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Factors Influencing Participation in Liberal Student Organizations on College Campuses

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Factors Influencing Participation in Liberal Student Organizations on College Campuses

A Thesis in Sociology

By

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Presented to the

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science

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ABSTRACT

Despite a long history of student organizations on college campuses there is relatively little research on participation and student experiences in such groups, especially on what factors motivate students to become involved. This study sought to examine factors that influence participation in political organizations on college campuses through dependent variables of attendance and holding a leadership role. The sample focused on groups understood to be “liberal” such as the College Democrats, environmental groups, and others. Respondents were reached through personal connections, social media, and distributing the survey to student organizations. The examined factors accounted for less than a fifth of the influence on joining or holding a leadership role, however, being a Democrat, living on campus, and being involved with another organization were all significant. This data will hopefully result in further research into factors motivating participation in student organizations among college students.

College campuses have long had a reputation as catalysts for social change and bases for lifetimes in activism. In modern history the protests supporting the Civil Rights Movement, opposing the Vietnam War, student unionization, fossil fuel divestment, and supporting immigration reform have captured the imagination of the public and were driven in part by student activism (Thomas et al, 2006; Apfel, 2015; and Ishiwata & Muñoz, 2018). Activism among women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and partisan student groups are also significant and well known. These spaces serve as testing and training grounds for lifetimes of social involvement. Given the growth of community colleges and changing student demographics, the landscape of involvement is evolving quickly. There is limited literature looking into what situational and non-demographic factors bring students to affiliate themselves with groups and causes on campus. Much of what does exist is either dated or is specific to a particular cause. Thus, this paper seeks to determine what factors influence participation by college students in political student organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role of Student Organizations

Student organizations are seen by many on the college campus as a key actor in building community and providing structure outside the classroom. Research from Dugan (2013) finds that student organizations help students develop skills, make friends, build industry connections, and improve graduation rates. However, most students do not participate in such organizations and this is especially true at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Among student organizations, political groups comprise a small but frequently occurring subsection. These organizations are commonly affiliated with political parties, such as the College Democrats or College

Republicans, or issue organizations like sustainability and immigrant rights groups. This study seeks to examine what factors influence students' participation in political student organizations at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and other institutions of higher learning.

Student organizations provide a co-curricular set of experiences to what is learned in the classroom. They provide a venue for students to practice what they are learning and to engage in subjects that are beyond their course of study. A widely-cited study by Dugan (2013) notes that many students are involved in organizations at some point in college, with over half spending at least an hour per week involved with a group and eighty percent participating at some point before they graduate. The author divides students as falling into eight patterns of involvement: Affinity Group Affiliates, Identity and Expression Leaders, Academic Careerists, Cultural Collegiates, Athletes, Social Recreators, Recreational Academics, and Social Collegiates. These categories provide a way to describe the types of behavior of involved students.

While student organizations and clubs are often perceived as core to the college experience, there is little research that has been done that examines why students elect to join them. Haines (2019) dissertation provides the most significant exploration from a student-centered perspective, but the study was limited to generic involvement without examining why students join political student organizations. While there is ample research on the benefits of joining an organization, there is little research beyond Haines on what motivates students to get involved. The nearest parallel is research on what causes people to join social movement organizations, but these lessons are not a precise fit for the on-campus environment even though they offer lessons to be learned from. Combining the findings from these two sources of information can help provide context for political student involvement.

Findings on Campus Involvement

Beginning with Haines (2019), the author finds that students are motivated to join organizations for reasons including finding a sense of belonging, creating social networks, pressure from older students to join, developing skills, and learning to be a leader. Students were often brought by friends or classmates to an event or saw the group at an involvement fair. These five factors were found through interviews with students across several organizations at a college in rural New York. This provides a strong basis for investigating what causes students to get involved in student organizations overall, but does not provide information about why students join activist or political groups specifically. Factors like a desire to make a difference or interest in an issue are not discussed, which can limit the utility somewhat.

Identity plays a role in findings from others as well. Hotchkins (2017) examined activism among Black students at predominantly white institutions, finding that Black students often get involved in activism as a way to navigate the institution. They are socialized into this by parental expectations of “participating in activism, the need to flourish while in college and giving back to Black communities through organizational involvement” and expectations to work through adversity just as past generations had. Hotchkins found that there was significant effort to retain “Blackness” amongst the students as a result of this socialization, and it was maintained digitally through conversations, social media postings, and planning.

This research provides several insights. The role of identity somewhat aligns with the finding of Haines, where students look for belonging. Parental expectations and self-preservation provides two additional areas to examine. Self-preservation makes particular sense in this context. Students with a marginalized identity are likely to seek out organizations that affirm

them, and the nature of marginalization means that these organizations are by nature political. However, existing in an environment where one is exposed to politics-adjacent messaging, such as a social sciences or humanities curriculum, also makes sense. An integration of such factors could provide a substantial increase in likelihood to join an organization.

Trolian (2019) looked at pre-college perceptions of student organizations as a way to predict involvement. The author finds that students are more likely to join if they have a positive perception of the organization and see a benefit to themselves in joining. This transactional attitude was highlighted in relationships with groups like fraternities and sororities. Expectations and opinions about various groups were found to partially predict how likely a student was to join in their first year at a college or university.

Reger (2018) describes the role that the institution of the university and cultures within it have in promoting campus activism. The author found that an academic opportunity structure where the institution permits the existence of an activist group can allow for organizations to thrive through the creation of subcultures. This study provides insight into how the institution itself can be a factor that influences activism. Such ideas are also found in Loader et al (2015), who looks at how the university may politicize students by analyzing the ecosystem of student organizations. They find that the student union building, social media, and student organizations are the largest factors in politicizing students on campuses. While this does not establish causal factors explaining why students get involved in organizations or use social media, it does indicate that social media and the college environment play a role in politicizing students. A campus with these factors present is likely going to see more involvement if the space both promotes and allows for such activities.

Findings on Social Movement Involvement

In looking at the relationship with social movements and young people broadly, Elliot and Earl (2018) note that most social movement organizations do a poor job of outreach to young people, especially online. In addition, most youth activism happens outside of formal organizations which potentially limits the value of examining the student organization as the centerpoint of political engagement on campus. Swank and Fahs (2017) confirm this lack of participation, finding that most young people do not engage in social protest actions. They also find that holding an LGBTQ identity increases the likelihood of participating, but being a social science major was a larger contribution. This aligns with the aforementioned findings of Hotchkins (2017). Identity plays a role in involvement but does not tell the whole story.

Sharp (2011) examines data presented by Munson (2009) that studied the experiences of pro-life/anti-abortion activists and non-activists to see what motivated them to join the cause. While not focusing solely on college campuses, Sharp and Munson provide insight into how individuals join movements, which holds additional relevance due to the presence of pro-life/anti-abortion groups on many campuses. Sharp finds that most people are drawn to the movement before beliefs are solidified, and experiences in activism serve as a turning point for many participants. People may not be activists until they join the organization or movement, implying that something attracts them to the cause in the first place. This research fits into the student organization space well, as many college students do not have a salient marginalized identity that might drive them to join a political group.

Swank (2012) expands on the interest approach in examining what factors motivate social work students to get involved in politics. The author finds that activist networks and

interpersonal requests to act provide the largest influence on engagement in actions like protests. Community relationships also play a large role. Perceptions of fighting injustice and living up to ideals also were influential. Differences exist between urban and rural students, based in part on opportunities to engage in politics and activism. Peer networks and personal ideals are significant factors in the student activism space. Maher and Earl (2019) find similar results by looking at youth activism, social media, and social networks. The authors build on earlier research to affirm that involvement in civically engaged social networks increases the likelihood that an individual becomes involved in activism. This is rooted largely on opportunities, knowledge, and direct invitations to act. The opportunities presented by social media create additional points of interaction that can be used to mobilize people. This has a particularly strong impact on young people, as they spend significantly more time on social media than older individuals. Like the findings of Loader (2015) indicate, the people and the environment seem to be key determinants.

Motivation for Current Research

Researching what factors motivate students to join political student organizations advances the research on social organizations and student development on college campuses in providing insights into a subset of an area with little research. Relatively little peer-reviewed research currently exists relating to why students join student organizations, though it is well known that doing so offers numerous benefits to the students. Looking particularly at political organizations allows for campuses and such organizations to grow their civic engagement ecosystems and provide understanding about why students behave in the ways that they do. In an era of contentious politics where the college campus is becoming increasingly politicized it is important to know more about participation.

DATA AND METHODS

Method

The data for this survey was collected through a survey administered through the Qualtrics platform. The Qualtrics link was sent by email to student organizations at the University of Nebraska at Omaha coded as political; to groups in the messaging application GroupMe, including several UNO political-coded organizations; to groups in the messaging application GroupMe administered by the College Democrats of America; through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram; and in-person to students known to the author. The survey included 32 questions on attendance, environment, demographics, behavior, and political beliefs. Valid responses were collected and their data was uploaded to SPSS. Attendance, behavior, environment, and immigration questions were each compiled into scale variables to provide a composite score for the strength of the respondent's relationship with them. A bivariate correlation test was conducted to measure the relationships between each variable. This was followed by comparing the dependent and independent variables with a linear regression.

Measures

The independent variable for this study consists of various environmental, experiential, and identity-related factors. These include race, income, grades, participation in a learning community, parental expectations, peer involvement, attendance at an involvement fair, and more. These variables are derived from the findings of previous researchers including: Swank, 2012; Hotchkins, 2017; Haines, 2019; Maher and Earl, 2019; and Trolian, 2019.

The dependent variable for this study is participation in a registered student organization at a college or university coded as political. Groups coded as political include organizations such as the College Democrats, environmental/sustainability groups, immigrant rights groups, reproductive rights groups, identity-based political organizations, and groups associated with a particular political issue. Participation is defined as frequency of participation with options including attending almost every meeting or event, attending most meetings or events, attending about half of meetings or events, attending some meetings or events, attending a few meetings or events, almost never attending meetings or events, and never attending meetings or events. However, this data has been compiled into a scale for ease of calculation. An additional independent variable is holding a leadership role in a student organization, which is self-identified. The independent variables of housing, political involvement, political opinions, environment, employment status, G.P.A., voter registration status, and first-generation student status are predicted to be the most significant.

Sample

The sample consists of 129 valid respondents who self-identify as having been involved in a political group while in college. The survey did not ask where respondents attended college, but the sample is believed to include at least ten institutions. This includes respondents who are both current and former students. A convenience method was used for this study that utilized the author's access to the College Democrats of America as a president of a state federation as well as relationships with organizations at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. In total, 203 respondents submitted surveys but only 129 were fully completed and thus were usable. 29 respondents are not currently enrolled at a college or university. A significant portion of the

respondents are current or former students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. This is significant as the large majority of students attending do not live on campus and reflects the author's personal connections, causing implications for transferability of the data. Low rates of on-campus living in practice limit the participation of students in student organizations as many individuals leave campus after classes and do not elect to return later in the day for meetings or activities. At one-fifth of the sample size, the relatively high rates of participation by respondents who are not currently enrolled in school indicates that the data cannot be used to describe a snapshot of the current state of participation, but rather shows a broader view of the matter.

Ethics and Safety

The anonymity of participants was protected through the use of Qualtrics and limiting access to the original dataset. In order to protect identities the campus of each respondent is not noted after the initial question, and that information is used solely to track the number of campuses reached by this study. This research contains no questions related to illegal or socially disapproved behavior, limiting potential for retaliation in the event of a data breach. The survey included questions about immigration status, gender, and sexuality which may cause respondents some discomfort and concern, so this information will be anonymized as their information will not be traceable to a specific campus in order to minimize potential for harm. As a requirement for the completion of the Senior Thesis course, the author earned a CITI research ethics certification before distributing surveys.

RESULTS

Demographics

Of the 130 valid responses that were collected nearly two-thirds lived on campus (65.4%, n=85) and more than three-quarters worked part-time or less (76.9%, n=100). Nearly all were full-time students (96.2%, n=125), around one-third were first-generation students (36.2%, n=47), and nearly all had a GPA over 3.0 on a 4.0 scale (86.9%, n=113). Roughly one-fifth of respondents are not current students (22.3%, n=29) while the remainder are (77.7, n=101) are. Approximately three-quarters held a religious identity other than Christian (72.3%, n=94). Almost half identified as LGBTQ+ (47.7%, n=62). More than half identified as women (51.5%, n=67), two-fifths identified as men (39.2%, n=51), and the remainder identified as nonbinary or another gender (9.2%, n=12). The sample was largely white (78.5%, n=102), with notable populations of Latinx (11.2%, n=15), Black/African-American (9.2%, n=12) populations. Asian (2.3%, n=3), Middle Eastern/North African (2.3%, n=3), individuals identifying as some other race (2.3%, n=3), and Native American (0.8%, n=1) rounded out the sample. The cumulative percentages for racial demographics exceed 100% as respondents were able to identify in multiple categories.

The sample was very similar politically. The vast majority of the sample were registered to vote (93%, n=121), were liberal or very liberal (85.4%, n=111), and described themselves as Democrats (85.4%, n=111). A majority attended most or nearly all meetings and events (53.1%, n=69), participants were largely students who were active on campus outside of organizations (62.3%, n=81), and felt expectations to be involved (60.8%, n=79). Nearly all students were involved in at least one other organization (91.5%, n=119) and most held a leadership position at some point during their involvement (63.8%, n=83).

Correlation

Bivariate analyses utilizing Pearson's test of correlation found few significant relationships between the dependent variables and independent variables. However, there were some notable correlations. The independent variables of political party affiliation ($r=.225$, $p<.05$), race ($r=.183$, $p<.05$), and the year that a student joined the political organization ($r=.181$, $p<.05$) were found to be correlated to the dependent variable of participation. Leadership was found to be correlated with being involved in other organizations ($r=.259$, $p<.01$), living on campus ($r=.227$, $p<.01$), and political party affiliation ($r=.278$, $p<0.01$) as well as being registered to vote ($r=.173$, $p<.05$). At this stage, correlated results match poorly with past research on involvement and predicted variables.

Regression

Multivariate analysis utilizing linear regression was then conducted in order to investigate any significance between the independent variables and attendance. The regression found an R-Square of 0.176 for all variables, explaining around 17.6% of the total variation in participation in student organizations. Of the independent variables, only two are significant: political party affiliation ($b=.256$, $p<0.05$) and race ($b=.126$, $p<0.01$) (see Table 1). There are several non-significant variables that have a measurable but noncausal connection to participation including gender, year of school joined, and being in other groups. These measures were correlated and in the predicted direction, which indicates that though the relationship is not direct these factors are still influential. The results of this regression align well with what correlated in the Pearson's test.

Repeating this process for the dependent variable of leadership finds an R-Square of 0.268 for the independent variables. This represents 26.8% of the total variation in being a leader

in a student organization. Political party affiliation ($b=.478, p<.001$), being involved in another student organization ($b=.134, p<.005$), and living on campus ($b=.252, p<.05$) were found to be significantly associated with holding a leadership position in a liberal student organization (see Table 2). Being a religion other than Christian ($b=.158, p<.1$) has a weak but somewhat significant relationship with leadership. This matches the bivariate correlation findings fairly well. Holding liberal political beliefs and being involved on campus outside of organizations have a notable but non-significant influence on holding a leadership position in a political student organization.

DISCUSSION

The analyses conducted indicate that there is little association between the independent variables and the dependent variables in this sample. The significant relationships were identifying as a Democrat, being involved in other student organizations, and living on campus. The identified independent variables only account for a collective 17.6% influence on the participation of students in political student groups. Organizations will likely have the most success in recruiting students who match one or more of these characteristics.

The weak relationships found through regression and correlation may be partially explained by the sample, as it is relatively small with just 129 valid responses and is not proportionate to student populations as a whole. Women, atheists/agnostics, and LGBTQIA+ respondents are more heavily represented in this sample than their proportion on most college campuses. Respondents were also far more likely to attend frequently and to be involved in organizational leadership. This sample is better described as grass-tops than grassroots. A fifth of the sample are not current students. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were members of the

College Democrats, meaning that the cross-applicability is limited to other organizations. The weak relationships found between variables indicate that there are other, more substantial factors that influence participation and leadership.

A population survey of student organizations and specifically one of political student organizations as a whole would provide data that are useful for comparison, as the differences could be evaluated to determine the strength of different relationships. Such research should focus on obtaining information from a broader section of members than what was collected for this study. Having a basic knowledge of student organization populations would be useful for any future studies on student organization participation. A qualitative study of the motivations of students involved in political student organizations may provide new independent variables which could then be quantitatively analyzed. This is necessary, as the variables used in this study accounted for less than a fifth of the total motivation as determined by linear regression. Other factors may provide much more explanation than what was identified in the current sample.

Given that more than 85% of the sample were members of the College Democrats it should come as no surprise that being a Democrat and being registered to vote are correlated with attendance. Living on campus also makes intuitive sense, as these students require less travel to attend meetings than off-campus students.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Tables

Table 1: Regression of Participation N=129			
Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Housing	0.054	0.071	-0.086
Campus Involvement	-0.057	0.144	-0.04
Political Opinions	-0.081	0.085	-0.108
Environment	0.061	0.114	0.052
Employment Status	-0.059	0.071	-0.083
G.P.A.	-0.061	0.082	-0.068
Voter Registration Status	0.024	0.11	0.021
First-Generation Student	0.033	0.061	0.052
Race*	0.126	0.075	0.177
Party**	0.256	0.096	0.301

*p<0.1 **p<0.05

Table 2: Regression of Leadership N=129			
Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Housing**	-0.252	0.107	-0.25
Campus Involvement	0.297	0.217	0.129
Political Opinions	0.033	0.128	0.027
Environment	0.153	0.172	0.082
Employment Status	0.006	0.107	0.005
G.P.A.	-0.102	0.124	-0.072
Voter Registration Status	-0.188	0.167	-0.99
First-Generation Student	-0.006	0.093	-0.147
Political Party Affiliation***	0.478	0.145	0.351
Being in Other Organizations**	0.134	0.045	0.265
Religion*	0.158	0.093	0.147

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.005

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Q: Do you agree to participate?

- Yes
- No

Q: Please state which organization you will be referring to when you respond.

- College Democrats
- An environmental organization
- A reproductive rights organization
- An identity-based political organization
- Some other organization

Environment Questions

Q: Before joining did you know any members?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you have a friend invite you to get involved?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you have someone else invite you to get involved?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you feel that parent or someone that raised you expected to be involved on campus?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you feel that your campus has a culture of student involvement?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you feel expected to be involved on campus?

- Yes
- No

Behavior Questions

Q: Before joining did you ever attend a university-sponsored involvement fair for student organizations?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you ever sign a petition

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you display political buttons, stickers, and/or signs?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you sign up for a political student organization's email list or a group chat?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you call a politician to talk about an issue?

- Yes

- No

Q: Before joining did you take part in a protest, rally, and/or demonstration?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you participate in another student organization?

- Yes
- No

Q: Before joining did you feel informed about what was happening in the news?

- Yes
- No

Q: What was your housing situation when you first became active?

- Living on campus
- Living off campus
- Living with family
- Other

Political Belief Questions

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? Marijuana should be legal.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? Abortion should be legal.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? Wealthy people should pay a large share of taxes than they do now.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? Racism is a problem in the United States.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? The government should do more to combat climate change.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral

- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? The government needs to do more to protect the healthcare of its citizens.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? Federal military spending should be increased.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? LGBTQIA+ people do not currently have the same rights as everyone else.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How did you feel about the following statement when you joined the organization? There is too much inequality in the United States.

- Strongly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagreed
- Strongly disagreed

Q: How often did you attend meetings for political groups when you were active?

- Attend almost all
- Attend most
- Attend about half
- Attend attending a few
- Almost never attend
- Never attended

Q: How often did you attend events for political groups, not including meetings, when you were active?

- Attend almost all
- Attend most
- Attend about half
- Attend attending a few
- Almost never attend
- Never attended

Q: How often did you attend social events for political groups (i.e. game nights, trivia, etc.)?

- Attend almost all
- Attend most
- Attend about half
- Attend attending a few
- Almost never attend

- Never attended

Q: How often did you attend activist events for political groups (i.e. volunteering, registering voters, protesting) while active?

- Attend almost all
- Attend most
- Attend about half
- Attend attending a few
- Almost never attend
- Never attended

Q: How many other student or community organizations were you a member of while you were active?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3+

Q: Did you serve in a leadership role for a political group?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to respond

Q: Please list the role (e.g. president, secretary, social chair, treasurer)

- [short answer response] _____

Q: How do you describe your gender? (Select all that apply)

- Man/Transman

- Woman/Transwoman
- Nonbinary/Gender Non-Conforming
- Other

Q: What is your relationship to immigration? (Select all that apply)

- Have immigrated
- Have family that have immigrated
- Have friends or contacts who have immigrated
- Have no relationship to immigration

Q: Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to respond

Q: What is your race (Select all that apply)

- Asian
- Black/African/African-American
- Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx
- Middle Eastern/North African
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- White
- Some other race _____

Q: What was your GPA when you first joined?

- _____

Q: Were you a member of a learning community when you first joined?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to respond

Q: What was your age when you first joined?

- _____

Q: How many hours a week did you work when you first joined?

- Working more than 20 hours each week
- Working less than 20 hours each week
- Not working

Q: What was your enrollment status while you were active?

- Full-time
- Part time

Q: During which years of college were you active in political student organizations?

- Freshman/First year
- Sophomore/Second year
- Junior/Third year
- Senior/Fourth year
- Fifth year and beyond
- Was not active

Q: What is your current year in school?

- Freshman/First year
- Sophomore/Second year

- Junior/Third year
- Senior/Fourth year
- Fifth year and beyond
- Graduated/not currently enrolled

Q: What was your religious identity when you first joined?

- Agnostic/Atheist
- Buddhist
- Catholic
- Christian (Protestant)
- Christian (Other)
- Jewish
- Hindu
- Muslim
- Other
- Unsure
- Prefer not to respond

Q: How would you generally describe your political stance?

- Far left
- Liberal
- Center/middle-of-the-road
- Conservative
- Far right

Q: What political party do you most identify with?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent

- Other

Q: What is your voter registration status?

- Registered
- Able to register, but am not currently registered
- Previously registered, but am not currently registered
- Unable to register

Q: Are you a first-generation college student?

- Yes
- No