



Political Expression on College Campuses: The Predictive Importance of Ideological Strength

By Eli Mckown-Dawson

Introduction

In recent years, the political climate on college campuses has received increased attention. “Cancel culture”—the process of rejecting or withdrawing support for people or groups due to their objectionable views or actions—has become an increasingly contested topic of debate, with multiple states passing or considering measures to alter or monitor the tone of public discourse on college campuses.¹

The heightened salience of campus climate is also evident in the increasingly frequent efforts of universities and private polling firms to ascertain whether college students feel able to express their sincerely held beliefs in an academic setting. This policy brief examines whether and how political ideology impacts undergraduate students’ views on these issues.²

The following analyses indicate that college students who identify as politically conservative are, on average, less willing to express themselves on campus compared to students who identify as either moderate or liberal. Conservative students, however, also appear less likely to report experiencing on-campus mistreatment than moderates and liberals. However, while we see aggregate

differences in students’ willingness to self-express and report experiencing mistreatment across the ideological spectrum, these effects are moderated by the importance students place upon their ideological identity. Students—both liberal and conservative—with strongly-held ideological identities are more likely to self-express and report experiencing mistreatment on campus. Thus, while identifying as a liberal or conservative is associated with students’ experiences on campus, the strength of this identification may counterbalance these effects and should be accounted for when assessing public opinion on campus climate.

Political Ideology and Public Opinion on Campus Climate

Much of contemporary political science literature suggests that the American public is not particularly ideological. Instead, political preferences are motivated by group loyalty to a political party—usually the Democratic or Republican party—and the strong correlation between political ideology and party identification. In other words, ideology influences people’s preferences and behaviors

not through strongly held policy positions but because it acts as a social identity closely linked with partisan loyalty.³ Partisans have been shown to engage in motivated reasoning by interpreting information through the lens of their party commitment and taking up issue positions that match those of their party. Self-described liberals and conservatives, as shown here, do not identify as such due to consistent ideological principles or policy positions. Instead, their attitudinal differences reflect a commitment to a particularly influential social group, their political party.⁴

Numerous public opinion surveys of undergraduate students have asked questions to assess beliefs about viewpoint diversity and self-expression on college campuses. These views consistently correlate with party identification and political ideology. For instance, a 2021 study by Yale University's William F. Buckley, Jr. Program found that 50 percent of students often felt intimidated sharing their opinions or beliefs in class because they differed from those of their peers.⁵ That number drops to 48 percent for students who identify as liberal but rises to 61 percent for conservatives.⁶

Similarly, a national survey of undergraduate students conducted by Gallup in 2019 reported that 63 percent of college students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive." A majority of both Republican (74%) and Democratic (58%) students agreed with the statement. Ninety-

three percent thought that liberal students could "freely and openly express their views," while 73 percent said the same of conservative students. This difference was driven primarily by conservative students, who were significantly less likely to say that conservatives could express themselves on campus.⁷

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill) conducted a similar study in the spring of 2019. They found that 13 percent of self-identified liberal students worried that expressing their views would cause an instructor to have a lower opinion of them, but 50 percent of self-identified conservative students said the same.⁸ Moreover, the proportion of conservative students who reported engaging in self-censorship at least once was 68 percent, while 24 percent of liberals reported doing the same.⁹

Additionally, public opinion surveys often assess *why* students feel uncomfortable expressing themselves on campus. The UNC-Chapel Hill study and the Campus Expression Survey (CES)—a national survey of undergraduate students conducted by the Heterodox Academy—find that students tend to worry more about the reactions of their peers than those of their professors. Figure 1 presents the reasons respondents to the 2019 CES chose when asked why they felt reluctant to discuss a controversial topic in class. Criticism from other students was the most commonly cited rationale for reluctance to self-express, followed by correction and criticism from professors.

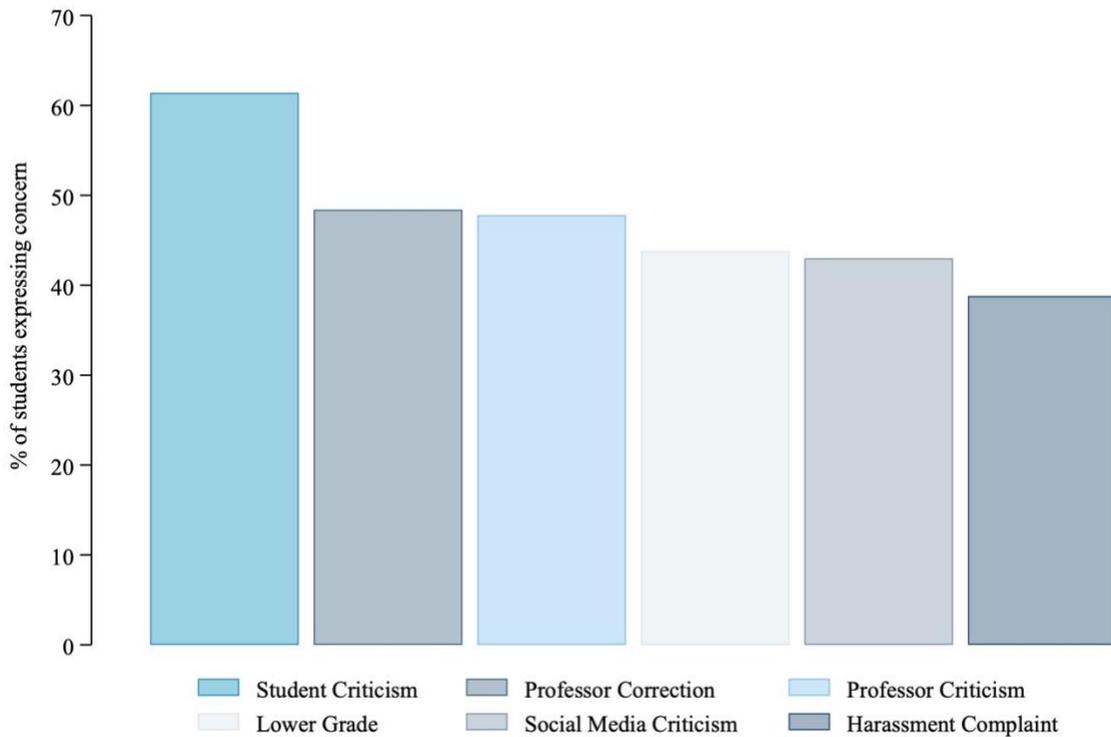


Figure 1. Why Students Were Reluctant Discuss a Controversial Topic in Class¹⁰
Students could select more than one option. Created with data from the 2019 CES, see Stiksma, M.

These data suggest an aggregate difference between how comfortable liberal and conservative college students feel expressing themselves on campus, a finding that warrants further exploration. One explanation is that because conservative students are more likely to identify as Republicans and liberals as Democrats, party attachment expressed through self-reported political ideology drives these observed differences.¹¹ Students who identify with a particular political party may take up that party’s stance on an issue like campus climate and interpret their interactions with professors and peers through a partisan lens.¹² For example, if those in the Republican party argue that colleges and universities are biased against conservatives, conservative students may take up those views and, as a result, self-censor.

An alternative explanation is that the on-campus experiences of liberal and conservative students differ in some systemic way that causes conservatives to report feeling less comfortable expressing themselves than liberals or moderates. Both the UNC-Chapel Hill and Gallup surveys find that students believe their professors are willing to consider and discuss multiple sides of issues that come up in class and tend to be more worried about the reactions of other students. Thus, if liberals and conservatives have different experiences when expressing themselves, these may be more likely to occur in peer-to-peer interactions. Perceived ideological distance is another possible cause of the reported difference in expression comfort. If students believe that conservatives represent a minority on campus—another finding of the UNC-

Chapel Hill survey—conservative students may be wary of expressing their views.

Analysis of the 2019 Campus Expression Survey

The Heterodox Academy (HxA), a nonprofit organization that engages in research and education about open inquiry in academia, conducts an annual Campus Expression Survey (CES). Their 2019 survey consisted of a national sample of 1,580 undergraduate students between 18 and 24 years old enrolled at a four-year educational institution in the United States.¹³ A survey weight—based on gender, region, age, and ethnicity data from the U.S. Census—was applied during all analyses to accurately represent the demographic characteristics of U.S. undergraduate students. HxA found that reluctance to self-express varied by topic, but students were most often hesitant to discuss politics and race. Additionally, most respondents were reluctant to give their views on at least one topic, and the most frequently cited reason for this reluctance was concern that other students would criticize their views as offensive.

HxA’s analysis also found statistically significant differences between Democratic and Republican students concerning reluctance to discuss various topics in the classroom. Specifically, Republican students were significantly more reluctant than Democratic or independent students to give their views on politics, race, sexuality, and gender. The only topic Republicans were less reluctant than other students to discuss was religion.

To better understand this apparent relationship and test whether it holds for political ideology, the DeVoe Moore Center extended HxA’s analysis by utilizing multivariate regression to analyze the survey data from the 2019 CES. This report assesses whether the relationship between political ideology and expression-

comfort is similar to what HxA finds for party identification, whether the relationship remains statistically significant when controlling for possible confounding factors, and whether this relationship exists for other measures of campus climate, such as perceptions of on-campus mistreatment.

This report employs three measures of “campus climate.” The first, institutional support, was created from one CES survey question that asked “how often does your university encourage students to consider a wider variety of viewpoints and perspectives?” Respondent answer choices ranged from “never” to “very frequently.” Second, expression-comfort is measured using an index that aggregates answers to six CES questions asking, “how comfortable or reluctant would you feel giving your views on ___?” with the blank at the end of the question filled in by either “race,” “gender,” “politics,” “religion,” “sexuality,” or “non-controversial topics.” The variable was measured by averaging responses to all six questions and creating a single unweighted expression-comfort scale. Finally, the third variable was an index measuring on-campus mistreatment. Six questions in the CES asked, “how frequently are you treated badly because of your ___?” with the blank at the end of the question filled in by “gender,” “politics,” “race,” “religion,” “sexual orientation,” and “gender identity” respectively.¹⁴ These questions were indexed in the same manner as the expression-comfort variable. This method of analysis enables the combination of the subject-specific expression comfort and mistreatment questions asked in the CES to test the effects of political ideology on students’ overall perceptions of campus climate.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, a standard statistical tool used in the social sciences, is employed to assess how political ideology impacts students’ views on campus climate.¹⁵ The same statistical weight created

and used by the Heterodox Academy was applied during these analyses to improve representativeness.¹⁶

Political ideology was measured using a seven-point scale, on which respondents to the CES could place themselves from “very liberal” to “very conservative.” A variable measuring the importance of ideology—whether students felt it was relevant to their identity—was included to identify whether the strength of a student’s political ideology moderates its effect on their perceptions of campus climate. This variable ranged from “very important” to “not at all important.” Both variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1 for ease of comparison. Both regression models control for respondents’ party identification and perceived ideological distance from the students, faculty, and administrators on their campus.¹⁷ In addition to these variables of interest, controls for party identification, gender, international status, academic field, race, sexual orientation, and religion are included in each model.

Results

Neither political ideology nor party identification has a statistically significant effect on responses to the institutional support variable. In other words, a respondent’s ideology is not associated with their opinion on

whether their university encourages students to consider a wide range of viewpoints. Overall, 85 percent believed their college or university encouraged this approach “very frequently,” “frequently,” or “occasionally” while only 15 percent said they did so “rarely,” “very rarely,” or “never.”¹⁸

Conversely, a statistically significant relationship exists between ideology and the expression-comfort variable. OLS regression indicates that conservative identification is correlated with lower expression-comfort. The observed relationship holds when controlling for possible confounding variables such as party identification. The importance of respondents’ ideology is also statistically significantly correlated with expression-comfort. In this case, an increase in ideological importance is correlated with an increase in expression comfort for liberals and conservatives. Figure 2 presents students’ predicted expression comfort as a function of ideology (left) and ideological importance (right), holding all other variables at their means. Moving from “very liberal” to “very conservative” on the ideology scale is associated with an approximately 10 percentage point decrease in the expression comfort scale, while moving from “not at all important” to “very important” on the ideological importance scale is associated with a 10 percentage point increase.

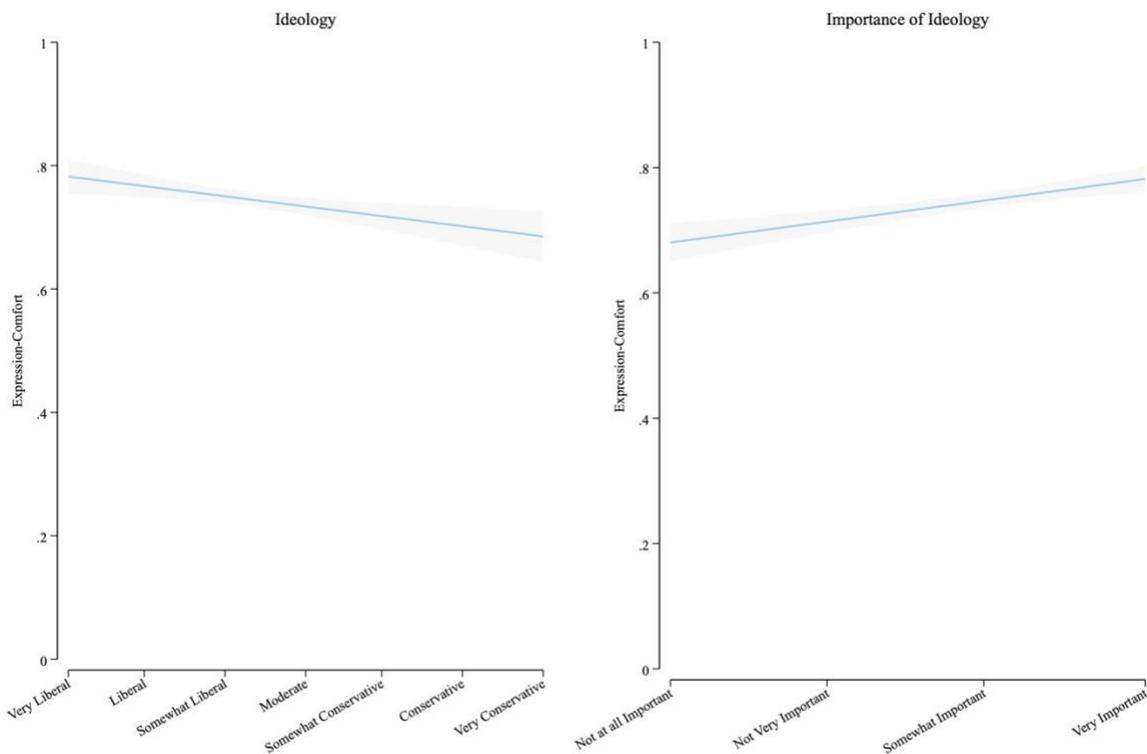


Figure 2. Predicted Expression-Comfort by Political Ideology and Ideological Importance
Created using data from the 2019 Campus Expression Survey, see Stikma, M.

A similarly significant relationship exists between ideology and perceived instances of mistreatment on campus, but in this case, identifying as conservative is correlated with lower levels of mistreatment. Moving from one end of the ideological scale to the other is associated with a 9 percentage point decrease on the mistreatment scale. This relationship is similarly robust to multivariate controls. A positive relationship is observed between ideological importance and mistreatment, such that moving the length of the ideology scale is associated with a 10 percentage point increase on the mistreatment scale. Thus, while conservatives are less likely to report being mistreated on campus, those for whom ideology is more important—either liberal or conservative—are more likely to report experiencing mistreatment (see figure 3).

Substantively, ideological importance has a slightly larger effect on both expression comfort and mistreatment than the ideology itself, and this variable—when included in the multivariate model—moderates how political ideology itself affects perceptions of campus climate. In other words, while ideology remains statistically significant when controlling for importance, its substantive effect decreases slightly. Moreover, ideological importance works in the opposite direction as ideology for both dependent variables. Thus, although we might expect a conservative student to feel less comfortable expressing themselves than a liberal student, this might not be the case if the former is more ideologically engaged than the latter.

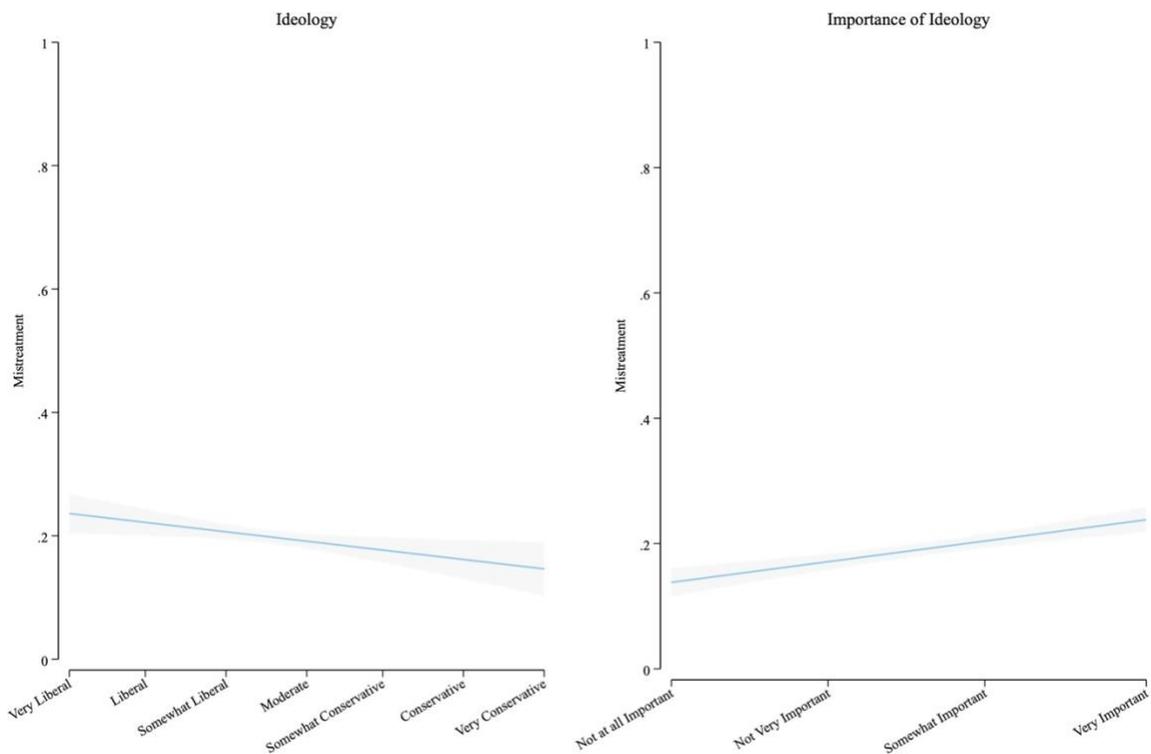


Figure 3. Predicted Mistreated by Political Ideology and Ideological Importance

Created using data from the 2019 Campus Expression Survey, see Stikma, M.

Implications for The Study of Discourse on College Campuses

This analysis provides additional insight into the association between political ideology and students' views of and experiences on their college campus. There is a statistically significant negative correlation between conservative identification and expression-comfort and reported frequency of mistreatment on campus. Conservative students are, on average, less comfortable expressing themselves and indicate experiencing less mistreatment than moderate or liberal students.

However, these effects are counterbalanced by those of ideological importance. Committed ideologies—both liberal and conservative—are more likely to self-express and also more likely to perceive mistreatment on campus

compared to students for whom political ideology is not as important. The substantive impact of this relationship is slightly greater than that of ideology itself.

This study cannot identify whether either relationship is causal or merely correlational. However, both are robust to demographic controls, including for respondents' party identification. Thus, it is unlikely that the effects of ideology or ideological importance are due to their correlation with partisanship alone. Similarly, because both effects remain significant when controlling for the ideological distance respondents perceive between themselves and others at their institution, perceived distance does not appear to be the sole driver of the association between perceptions of campus climate and political ideology.

These findings support the notion that political ideology impacts students' perceptions of their campus climate but also identify ideological strength—measured using the importance of political ideology to respondents' identities—as a predictor of these views. In other words, the direction and strength of students' political ideologies impact how they interact with their campus. Accounting for this second partisan dimension is critical when assessing student views on campus climate, as two students with the same political ideology may have vastly

different experiences based on the strength with which they hold those beliefs.

Future studies should note the importance of ideological strength as a predictor of views on campus climate and attempt to assess causality through experimental or quasi-experimental research designs. It would also be useful to study this relationship over time, ascertain whether it is a downstream effect of increasing partisan polarization, and identify whether ideological strength is a proxy for negative partisan affect.

Appendix A: Methodology

The analyses in this policy brief use data from the Heterodox Academy's 2019 Campus Expression Survey (CES). Sampling methodology, a full list of questions, and the survey data utilized in this study can be found on The Heterodox Academy's website.¹⁹ The CES sample consisted of 1,580 18 to 24-year-old undergraduate students in the United States enrolled full-time at a four-year institution. Twenty-one percent of students in the survey attended school in the Northeast, 24 percent in the Midwest, 34 percent in the South, and 21 percent in the West. Within each region, the Heterodox Academy requested representative samples of respondents by gender and race, based on statistics obtained from the National Center for Educational Statistics.

HxA constructed a statistical weight based on region, gender, and race. This weight was applied during their analysis and the analyses presented in this policy brief to ensure the sample accurately represented the target population of U.S college students aged 18-24. Overall, the Heterodox Academy reported that their weighting system and descriptive results were demographically similar to other surveys of the same population.

The final CES sample was 56.6% female and 43.5% male. The percentages for racial demographics are as follows: White (54.9), Hispanic (20.2), Black (13.3), Asian (6.6), Multiracial (3.9), American Indian or Alaska Native (0.3), Pacific Islander (0.3), Middle Eastern (0.2), and something else (0.3). A plurality of respondents (44.5%) identified as Democratic, while 19.2% identified as Republican, 18.2% as Independent, 3.6% as Libertarian, and 1.7% as something else.

Another 9.2% of respondents had not thought much about their political party. As for sexuality, 75.7% of sampled students identified as heterosexual or straight, 13.3% as bisexual, 5.2% as homosexual, 2.4% as asexual, 1.5% as something else, and 1.9% preferred not to say. The most common ages for respondents were 19 (21.3%), 20 (20.3%), and 21 (19.7%) years old. The remainder were 22 (13.3%), 18 (12.7%), 23 (7.5%), and 24 (5.3%).²⁰

Data cleaning for the analyses presented in the policy brief consisted primarily of removing "unsure" answers from specific variables—ideology, for example—to create usable ordinal scales. Other variables in the CES were reordered to assist with interpretation, and both the dependent variables and focal independent variables were rescaled to range from 0-1.

Aside from this general data cleaning, the most substantial pre-analysis work involved generating the expression-comfort and mistreatment indices. The six comfort topics—each measured using a separate variable with a four-point scale—were aggregated into a single index by taking each respondent's mean response across all six variables. The same process was applied to the seven mistreatment questions, each of which was measured on a 6-point scale. For the expression-comfort index, Cronbach's alpha = 0.78, and for the mistreatment index, Cronbach's alpha = 0.82. In addition to the independent variables of primary interest (ideology and importance of ideology), both models included controls for party identification, gender, international status, academic field, race, sexuality, religion, and the relative views of students, school administration, and professors. Data and replication materials are available upon request.

Appendix B: Statistical Output

Table 1. OLS Regression of Expression-Comfort and Mistreatment

	Expression Comfort	Mistreatment	Institutional Support
Ideology	-0.097** (0.033)	-0.090* (0.037)	-0.043 (0.039)
Ideological Importance	0.101*** (0.022)	0.100*** (0.019)	0.011 (0.025)
Independent	-0.004 (0.017)	0.030 (0.017)	-0.033 (0.02)
Republican	-0.004 (0.022)	0.033 (0.024)	-0.011 (0.027)
International	-0.014 (0.028)	0.074 (0.040)	0.059 (0.034)
Female	-0.052*** (0.014)	0.021 (0.013)	0.008 (0.017)
Biological Science	-0.015 (0.030)	0.008 (0.031)	-0.011 (0.033)
Business	-0.012 (0.027)	0.019 (0.028)	-0.052 (0.032)
Education	-0.048 (0.033)	0.059 (0.032)	-0.024 (0.042)
Engineering	-0.003 (0.031)	-0.025 (0.029)	-0.049 (0.035)
Health	0.020 (0.030)	-0.025 (0.028)	-0.037 (0.040)
Humanities	-0.018 (0.037)	0.027 (0.029)	-0.155** (0.051)
Mathematics	0.001	0.054	-0.134*

	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.061)
Religion	0.010	0.064	0.068
	(0.102)	(0.084)	(0.062)
Physical Science	-0.004	-0.009	0.026
	(0.042)	(0.038)	(0.042)
Social Science	0.011	-0.015	-0.020
	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.033)
Something else	-0.004	-0.012	-0.005
	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.034)
Asian	0.044	0.081	-0.112**
	(0.122)	(0.046)	(0.039)
Black	0.094	0.155***	-0.094**
	(0.121)	(0.045)	(0.034)
Hispanic	0.083	0.110**	-0.108***
	(0.120)	(0.042)	(0.032)
Middle Eastern	0.033	0.113	-0.101
	(0.125)	(0.080)	(0.088)
Pacific Islander	0.073	0.063	-0.133
	(0.126)	(0.072)	(0.133)
White	0.053	0.085*	-0.082**
	(0.120)	(0.041)	(0.031)
Multiracial	0.074	0.106*	-0.047
	(0.124)	(0.047)	(0.054)
Homosexual	-0.004	0.094**	0.043
	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.034)
Bisexual	-0.007	0.090***	0.006
	(0.020)	(0.018)	(0.022)
Asexual	-0.030	0.071*	0.038
	(0.041)	(0.036)	(0.038)

Atheist	-0.031 (0.025)	-0.004 (0.019)	-0.010 (0.028)
Buddhist	0.004 (0.048)	0.048 (0.053)	0.155*** (0.043)
Christian	0.014 (0.019)	0.025 (0.015)	0.018 (0.023)
Hindu	0.050 (0.036)	0.136* (0.065)	0.087 (0.058)
Jewish	0.023 (.034)	0.006 (0.029)	0.032 (0.048)
Muslim	.095** (0.031)	0.104 (0.064)	0.066 (0.063)
Transgender	-0.003 (0.038)	0.170*** (0.046)	-0.048 (0.052)
Something Else	0.026 (0.025)	0.031 (0.026)	-0.044 (0.031)
Prefer not to Say	0.009 (0.016)	0.025 (0.017)	-0.020 (0.019)
Students to the right	-0.007 (0.018)	0.047** (0.017)	-0.016 (0.022)
Students to the left	-0.021 (0.018)	0.041* (0.017)	0.023 (0.021)
Students equally right and left	0.023 (0.019)	0.017 (0.015)	0.042 (0.021)
Administration to the right	0.013 (0.02)	0.026 (0.018)	0.004 (0.023)
Administration to the left	0.005 (0.021)	0.029 (0.021)	0.004 (0.025)
Administration equally right and left	0.022	0.001	0.035

	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.025)
Faculty to the right	0.003	0.051*	-0.078**
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.026)
Faculty to the left	-0.020	0.028	-0.035
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.025)
Faculty equally right and left	-0.026	-0.030	-0.008
	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.022)
Constant	0.689	-0.058	0.862
	(0.125)	(0.052)	(0.049)
Observations	974	974	974
R-squared	0.105	0.226	0.081

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

About the Author

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Notes

1. Bauer–Wolf, Jeremy. (2019, September 16). States passing laws to protect college students' free speech. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/09/16/states-passing-laws-protect-college-students-free-speech>; Anders, Caroline. (2021, June 24). In push against 'indoctrination,' DeSantis mandates surveys of Florida college students' beliefs. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/06/24/florida-intellectual-freedom-law-mandates-viewpoint-surveys/>; Lonas, Lexi. (2022, March 18). NYT editorial board to identify 'wide range of threats' to free speech, offer solutions. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/598751-nyt-editorial-board-to-identify-wide-range-of-threats-to-free-speech-offer>; Vogels, Emily A., et al. (2022, June 30). Americans and 'Cancel Culture': Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/>.
2. Stimson, James A. (1975). Belief Systems: Constraint, Complexity, and the 1972 Election. *American Journal of Political Science*, 19(3), 393–417; Conover, P. J., and Feldman, S. (1981). The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications. *American Journal of Political Science*, 25(4), 617–645.
3. Barber, Michael, and Pope, Jeremy C. (2018). Does Party Trump Ideology? Disentangling Party and Ideology in America. *American Political Science Review*, 113(1), 38–54.
4. Bolsen, Toby, Druckman, James N., and Cook, Fay L. (2014). The Influence of Partisan Motivated Reasoning on Public Opinion. *Political Behavior*, 36, 235–262; Achen, Christopher H., and Bartels, Larry M. (2017). *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections do not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
5. The “often” category includes students who said they felt intimidated “frequently” (14%) and “sometimes” (36%).
6. Schmidt, Robert M. (2021) *National Undergraduate Study*. McLaughlin & Associates, with The William F. Buckley, Jr. Program at Yale University. <https://www.buckleyprogram.com/post/buckley-program-releases-seventh-annual-college-student-survey>.
7. *The First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report: College Students' Views of Free Expression*. (2020). Gallup and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/First-Amendment-on-Campus-2020.pdf>.
8. This includes students who said they were “extremely,” “moderately,” “somewhat,” and “slightly” concerned.
9. Larson, Jennifer, McNeilly, Mark, and Ryan, Timothy J. (2020). *Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
10. Only asked of students who reported being “very” or “somewhat” reluctant to discuss at least one of the following topics: politics, race, religion, sexuality, or gender.
11. In the 2019 CES, for example, 81% of liberal students were Democrats, and 75% of conservative students were Republican. See

Barber and Pope, Does Party Trump Ideology? 38-89.

12. Lenz, Gabriel S. (2009). "Learning and Opinion Change, Not Priming: Reconsidering the Priming Hypothesis." *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(4), 821–837. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00403.

13. The 2019 CES data, toplines, and report can be found on HxA's website: <https://heterodoxacademy.org/campus-expression-survey/>.

14. All three dependent variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1 for ease of comparison.

15. All analyses were repeated using ordinal logistic regression to ensure robustness. The statistical and substantive significance of all results reported below remain the same regardless of specification.

16. Details about survey methodology and regression outputs are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B.

17. Ideological distance was measured using three questions that asked respondents—for administrators, students, or faculty at their institution—"would you say most of them are politically to the left of you (more liberal) or politically to the right of you (more conservative)?"

18. Stikma, M. (2019). *Understanding the Campus Expression Climate: Fall 2019*. Heterodox Academy. <https://heterodoxacademy.org/campus-expression-survey/>.

19. Stikma, *Understanding the Campus Expression Climate*.

20. This information was drawn from HxA's methodology report for the 2019 CES, which can be found on their website. <https://heterodoxacademy.org/campus-expression-survey/>.