

November 1974

A Political Analysis of the Ability of Professors to Affect Student Attitudes: A Study of Student Reactions to Academic Title and Supposed Experience

Donald Hugh Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Donald Hugh (1974) "A Political Analysis of the Ability of Professors to Affect Student Attitudes: A Study of Student Reactions to Academic Title and Supposed Experience," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.

A Political Analysis of the Ability of Professors to Affect Student Attitudes: A Study of Student Reactions to Academic Title and Supposed Expertise

DONALD HUGH SMITH

Old Dominion University

Confronted with an election year in which young students are eligible to vote for the first time we were interested in determining, in general, how compliant students are and which students are most compliant to the academic title or status of their professors.

This research evaluates the reactions of 986 students at four southern universities to the academic title and alleged expertise of their professors. Specifically, we seek to answer these questions as affected by the intervening variable political affiliation or are there any differences in compliance between Democratic, Republican, Independent, American Independent affiliated students; when considering the following questions:

1. Which academic majors are the most compliant or the most influenced by their professors when discussing popular issues?
2. Are there any differences in the compliance of students from rural versus urban areas?

The dependent variable in this study is the degree to which students accept or comply with a professor because of their title and alleged expertise compared to their reactions to those who lack the title or alleged expertise.

The independent variables evaluated in this research are:

1. Political party of the student.
2. Political party of student when the same as parents and political party different from parents.
3. Academic major of students.
4. Students from rural versus students from urban areas.

The results indicate marked differences in compliance as a function of class standing, academic major of the students and students from rural versus urban areas. Political party, per se, had little affect on

compliance except when evaluated according to those who are affiliated with political parties different than their parents. The Democratic students whose parents are not Democrats tended to be less compliant with their parents and, therefore, more compliant with their professors.

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to determine if there are any differences in the level of compliancy to the status criterion of university professors between Democratic, Republican and Independent college students at four southern universities.

The impetus for this research came from many of the election year editorial suggestions that the advantage of the 18 year old vote would accrue to the benefit of one party over another and that the alleged general liberal bias of the university community would be translated into a distinct advantage for the Democratic party. It was felt that the higher incidence of voting in the more educated would ensure that college students would vote more frequently than the other members of their age group, and that college students would mirror the alleged liberal biases of their professors.

A question that leaps forth from these assumptions is whether college professors do indeed affect the opinions or attitudes of their students in a direct way. It should be obvious that this question has more far reaching implications than denying or verifying the assumptions of a few news analysts. We did not attack this question directly, but indirectly, by seeking the level of compliance of students with professors and by having students evaluate the behaviors and contributions of professors versus non-professors in experimental settings. It is our contention that this procedure will eliminate any direct political implications and yet tap any differences in student compliance with and evaluation of professor status criteria as a function of political party. By maintaining relative neutrality of the stimulus persons we are seeking differences in compliance as a function of the political party of the potential student voter.

We did not use a non-college control group, so that we did not attempt to determine the relative effect in political parties as independent variables, as they might effect voting behavior outside the college population.

We are also not tapping voting behavior in any way. We avoided references to political party as much as possible so that the subjects would not fix on, or develop a cognitive set vis-a-vis political party when perceiving the stimulus variable and answering their questionnaires.

Methodology

To accomplish the goals outlined above we selected a purposive sample of 986 university students from four southern universities. One urban state liberal arts university, one rural state technological university, one private liberal arts university and one urban technological two year college affiliated with a four year university.

The sample amounts to a purposive sample that was subjected to experimental manipulation via a television presentation of four persons discussing a current problem. The contributions, and credentials, of the professors seen on the video taped television program were experimentally manipulated.

The subjects were shown the television program after reading about the credentials of the persons on the television program on the face sheet of their questionnaire. The experimental conditions were set by these face sheets. There were two experimental variables set on the face sheet, academic expertise or credibility credentials and task competency on the subject matter as rated by alleged experts. The subjects were evaluating persons who were either from high-high (high credibility—competency) to low-low (low credibility and low competency). Stimulus variables, other than those covered on the face sheet, were controlled by television production techniques. All individuals seen on television were homogeneous as to appearance to avoid any irrelevant factors from contaminating the experimental variables. Experimental sessions were run in class rooms, and the experimental conditions were randomly distributed in each session so that any situational contaminants would be distributed across all of the experimental conditions. The subjects were then asked to evaluate the contributions of one person they had seen on the television. Other intervening independent variables were used to partial out the effect of the major independent variable in this study, political party affiliation. The major dependent variable in this study is the measure of student compliance with an evaluation of the individuals seen on the videotape. The scale is designed in such a way that those subjects, or students who are more compliant to those criteria, popularly held as being the professional criteria of evaluation of college professors would score significantly lower than those who do not accept or agree with, or are not influenced by these criterion. Other intervening variables that were used as controls are: sex, academic major (operationally defined as liberal arts majors versus technological majors), whether the students were raised primarily in a rural or an urban area, those who are affiliated in the same party as their parents versus those in different parties than their parents, and the experimentally manipulated

variables which varied the credibility and competency of the television subjects. Except where specifically mentioned as independent variables, the experimentally manipulated credibility and competency criteria conditions were simply summed, and differences of other independent variables used a summed mean score of these manipulated variables.

Both quasi-experimental and survey techniques were used. Data were analyzed by analysis of variance and Student's "t" for difference of means. The sample consisted of 646 males and 340 females. There are 235 Democrats, 262 Republicans, and 437 Independents. American Independents ($N=52$) were so few in number they were eliminated from the analysis. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1. Distribution of Sample by Sex and Political Party Affiliation

	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	
Democrats	152	83	235
Republicans	167	95	262
Independents	291	146	437
American Independents	36	16	52
	646	340	986

Because of the exploratory nature of this research we are using the .05 level of significance, two tailed test for testing in each case that $H_0: u_1 = u_2$. However, in each case where tests are used, even where the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, we will state the probability that the relationship between the sample means could have occurred by chance.

Virtually all of the subjects were within the upper middle to lower middle class range. There were no upper class and no lower class subjects according to the two factor Hollingshead-Redlich index applied to the subjects' parents.

Results:

The results indicate that there are essentially no significant differences between political party, i.e. controlling for no other variables (See Table 2).

TABLE 2. Means, Standard Deviations, Ns and Student's "t" Values and Probabilities for the Differences Between Democrats, Republicans and Independents

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>t</i>
Democrats	235	39.32	8.06	.657
Republicans	262	38.81	9.00	.754
Independents	438	39.84	8.35	1.57

There were no significant differences between the parties when controlling for sex. However, female Democrats were less compliant than female Republicans ($t=1.91$, $P. .0281$) compared to a slightly less compliant male Democrat sample compared to the Republican male sample ($t=.657$, $p .2578$) see tables 3 and 4. The smaller score equals more compliance.

TABLE 3. Means, Standard Deviations, Ns and Student's "t's" for Males by Political Party

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>
Democrats	152	39.91	7.32	1.15
Republicans	167	38.92	8.15	1.21
Independents	291	40.26	8.15	

TABLE 4. Means, Standard Deviations, Ns and Student's "t's" for Females by Political Party

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>
Democrats	83	41.36	9.21	1.91
Republicans	95	38.60	10.10	
Independents	146	38.60	8.78	

When controlling for sex and academic major no differences were found between Republican and Democratic Liberal Arts Majors ($t=.652$, $p .2752$) See Table 5. Again, there were no differences between male technological majors across political parties, however, the probability that the relationship could have occurred by chance is much smaller ($t=1.02$, $p .1539$) for the comparison of the technological majors (see Table 6). Indicating a consistent trend that Democrats are slightly less compliant but in most cases not significantly so.

TABLE 5. Means, Standard Deviations, Ns and Students "t's" Comparing Democratic and Republican Liberal Arts Majors, Males Only

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>	<i>P</i>
Republicans, L. A.	48	39.40	8.13	.652	.2754
Democrats, L. A.	67	40.37	7.50		

TABLE 6. Means Standard Deviations, Ns and Students "t's" Comparing Democratic and Republican Technological Majors, Males Only

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>	<i>P</i>
Democratic Tech.	86	39.53	7.17	1.02	.1539
Republican Tech.	119	38.45	7.81		

Comparing academic major within political party also led to no significant results, except that the liberal arts majors in each party were slightly less compliant than the technological majors (see Tables 7 and 8). There were also no significant differences between male Democratic liberal arts majors and male Republican technological majors ($t=1.66$ $p .0485$) which were the extremes of the combinations of the political party and academic major continua.

TABLE 7. Democratic Liberal Arts Versus Technological Major Comparisons

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>
Democratic L. A.	67	40.37	7.50	.706
Democratic Tech.	86	39.53	7.17	

TABLE 8. Republican Liberal Arts Versus Technological Major Comparisons

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>
Republican L. A.	48	39.40	8.13	.699
Republican Tech.	119	38.45	7.80	

If we compare party affiliation and control for the high-high experimental condition (high credibility and high competency) we find no significant differences between the political parties (see Table 9). The same findings hold for the low-low condition (see Table 10). So apparently there is no variation in the way the political party members view the credibility-competency continuum. Again, however, what very slight differences do exist indicate the Democrats are less compliant or generally more critical of their professors' expertise criteria.

TABLE 9. High Competency-High Credibility Condition Democrats Versus Republicans

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>
Democrats	41	36.25	6.06	.846
Republicans	56	35.15	7.35	

TABLE 10. Low Competency-Low Credibility Condition Democrats, Republicans and Independents Compared

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>"t"</i>
Democrats	44	45.43	8.16	1.29
Republicans	41	42.83	10.05	
Independents	71	43.47	8.94	

When controlling for rural versus urban origins we find the most marked differences. There are significant differences between male Republicans and male Democrats from urban areas ($t=2.15$, $p .0166$) and significant differences between male urban Independents and male urban Republicans ($t=3.34$, $p .005$). There are no differences between male Republicans, Democrats and Independents from rural areas. These rural groups means are closest to the urban male Democrats in terms of their compliancy and, therefore, they are slightly more critical or less influenced by the professional criteria of their professors. What causal factors are involved in these similarities should be the subject of further research. One might ask such questions as: Are the urban Democratic males cynical and critical and the rural democratic males unimpressed and, therefore, less compliant? Or, are Republican middle class students more compliant to authority figures? Further research into these questions is currently in progress.

The same rural urban trends hold for females. There are significant differences between female urban Democrats and female urban Independents ($t=2.33$, $p .0099$) and marked but not significant differences between female urban Republicans and female urban Democrats ($t=1.56$, $p .0594$). Whereas these differences do not exist between female rural Democrats and female rural Republicans ($t=.943$, $p .1736$).

Clearly, the most influential variable interacting with political party is urban versus rural origins. There are no differences between political parties until the sample is divided into those of rural origin versus urban origin. Apparently, those persons from rural areas have a more homogeneous view of the credibility and competency criteria of their professors than those from urban areas. These data are summarized in Table 11.

The data dealing with influences of belonging to the same party of parents versus a different party of parents indicates that those subjects in the Democratic party whose parents are either Republicans or Independents were significantly more compliant with the status criteria of their professors ($t=2.608$, $p .0145$), see table 12. When compared with those Democrats who belong to the same party as their parents, there were no significant differences between students in the Republican Party whose parents are Republican versus those whose parents are not Republican, see Table 13.

TABLE 11. Means, Standard Deviations, Ns, "t's" by Political Party and Rural Versus Urban Origins

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Male Republican Urban	105	38.57	7.38	2.13	.0166
Male Democrat Urban	107	40.70	7.34	3.34	.0005
Male Independent Urban	207	41.62	8.19		
Male Republican Rural	59	39.41	9.42		
Male Democrat Rural	42	39.07	7.16	2.07	.4207
Male Independent Rural	83	40.60	8.34		
Female Republican Urban	63	38.86	11.41		
Female Democrat Urban	66	41.69	9.04	1.56	.0594
Female Independent Urban	112	38.59	7.77	2.33	.0099
Female Republican Rural	331	38.28	7.12	.943	.1736
Female Democrat Rural	20	40.55	9.17		
Female Independent Rural	49	39.22	8.31		

TABLE 12. Means, Standard Deviations, Ns, "t's" of Democratic Students With Democratic Parents Versus Those With Non-Democratic Parents

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Democrats with Democratic Parents	98	43.38	7.34	2.206	.0145
Democrats with non- Democratic Parents	80	40.1	8.74		

TABLE 13. Means, Standard Deviations, Ns, "t's" Values of Republican Students With Republican Parents Versus Republican Students With Non-Republican Parents

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>t</i>
Republican with Republican Parents	55	38.79	10.11	.596
Republican with non- Republican Parents	109	39.69	8.63	

Discussion:

These results seem to indicate that political party, per se, does not influence the students perceptions of influence of university professors status criterion. Only when one controls for rural versus urban origins does one find significant differences between the students' party affiliations. However, there is a consistent trend, although slight, that Democratic students are less compliant to the status criterion than their Republican peers. This would seem to be a slight contradiction of much of what the popular press predicted about the relationship between professors, party affiliation, and influence at these four southern universities.

These data also indicate that those students who are affiliated with the Democratic party and whose parents are not Democrats tend to be significantly influenced by the status criterion of their professors. This relationship did not hold for Republicans, although the Republican mean compliance scores were lower and, therefore, more compliant than the Democrats when controlling for similarity of political affiliation with parents. It could be that in the absence of the usually strong correlation between the party identification of parent and child, the off-spring tend to look for some type of parent surrogate which a professor, by virtue of his position of authority, may satisfy. If this is indeed the case, one must still explain why this was so in the case of Democrats but not Republicans, and this explanation, as well as an explanation of why rural backgrounds correlate more highly with influence by status criteria of professors, are beyond the scope of this paper.