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Sexual Consent: Do you get it? How college students' definitions of consent differ from their regions' consent policy



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 Mentors: Dr. Sean Massey, Dr. Ann Merriwether, Dr. Melissa Hardesty and Dr. Sarah Young



Abstract

Although many colleges across the United States have incorporated some form of sexual consent policy into their code of conduct, these definitions vary by region and institution. Moreover, previous studies have found that although students may be aware of their university's consent policy, it may not always be used in practice (Gronert & Raclaw, 2019; Ortiz, 2019). This study compares four samples of respondents by region (i.e. Northeast and South), assigning a regionally-typical consent policy to the sample and then analyzing the differences in sexual consent understanding and behaviors. We hypothesized that students' internalized definitions of consent will differ both from their regionally-stated policy and from each other in significant ways. Data was collected from participants through an online national survey that asked questions regarding students' definitions of consent and how they knew that their previous partners had given them consent. These responses were then analyzed to examine what themes exist between students' perceptions of consent and their assigned regional policy. Implications for the utility of university consent policy upon student consensual behavior is discussed.

Background

Many universities throughout the United States have implemented sexual consent policies which define the acceptable ways in which students are able to communicate and obtain consent during hookups. Hookups can be defined as a short term casual sexual encounter, or a sexual encounter with no intention of commitment and have become increasingly more common amongst emerging adults (Bogle, 2008). However, previous studies have shown that college students do not always implement their university's sexual consent policy when they are in various hookup situations (Gronert & Raclaw, 2019; Ortiz, 2019).

Furthermore, other social and situational factors such as history of the relationship, sexual scripts, and interpersonal signals between students, appear to increase the separation between universities' sexual consent policies and the ways in which their students actually obtain consent (Hullenaar, 2016). Additionally, these factors may be especially influential on college-aged students because many are in a developmental stage called emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood was first described by Dr. Jeffrey Arnett in 2000, as a period in which a person's identity and values are easily influenced (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2007). College-aged students therefore may be particularly susceptible to social and situation factors during this developmental period (Hullenaar, 2016).

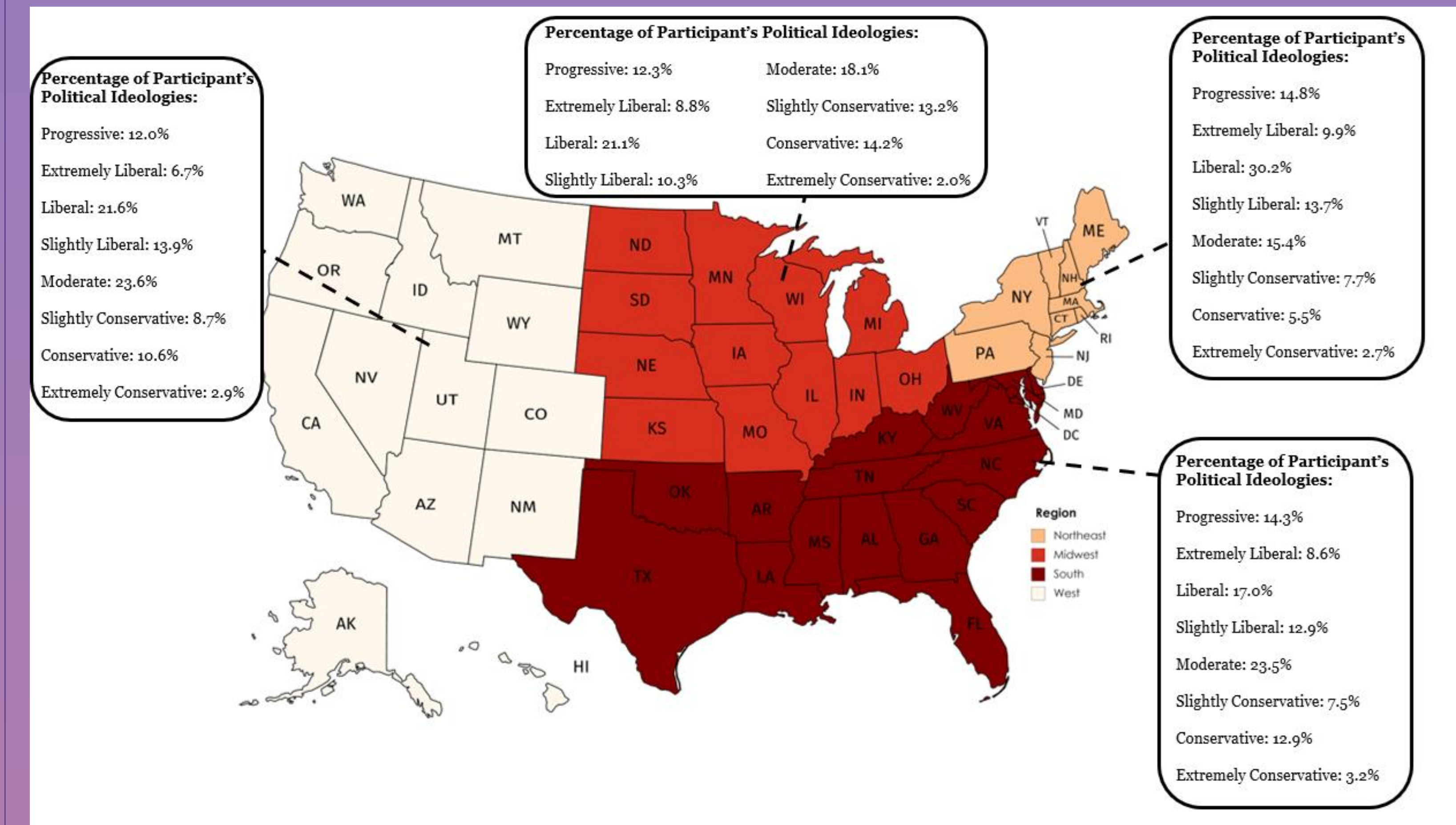
While several studies have analyzed the gap between how a single university students communicate consent the current study aims to investigate if a similar phenomenon is present across the United States by using information gathered from four, predetermined regions: the Northeast (NE), the South (SO), the Midwest (MW), and the West (WE). Other factors such as political ideology were also analyzed to determine if they affected the methods used students to obtain consent.

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that

- Undergraduate students' internalized definitions of consent will differ both from their regionally assigned policy as well as from each other in significant ways.

Results



During a sexual encounter, if **your partner** behaved in the following ways, how likely are you to use that behavior to determine whether or not **their consent** was provided?

Behavior	Region			
	Midwest	Northeast	South	West
They kiss and touch you in return	3.39	3.57	3.52	3.64
Actively touching you	3.49	3.57	3.58	3.75
Answering your questions about protection/birth control	2.93	3.18	3.22	3.18
Asking you about protection/birth control	3.09	3.13	3.31	3.25
Avoiding eye contact	1.77	1.78	1.84	1.83
Becoming flushed	2.12	2.59	2.41	2.51
Being silent	1.69	1.85	1.85	1.79
Being still	1.84	1.93	1.98	1.97
Breathing heavy*	2.25	2.72	2.54	2.60
Closing their eyes	2.31	2.47	2.34	2.45
Getting an erection or getting wet	2.76	2.97	2.90	3.01
Getting close to orgasm	3.02	3.23	3.12	3.20
Getting into bed	2.52	2.80	2.79	2.84
Hand gesturing*	2.69	3.08	2.99	3.02
Having already engaged in other sexual activity with you during this encounter*	2.48	2.73	2.73	2.92
Hugging or pulling you closer	3.29	3.32	3.44	3.45
Laughing	2.22	2.47	2.40	2.46

Leaning in	3.03	3.14	3.10	3.24
Making direct eye contact	2.76	2.88	2.82	2.91
Moaning	2.97	3.08	3.07	3.11
Nodding	3.16	3.40	3.15	3.24
Not leaving	2.18	2.43	2.44	2.53
Not resisting your advance	2.70	2.72	2.76	2.77
Partner taking off their own clothes	3.16	3.43	3.32	3.40
Partner taking off your clothes	3.28	3.36	3.47	3.57
Reciprocating your touch	3.17	3.40	3.32	3.49
Saying they are willing to do a specific sexual activity	3.97	4.14	3.86	4.03
Smiling	2.66	2.91	2.77	2.83
They ask you if you want to have sex	3.93	4.05	4.00	4.11
They ask you to get a condom*	3.21	3.52	3.55	3.52
They bring out a condom*	3.21	3.45	3.57	3.54
They bring you back to their place	2.67	2.80	2.78	2.90
They follow you into a private room	2.70	2.77	2.84	2.78
They go back to your place	2.53	2.59	2.72	2.87
They initiate a sexual behavior with you and wait to see if you reciprocate**	3.44	3.62	3.42	3.81
They lead you into a private room	2.83	2.99	2.98	3.16
They move your hands to where they want you to touch them*	3.39	3.56	3.56	3.79
They say "I want you."	3.46	3.59	3.60	3.72

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Method

Participants

Participants were United States university students who were within the age range of 18–21 years old. Participants were recruited using the Qualtrics recruitment system; each respondent was compensated for their participation.

- 1749 participants
- 40.5% lived in the South region, 18.4% lived in the Northeast region, 21.7% lived in the Midwest region, and 19.4% lived in the West region.

Procedure

Undergraduate students from different regions across the United States completed an online survey regarding their motivations, perceptions, relationships, and experiences in the context of a hookup. Demographic information about participant's regional origin, political affiliation, and beliefs on consent were recorded. Following completion of the survey, information describing the goals of the study was then disclosed to participants. Each region was then assigned a regional consent policy based on the most frequently cited type of consent policy for a variety of colleges in that region. In assessing universities by region, it was determined that the most common consent policy in the South, Midwest and West was a strong consent policy without a state mandate. Strong consent policies without a state mandate are defined as policies with a clear definition of consent, laid out boundaries of consent and examples of situations. For the Northeast region, the most common consent policy was determined to be an affirmative consent policy. Affirmative consent is defined as a strict adoption of a clearly worded policy that requires the consent to be actively present, continual, conscious and voluntary to engage in a hookup. In this case, the university may adopt this as their institution's definition of consent either independently of the state's intervention, or sometimes as a result of a state mandation such as in California or New York. ("Campus Affirmative Consent Policy Maps", 2017). Next, responses to questions asking about how students give consent and what they would consider to be a behavior that indicates consent from a partner were analyzed from the online survey by region. These reported results of consent actions by region were analyzed to find any significant differences in the responses between region. Additionally, the actions used to indicate consent were compared to their regionally assigned consent policies to determine if students' definitions of consent were similar to their regional consent policies.

Discussion

Out of the twenty different variables that were measured, only eight were found to be significantly different by region: hand gesturing, having already engaged in other sexual activities, breathing heavy, they bring out a condom, they ask you to get a condom, they say "no," they say "I'm not sure," and they initiate a sexual behavior. Of the eight variables, only two were characterized as vocal behaviors, indicating that there may be a greater obscurity in determining whether certain nonverbal behaviors indicate if consent has been given. While university policies may address nonverbal behaviors, these results highlight that more clarity between students and their respective universities is needed in order to better educate incoming college students.

When the remaining six nonverbal variables were analyzed, it was found that for five out of six nonverbal variables, the MW region reported finding these behaviors less acceptable compared to other regions. For three of the nonverbal variables, the MW region reported these behaviors to be less acceptable compared to the NE. This demonstrates that although certain institutions may introduce a certain consent policy into their institution, such as many universities in the NE using the affirmative consent policy which emphasizes verbal consent, how student's report that they actually obtain consent may differ. However, other sociocultural influences for that region may have also produced these results. For instance, since some institutions are managed by their state, different political ideologies may impact what policies are introduced into the universities. The MW region was shown to have a more polarized political ideologies compared to other regions, which may also contribute to these differences. If various political ideologies place larger emphasis on certain gender scripts, a difference in what is thought of as acceptable consent behaviors may be observed. For instance, Hullenaar (2016) described that males more often interpret nonverbal cues as acceptable methods for obtaining consent compared to females and this difference may be attributed to males being scripted as the "pursuers" in traditional gender roles. This may lead to males who have been exposed to these gender scripts perceiving consent behaviors differently than females. Future studies should explore the impact that varying political ideologies may have on the creation of institutions' consent policies. Additionally, future studies should distill these regions into their respective states in order to ensure that a single state's results were not dominating its regional sample's results. Another area to explore is to longitudinally map how political ideologies in regions change over time and observe whether student's methods of obtaining consent change as well.