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Are Republicans Resurging?

Paul A. Djupe

November 13, 2023

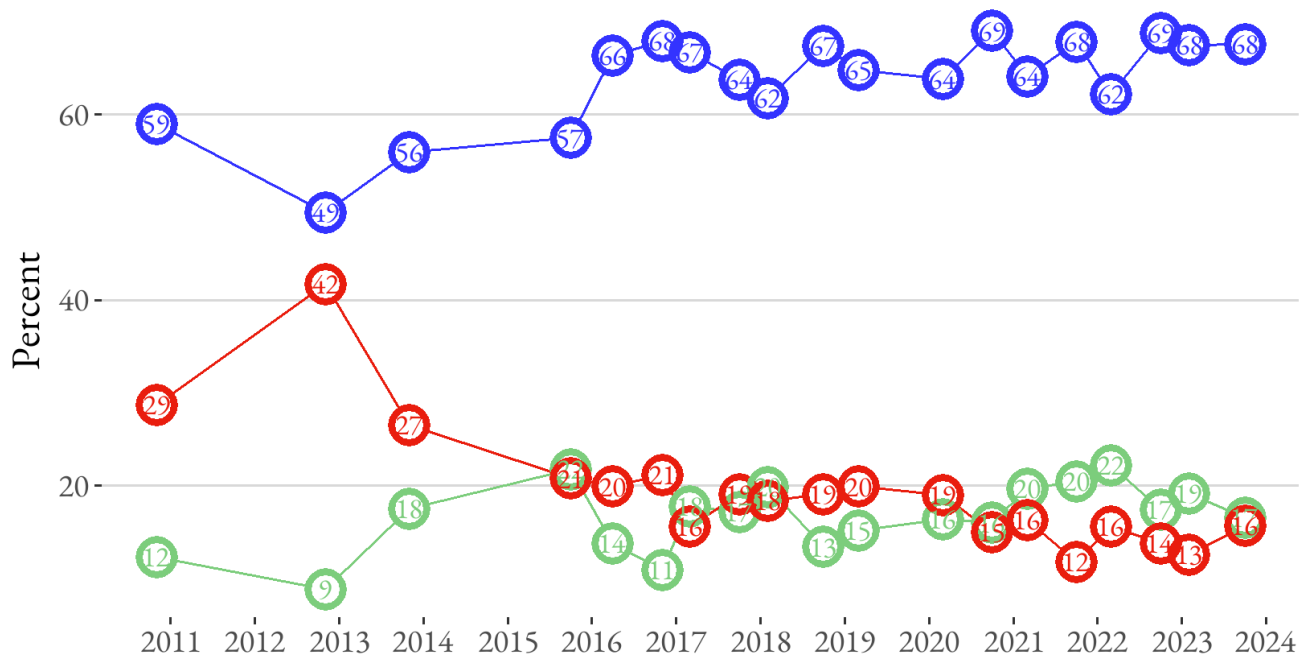
By Paul A. Djupe, Director of Data for Political Research

The Trump years were not particularly effective for recruiting young Republicans, especially on college campuses. While there are colleges and universities that explicitly bill themselves as conservative havens, most others are just following the winds and accepting whatever the market provides. And that's liberal Democrats. As a side note, this era has not been particularly solicitous of people maintaining a religious identity either.

The two common explanations tend to vary by ideology. Conservatives are likely to argue that colleges socialize impressionable minds into socialism. They demonize faculty as politically motivated and argue that most colleges are not appropriate for conservatives. David Horowitz labels higher ed as "Indoctrination U." But much of the evidence is anecdotal – "I felt like I need to self-censor" or "There was an incident at X university." Liberals tend to argue that there are so few conservatives in colleges because of a selection effect – they simply choose not to enroll or attend particular schools (e.g., Liberty or Hillsdale). At times they cite studies of undergraduate partisan change, which find little evidence of faculty influence. Instead, research tends to find peer effects from studying the random assignment of roommates – roommates move toward each other's opinions.

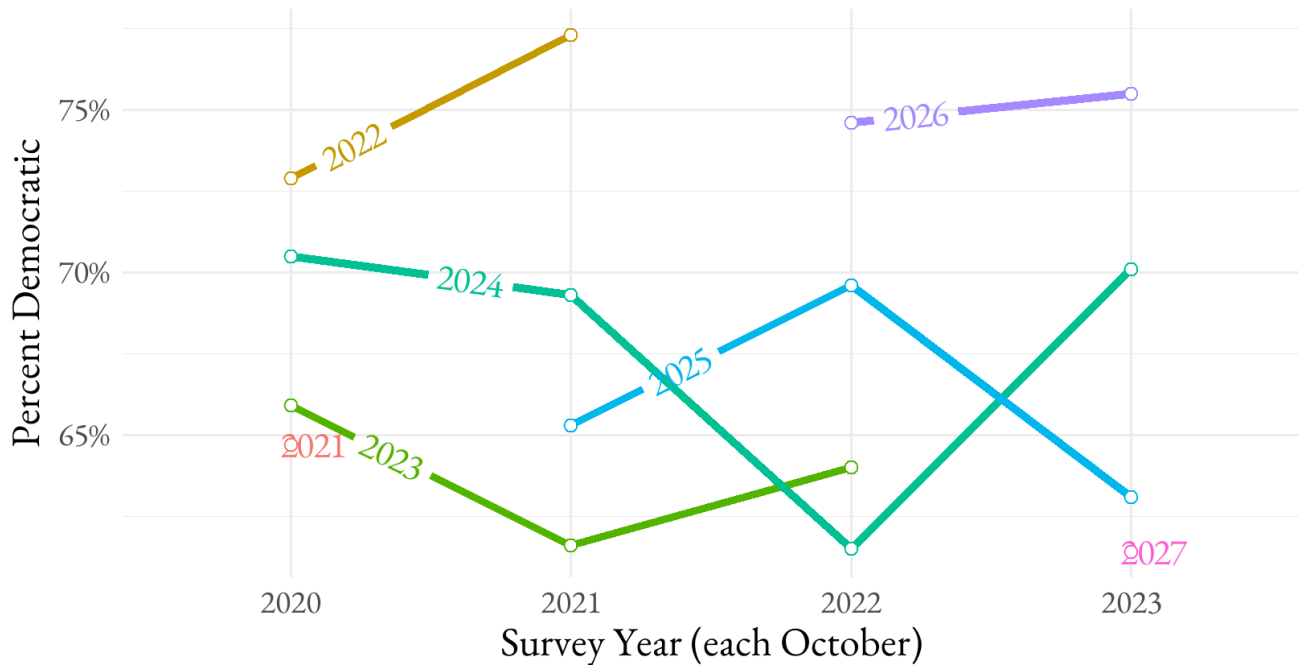
I've been writing about this trend for years and have over a decade of data to track it. So let's get into it. 2023 looks no different than the last few years. Democrats are holding strong at 68 percent. But independents and Republicans have shifted ever so slightly. Republicans are back up to 16 percent – where they were in 2022 – which has come at the expense of independents. That's probably no surge, but it could be and only time will tell.

Denison Partisan Trend, 2010-2023



Is there any evidence that students are shifting to the left across their four years? Not really. For the figure below, I put together 4 different October surveys so we could watch class years evolve. They do move around a little, but the direction is not easy to discern. The class of 2022 was more Democratic in their senior year than in their junior year. The classes of 2023 and 2025 became slightly less Democratic as they moved through Denison. 2024 dropped and then rebounded. It's important to remember that these are not necessarily the same people answering the survey, so there's sampling error involved in these estimates. But I think it is safe to say that this is not a pattern of indoctrination.

Partisan Change Among Class Years Looks Random

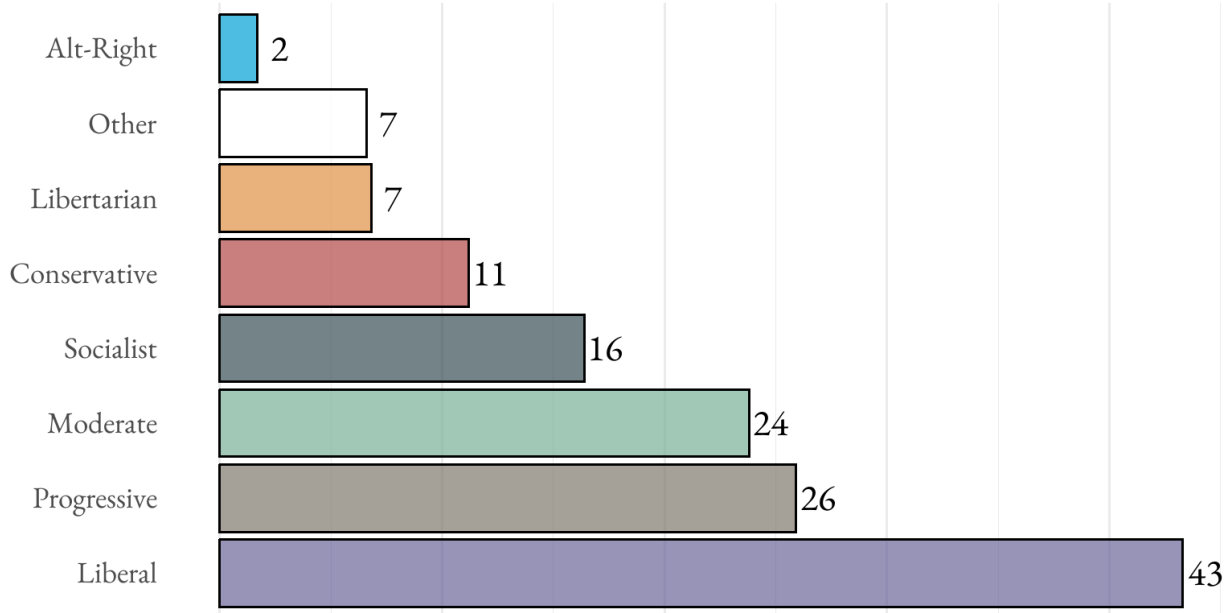


Source: October Surveys, 2020-2023.

Partisanship is an incredibly important identifier in American politics, but it is not the only one and ideas can matter. One easy way to see this is in the factions in the Republican Party that battled over naming a Speaker of the House. We can also see this play out in the Democratic Party over support for Israel and Gaza residents. As a way to simplify the sets of ideas people may have about politics, we often ask about their ideological identity. Shown below, they reinforce the left-lean of the campus, but also showcase much more diversity than perhaps we would have thought by just looking at partisanship (the percentages don't sum to 100 because participants could have chosen multiple).

The plurality are liberal, followed by progressives and moderates. A sixth of campus calls themselves socialist. There are some right-leaning ideologies as well – ten percent chose conservative and a handful took on the alt-right label. It's instructive to compare these results with October 2022, the last time I took a look. At that point there were *more* liberals (48%) and progressives (29%) and fewer moderates (21%). Socialists were unchanged (16%) and there were somewhat fewer conservative (10%) and libertarians (6%).

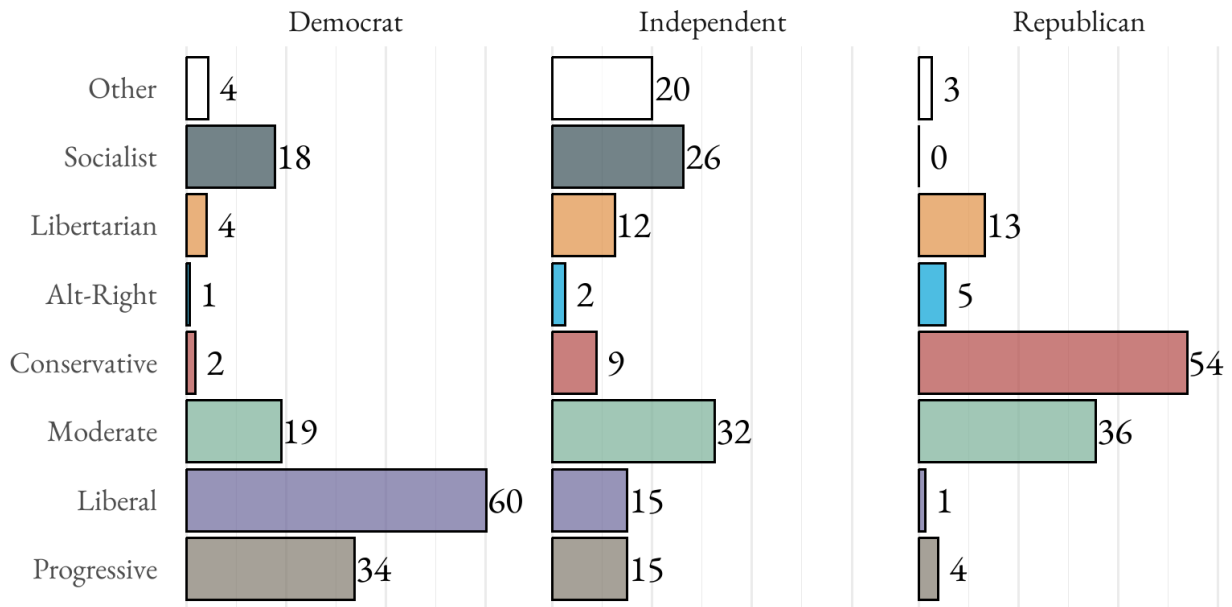
There is No Majority Ideological Identity



Source: October 2023.

But let's look at the ideological makeup of the parties explicitly, which should give us a good sense why it's hard to govern. Democrats have equally sized chunks of moderates and socialists. While the balance are liberals, a third are progressive and those two factions have tended to feud a bit. Republicans are perhaps less diverse – a majority are conservative, just over a third are moderate, and a sixth are libertarian (a handful call themselves progressive?). Independents are up for grabs because they're all over the place. From these results, it's no surprise that it's far easier for partisans to dislike the other side than it is for them to like each other.

The Parties Are Ideologically Diverse



Source: October 2023 Survey.

There's no doubt that the campus leans left. In line with research extending beyond Denison, it does not appear that the campus pulls students one way or another. Class years come in Democratic and basically stay there. We've said so before, too. Beyond partisanship, students differ considerably in their ideological identities. While it's not clear exactly what they mean by that, those labels are used consistently out in the world and tend to offer distinctive programs for the size and reach of the government. We can see those differences playing out in Congress, not to mention campus debates about public policy.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who runs the Data for Political Research minor. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action and spread accurate knowledge about campus and what goes on there. He also writes about religion and politics in the US.