

**“Political Ideology” and “Economic Ideology” Among College and  
Non-College Young People**

**Kevin Lownds**

According to a recent CBS News article, Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX) is not only the “Republican Party’s most radical candidate” for president, but “an icon for many college-aged voters.” (*CBS News*) The article argues that college students have formed “Paul’s base of support,” which has coincided with a “resurgence” of libertarianism on college campuses. (*CBS News*) Apparently, libertarian ideals of fiscal conservatism and free market economics hold some appeal to college students. These revelations contradict the claims of conservative pundits who consistently argue that college campuses are bastions of liberalism and hostile to all forms of conservatism. In this paper, I will examine the extent of this “liberal bias” and the possibility of high levels of fiscal conservatism on college campuses. I will study groups of both college students and young people who are not currently enrolled full-time in a four year college or university to determine if the “liberal bias” in academia leads students to adopt more liberal political orientations, or if these attitudes are simply a reflection of their age. I will also examine the economic ideologies of these two separate groups of young people to determine if fiscal conservatism really is more prominent among college students. Ultimately, I will argue that this examination can not only determine the effect of the purported “liberal bias” on college campuses, but can also help to predict the future political behavior of young people.

### *Research Question*

For this analysis, my central research question will be twofold: *what is the effect of the alleged “liberal bias” on college students, and is there a concurrent trend of fiscal conservatism among college students?* Scholars and researchers have sought evidence of attitudinal shifts about economic issues once students matriculate at colleges and universities. Whaples examined the changing perceptions of college students about the free market after taking courses in

introductory economics, and found that “a greater percentage come to regard the functioning of the market as fair.” (Whaples, 308) Thus, in his analysis, immersion in economics classes at a college or university will lead to more conservative attitudes towards fiscal policy.

Meanwhile, pundits, especially conservatives, have attacked the “liberal bias” in academia, arguing that it has a negative effect on students. While it is not clear how high levels of liberalism among professors affect the political beliefs of students, studies have shown that college professors are more likely to be liberal than conservative. A George Mason University study found that “By their own description, 72 percent of those teaching at American universities and colleges are liberal and 15 percent are conservative.” (*The Washington Post*) This study found that the differences were not based on academic specialty, as “there was no field...in which there were more conservatives than liberals...” (*The Washington Post*) Conservative pundits have used this evidence to assert that the college campus biases students to become liberals. In an article in *The Boston Globe*, Cathy Young argues that the “liberal bias in the ivory tower” is especially detrimental because at universities, “ideas are their lifeblood, and a lack of intellectual diversity endangers the very purpose of the academy.” (*The Boston Globe*) She particularly fears a college campus where “a ‘normal’ person is presumed to be liberal.” (*The Boston Globe*)

Some researchers and writers have argued that the alleged higher rates of liberalism among young people is simply a function of their age, as shown by a study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement which found that all young adults, regardless of full-time enrollment in college, “voted for the Democratic candidate over the Republican candidate in races for the House of Representatives...the Senate...and governor.” (CIRCLE) Is there really a biasing influence on college campuses? Can the environments on

college campuses create both political liberals and fiscal conservatives? Or, are the political attitudes of young people a reflection of their age, not their environment?

This research question has implications regarding the “liberal bias” in academia as well as the future political behavior of young people. By comparing the attitudes of college students with the attitudes of young people who do not attend four year colleges full-time, it can be determined if the purportedly higher rates of political liberalism among young people is based on their immersion in the college environment or simply a function of their age. If college students and non-college young people have similar political orientations, then it is unlikely that the “liberal bias” in academia has much effect on the students. In addition, this study could enable researchers to predict future political behavior of young people. If young people appear to be politically liberal but fiscally conservative, as a result of immersion in economics classes or other factors, they may adhere to more conservative political beliefs in the future when financial concerns become more important to them. Thus, this examination will enable understanding of the extent to which the alleged “liberal bias” in academia shapes students’ beliefs and could also foreshadow a conservative trend among young liberals based on attitudes towards fiscal policy.

### *Hypothesis*

I expect that this analysis will show concurrent trends of both higher political liberalism and higher fiscal conservatism among young people who attend college. I believe that the “liberal bias” on college campuses will impact the attitudes of young people who attend college and increase the likelihood that college students will describe themselves as liberal. As a result, I expect that *college students will be more likely than young people who do not attend a four year college or university full-time to describe their political orientation as liberal.* However, I also

believe that the recently acknowledged trend of libertarianism among college students will lead them to have more conservative fiscal ideologies, especially if scholars like Whaples are correct about the impact of economics classes on support for the free market. Thus, I expect that *college students will be more likely than young people who do not attend a four year college or university full-time to describe their ideology on economic issues as conservative*. While I am not able to exclude external influences and present a causal relationship, I expect a correlation between full-time attendance at a four year college or university and higher levels of political liberalism and economic conservatism.

### *Questions*

In order to test this hypothesis, I utilized three questions on the National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey. First, I used the question regarding full-time attendance at a four year college or university as my independent variable. While this question is actually for sampling purposes and yielded 498 students enrolled full-time in college and 499 students who are not enrolled full-time in college, my hypothesis depends on the *differences* between college students and young people who do not attend a full-time college. This question is, “Are you currently enrolled full-time in a college or university?” I then examined the question about political orientation as my first dependent variable. This question is, “When it comes to political issues, do you think of yourself as liberal, moderate, or conservative?” Respondents are given the choices of “Conservative, Moderate leaning conservative, Moderate, Moderate leaning liberal, Liberal, I Don’t Know.” I chose this question simply because it was included on last year’s National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey. When crosstabulated with the college attendance question, these responses will enable me to answer my

first research question regarding the potential biasing effect on college campuses. If college students choose “liberal” or “moderate leaning liberal” more often than non-college young people, these differences could be due to the effect of the “liberal bias.” By contrast, if college students are equally or less likely than non-college young people to describe themselves as “liberal” or “moderate leaning liberal,” it is unlikely that the alleged “liberal bias” on college campuses has a strong effect on students’ attitudes.

I utilized the measure of economic ideology as my second dependent variable. This question appeared on the questionnaire as, “How would you describe your views on economic issues?” Respondents can choose, “Conservative, Moderate leaning conservative, Moderate, Moderate leaning liberal, Liberal, I Don’t Know.” I wrote this question based on the Gallup organization’s economic ideology measure, though their specific question is usually “Thinking about economic issues, would you say your views on economic issues are?” (Gallup) This question is typically used for telephone surveys, which explains the repetition of the phrase “economic issues.” In an internet-based questionnaire, this repetition is less necessary. Once this question is crosstabulated with full-time college attendance, it will answer the second research question regarding the potentially high fiscal conservatism among college students. If college students choose “conservative” or “moderate leaning conservative” more often than non-college young people, then perhaps college students are becoming more libertarian towards the economy. However, if college students choose “conservative” or “moderate leaning conservative” equally as often or less than non-college young people, it is unlikely that this trend of fiscal conservatism is unusually strong on college campuses.

*Sample*

This survey was conducted during the last few weeks of November 2007 by the public opinion research organization Polimetrix. Polimetrix created a target sample of 1,000 young people by drawing a random selection of 1,000 respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 from the American Community Study, which was conducted by the Census Bureau. This target sample was created in order to most appropriately describe the demographic characteristics of the underlying population of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. Ultimately, 1,629 interviews were conducted, and the 1,000 respondents who most closely represented the target sample were included in the data. The sample was required to include 500 respondents who attend college full-time and 500 respondents who do not. This particular specification fits my hypothesis well because it enables me to examine the differences of political and economic ideologies between college students and non-college young people evenly. Since approximately 25% of young people attend a full-time college, (Portney, 10/16/07) if a simple random sample of 1000 were done of young people between the ages of 18-24, approximately 250 college students would be sampled. These responses would not be sufficient to accurately provide data on the attitudes of college students, so it was necessary to split the underlying population into college students and non-college young people in order to compare the political and economic ideologies of these two groups. It was also required that individuals who are serving full-time in the United States military be excluded from the sample, as the overall purpose of the survey is to examine the civic engagement of young people, and full-time members of the military are not allowed to participate in many political activities. (Portney, 10/16/07)

The survey was implemented through self-administered questionnaires over the internet. The respondents were chosen based on a list held by Polimetrix. 993 of the respondents were

invited to complete the survey through an email, while the remaining 636 respondents were redirected to complete this survey after failing to qualify for another survey, which means that this sample *is nonrandom*. Nardi explains that "...in order to achieve a truly random sample, you must be able to provide a complete list of all units in the population from which to choose a sample." (Nardi, 113) The list did not contain the names and email addresses of all young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, and instead only included those people who *chose* to be a part of Polimetrix's database, making it an "opt-in survey." Thus, this sample is not representative of the entire population of young adults ages 18-24. The response rate for the individuals who were invited directly to complete the survey was 31.2%, while the response rate for individuals who were redirected after failing to qualify for another survey was 66.7%. (Polimetrix) These response rates are high by most estimates, especially given the fact that response rates have been declining over the past several years. (Dillman, 28) Usually, high response rates indicate that the sample is more representative of the underlying population, making the results more generalizable, but this sample is nonrandom. Thus, these high response rates simply indicate that those individuals who have signed up to receive surveys through Polimetrix are fairly willing to respond to them.

There are advantages and disadvantages to conducting a self-administered questionnaire through the internet. Dillman explains that self-administered questionnaires often struggle to get "adequate answers to open-ended questions." (Dillman, 41) However, I did not use any open-ended questions to test my hypothesis, so this drawback did not affect my research. Self-administered questionnaires are more beneficial for "...measuring variables with numerous values or response categories that are too much to read in an interview or on the telephone..." and "...describing characteristics of a large population..." (Nardi, 67) Since this questionnaire

is quite lengthy and has several questions with many response categories, it would be difficult for respondents to keep track of the possible answer choices if the survey was conducted over the phone or in-person. It would be equally difficult to sit through the entire questionnaire if it was conducted in-person or over the phone, since the interviewer would have to read all of the questions and choices out loud. With the proliferation of cell phone use, especially among young people, it could also be problematic to contact many of the potential respondents through traditional land lines. Conducting interviews in-person “costs more than it does to distribute self-administered questionnaires...” (Nardi, 70) and was financially prohibitive. The questionnaire was emailed to the respondents, which is advantageous for this particular population. Many young people utilize email as a preferred means of communication, and it is one of the most effective ways to contact people in this underlying population. Again, the main problem with the implementation was that emails only went to individuals who had signed up to be included in Polimetrix’s database, making the sample nonrandom. Nevertheless, the best means of accurately measuring a population of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 with the financial resources available and the presence of a lengthy survey was a self-administered questionnaire sent through email.

### *Data*

The results of the analysis are presented in the tables below:

**Table I. Political Orientation by College Attendance\***

	<b>College Attendance</b>			
		<b>Non-College Young People</b>	<b>College Students</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Political Orientation</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	137 32.6%	145 30.3%	282 31.4%
	<b>Moderate Leaning Liberal</b>	55 13.1%	90 18.8%	145 16.1%
	<b>Moderate</b>	87 20.7%	86 18.0%	173 19.3%
	<b>Moderate Leaning Conservative</b>	39 9.3%	60 12.6%	99 11.0%
	<b>Conservative</b>	102 24.3%	97 20.3%	199 22.2%
	<b>Total</b>	420 100.0%	478 100.0%	898 100.0%

\* This table does not include respondents who chose "I Don't Know" for this question.

**Table II. Economic Ideology by College Attendance\***

	<b>College Attendance</b>			
		<b>Non-College Young People</b>	<b>College Students</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Economic Ideology</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	95 23.0%	96 20.7%	191 21.8%
	<b>Moderate Leaning Liberal</b>	54 13.1%	78 16.8%	132 15.1%
	<b>Moderate</b>	110 26.6%	97 21.0%	207 23.6%
	<b>Moderate Leaning Conservative</b>	48 11.6%	75 16.2%	123 14.0%
	<b>Conservative</b>	106 25.7%	117 25.3%	223 25.5%
	<b>Total</b>	413 100.0%	463 100.0%	876 100.0%

\*This table does not include respondents who chose “I Don’t Know” for this question.

### *Results*

Based on this data, it does not appear that college students are substantially more likely to be politically liberal than young people who do not attend a four year college or university full-time. 32.6% of non-college young people described themselves as politically “liberal,” compared to 30.3% of college students. However, more college students (18.8%) than non-college young people (13.1%) described themselves as “moderate leaning liberal.” In fact,

college students were more likely to describe their political orientation as “moderate leaning conservative” than non-college young people, while non-college young people were more likely to choose “conservative.” Thus, college students chose a “moderate leaning...” option more often, while non-college young people were more likely to choose the “liberal” or “conservative” poles. This data does not vindicate the claim that college students are more likely to be politically liberal than non-college young people. In actuality, they are more likely to describe themselves as “moderate leaning liberal” or “moderate leaning conservative,” while non-college young people are more likely to state that they are either “liberal” or “conservative.”

These results show that the purported “liberal bias” on college campuses likely has little impact on the attitudes of students, as young people appear to be politically liberal regardless of college attendance. 31.4% of the respondents described themselves as “liberal” while only 22.2% of the respondents described themselves as “conservative.” The conventional wisdom that young people are more liberal than conservative does seem accurate, but it is unlikely that these young people are more liberal because of their college attendance. In fact, young people who attend college full-time are actually less likely to describe themselves as politically “liberal.” The sources of these differences are unclear; perhaps college students gain more exposure to alternative views in their classes, and thus, become less likely to choose one of the poles, “liberal” or “conservative.” Regardless of the sources of these tendencies, it is clear that the “liberal bias” on the college campus has little effect on the self-described political tendencies of young people.

The data also contradicts the claim that libertarianism is on the rise among college students. Once again, college students were more likely to choose “moderate leaning liberal” or “moderate leaning conservative” than non-college young people to describe their economic

ideology, and less likely to choose either “liberal” or “conservative.” 25.7% of non-college young people described their economic orientation as “conservative” while 25.3% of college students did the same. Thus, it does not appear that college students have a unique propensity for free-market values and fiscal conservatism. They do, however, appear to have a tendency for views that “lean” in one direction, similar to the pattern observed in the political ideology question. For both questions, college students chose “moderate leaning liberal” or “moderate leaning conservative” more often than non-college young people. Interestingly, non-college young people chose “moderate” more often in both questions than college students. Thus, it appears that college students are more likely to have political and economic views that “lean” to one side, while non-college young people are more likely to have views that are squarely either “liberal,” “moderate,” or “conservative.” It should be noted that this data does not include those respondents who answered “I Don’t Know” to either question, as those results do not pertain to the research question or hypothesis.

The results of the economic ideology question point to an important trend regarding the political behavior of young people. Young people, irrespective of college attendance, are actually more likely to be fiscally *conservative* (25.5%) than fiscally liberal (21.8%). While the difference is not dramatic, it is important in the context of the political orientations of young people, in which 31.4% described themselves as liberal and 22.2% described themselves as conservative. Since young people were almost 10% more likely to be politically liberal than politically conservative, this directional shift in favor of fiscal conservatism is significant. It is unlikely that most young people are voting based on their fiscal ideologies right now, but as they grow older and financial concerns become more salient to them, these differences could shift voting patterns. Therefore, though libertarianism and fiscal conservatism does not seem to be

unique to college students, it does appear to be somewhat prevalent among young people in general, and could affect future political behavior.

### *Critique*

One main roadblock to accurate results about the effect of the “liberal bias” and the level of libertarianism on college campuses is that these questions deal with *self-described* political and economic orientations. These questions do not measure the political and economic ideologies of young people in practice, but instead, just measure how they describe themselves. Ideally, I would have been able to include questions that would enable respondents to demonstrate as well as describe their ideals. For example, I would have liked to ask about support for free trade, social programs to alleviate poverty, or tax cuts. These questions would have illustrated how well individuals actually match their views on specific policies to their self-described economic tendencies. It is possible that their self-descriptions of ideology are inconsistent with their specific views on policy, but my results cannot uncover these contradictions. Rather, my data is only based on how these respondents describe their own values, as the questionnaire was only able to accommodate a certain number of questions.

Also due to the limitations of the questionnaire, I was unable to examine another important facet of libertarianism: social liberalism. Libertarians are usually characterized by opposition to government intrusion into both monetary and social policy, leading to support for issues like abortion rights and gay marriage. In order to truly examine the level of libertarianism on college campuses, a question regarding ideology on social issues would have been instructive. If social liberalism and economic conservatism had been higher among college students than non-college young people, I would have been able to definitively validate the claim that

libertarianism is rising among college students. However, since my analysis showed that fiscal conservatism, a necessary value for libertarianism, is not unique to college campuses, it is safe to assume that libertarianism at its purest is not unusually prevalent among college students.

For this specific hypothesis, it would have been difficult to conduct the survey much differently. The stratification of the sample into both college students and non-college young people enabled sufficient numbers for analysis of both groups. The proliferation of cell phone use and the length of this particular questionnaire would have made contacting the respondents via telephone land lines difficult and protracted. The primary difficulty with this sample is that it is nonrandom. The respondents were chosen based on their “opting-in” to the list held by Polimetrix and often by their inability to qualify for a different questionnaire. In order to achieve truly representative results, all members of the population of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 would have needed to have an equal chance of being contacted. Because of this limitation, the results are not necessarily generalizable to the whole population. Nevertheless, given the financial constraints, the length of this particular questionnaire, and the nature of these respondents, very little could have done to improve the implementation of this survey.

### *Conclusion*

When discussing the political beliefs of young people, pundits and scholars have sought to explain the apparently high degree of political liberalism among the nation’s youth. Often, conservatives attack the purported “liberal bias” in academia, accusing the generally liberal college professors of indoctrinating their students. However, recently, campaigns like Congressman Ron Paul’s have attempted to capitalize on the idea that libertarianism, particularly economic conservatism, is rising among college students. The results presented in this analysis

indicate that young people, as a whole, are more likely to describe themselves as politically liberal. This trend occurs in both college students and young people who do not attend a four year college or university full-time, indicating that the “liberal bias” on college campuses has little effect on the self-described attitudes of young people. Young people are also, somewhat surprisingly, more likely to describe themselves as fiscally conservative, though, again, this trend does not appear unique to college campuses. As a result, it is possible that young people will become more likely to vote for conservatives in future elections when financial concerns become more important to them, despite their current self-described political “liberalism.” While this research has not validated the claims of conservatives that the collegiate “liberal bias” has a large effect on students nor the assertions that fiscal conservatism is on the rise among college students, it does indicate that young people are not exclusively liberal, and invites discussion of how fiscal conservatism among young people will affect future voting patterns.

### Works Cited

Dillman, Don. Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method: Second Edition. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

Kurtz, Howard. "College Faculties A Most Liberal Lot, Study Finds." Washington Post 29 March 2005. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A8427-2005Mar28.html>>

Lopez, Mark and Jason Kolaczowski. "Civic Engagement Among Non-College Attending 18-25 Year Olds." The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. February 2003. <[http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_Non-college\\_corrected.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Non-college_corrected.pdf)>

Nardi, Peter. Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods. Boston: Pearson Education, 2006.

Portney, Kent. PS 115 Class. Tufts University, Medford, MA. 16 October 2007.

"Question Profile: Question qn4\_FormB\_A." The Gallup Organization. 3 June 2007. Accessed 29 November 2007. <<http://brain.gallup.com/documents/question.aspx?question=160586&Advanced=0&SearchConType=1&SearchTypeAll=economic>>

Sun, Albert. "Ron Paul's Support Grows on College Campuses." CBS News 16 November 2007. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/11/16/politics/uwire/main3516681.shtml>>

Whaples, Robert. "Changes in Attitudes among College Economics Students about the Fairness of the Market." The Journal of Economic Education (1995): 308-313

Young, Cathy. "Liberal Bias in the Ivory Tower." The Boston Globe 11 April 2005. <[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2005/04/11/liberal\\_as\\_in\\_the\\_ivory\\_tower/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/04/11/liberal_as_in_the_ivory_tower/)>