aggregating six questions asking, “how comfortable or reluctant would you feel giving your views on this topic?” Included topics: race, gender, politics, religion, sexuality, and non-controversial.
 - A mistreatment index aggregating six questions asking, “how frequently are you treated badly because of your...?” Included traits: gender, politics, race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity.
- The sample was weighted to ensure representativeness. The model includes controls for party identification, gender, international status, academic field, race, sexuality, religion, and respondent views on ideological placement relative to students, faculty, and administration.

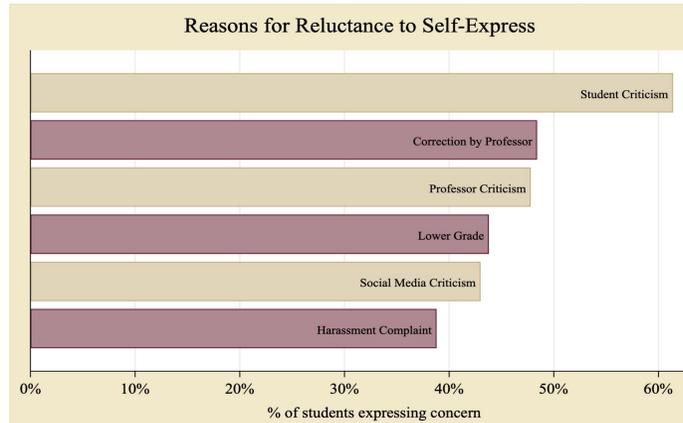


Figure 1. Factors influencing respondent reluctance to self-express averaged across five controversial topics from the 2019 Campus Expression Survey.⁶

Table 1. OLS Regression Model of Reluctance to Self-Express & Self-Reported Mistreatment (variables rescaled to range from 0-1)

Independent Variables	Reluctance to Self-Express	Self-Reported Mistreatment
Ideology	-0.109 (0.033) **	-0.105 (0.038)**
Others ideologically left	-0.048 (0.023)*	0.084 (0.021)***
Equal right/left placement	0.007 (0.025)	-0.027 (0.017)
Others ideologically right	-0.004 (0.246)	0.115 (0.023)***
Constant	0.755 (0.042)	0.039 (0.034)
N	1,019	1,019
R-squared	0.083	0.197

Table 2. Stratified OLS Regression Model of Reluctance to Self-Express (variables rescaled to range from 0-1)

Independent Variables	Ideology Very Important	Ideology Somewhat Important	Ideology Not Very Important	Ideology Not At All Important
Ideology	-0.168 (0.064) **	-0.063 (0.050)	0.018 (0.075)	-0.166 (0.189)
Others ideologically left	-0.046 (0.047)	-0.067 (0.035)	0.031 (0.056)	-0.242 (0.088) **
Equal right/left placement	-0.007 (0.057)	-0.048 (0.036)	0.147 (0.059) *	-0.090 (0.092)
Others ideologically right	-0.027 (0.049)	-0.027 (0.036)	0.119 (0.069)	-0.111 (0.112)
Constant	0.827 (0.161)	0.735 (0.061)	0.585 (0.092)	0.777 (0.134)
N	250	446	214	109
R-squared	0.216	0.091	0.182	0.282

Table 3. Stratified OLS Regression Model of Self-Reported Mistreatment (variables rescaled to range from 0-1)

Independent Variables	Ideology Very Important	Ideology Somewhat Important	Ideology Not Very Important	Ideology Not At All Important
Ideology	-0.281 (0.091) **	0.031 (0.051)	-0.125 (0.061)*	0.032 (0.105)
Others ideologically left	0.152 (0.512)**	0.095 (0.030)**	0.035 (0.041)	-0.055 (0.048)
Equal right/left placement	-0.046 (0.047)	-0.014 (0.025)	-0.038 (0.037)	-0.113 (0.047)*
Others ideologically right	0.073(0.054)	0.127 (0.031)***	0.159 (0.064)*	-0.074 (0.058)
Constant	-0.226 (0.141)	-0.019 (0.057)	0.112 (0.067)	0.096 (0.070)
N	250	446	214	109
R-squared	0.391	0.203	0.383	0.608

* P < .05. ** P < .01. *** P < .001.

Results

- Of the six surveys that measured how willingness to self-express varied across ideological identification, each found that students who identified as conservative reported less comfort sharing ideas than their democratic or liberal counterparts.
 - Criticism from fellow students was the most cited reason for reluctance across multiple surveys, followed by criticism from professors and academic penalties such as a lower grade (see Figure 1).
- Of the three measures used in this OLS regression, two were found to have a statistically significant relationship with respondent ideology.
 - There was no relationship found between political ideology and a respondent’s views on administrative support for viewpoint diversity.
 - This model indicates a statistically significant relationship between ideology and willingness to self-express, whereby moving from liberal to conservative decreases a respondent’s propensity to do so.
 - There is a similarly significant relationship between ideology and instances of mistreatment on campus, but in this case, identifying as conservative is negatively correlated with experiencing mistreatment. We also find that perceived ideological distance causes a statistically significant increase in reported mistreatment.
- When stratifying based on the importance of ideology, we find a relationship between the centrality of ideology to a respondent’s identity and the significance of this factor concerning views on campus climate.

Conclusions & Policy Recommendations

Results from this study support the claim that ideology—likely as a stand-in for party identification—affects student views on campus climate. This regression analysis indicates that conservative students are more likely to self-censor but less likely to experience mistreatment on campus. The effect is unevenly distributed across respondents and is most prevalent in students who hold ideology as central to their identity. We also find that perceived ideological distance correlates with higher rates of mistreatment.

The researcher plans to survey students at Florida State University to assess similar views and ascertain whether these trends hold. Beyond future surveys, ideology’s effects should be measured over time to assess when this apparent relationship developed. It would be particularly useful to understand whether these results are a downstream effect of increasing polarization.

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