Studying the Gender Gap at the University of Georgia

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Many researchers have described the connection between social characteristics and political behavior as an interesting way to view partisanship. One trend that emerged from studying this connection is the gender gap. The gender gap refers to how male and female voter behavior tends to be very different. Females vote more liberally than males. This trend has existed on the national level since the 1980s. In this study, we explore whether this trend also exists among University of North Georgia students. Other relationships were also observed in this study including age, marital status, education, religion, religious attendance, military status, race, and region. Gender proved not to be a significant factor. However, this study uncovered several statistically significant constructs. A careful study of the influence of these constructs and a continued study of the gender gap can help create a better understanding of how our social world affects our political world.

People are not born understanding politics or what part they want to play in their political world. So, where do these values come from, and how do they affect our current American electorate? Many researchers suggest that party identification is shaped through political socialization. Political socialization is

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1 Originally presented at the 2018 annual meeting of the Georgia Political Science Association, Savannah Georgia, November 8-10. We would like to thank our American Government 1101 students for participating in this survey and giving us the inspiration for this project.
the process by which people form their political beliefs and values. Political actors do this by socializing with other groups. Through this process they create and reinforce their political beliefs (Flanigan et al. 2015, 185–86).

Studying the partisanship of social groups has generally been regarded as the more interesting way of looking at the relationship between social characteristics and political behavior, largely because of the causal connection between social characteristics and partisanship. Thus, one is far more inclined to say that race and ethnicity, religion, or education cause an individual to select a particular political party than to say that political affiliation causes any of the others. Familiarity with the composition of the parties is useful, however, in understanding the campaign strategies and political appeals that the parties make to hold their supporters in line and sway the independents or opposition supporters to their side. (Flanigan et al. 2015, 186)

Politics is complicated because people are complicated. At times, the factors that shape our government and political values seem incomprehensible. However, a careful study of the American electorate can produce trends that give us a better understanding of why political actors behave in a certain way.

One well-observed trend is the gender gap (Whitaker 2008, 9–12). Females are generally less conservative than males. This trend has existed since the 1980s. Researchers suggest that this may be due to discriminatory treatment. In the past, females were excluded from the voting process, which could have influenced the way females have ultimately come to view politics (Whitaker 2008, 12–13). Males and females have also tended to view issues in different ways. This makes the gender gap particularly important to study because it has had a profound impact on shaping public policy (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004, 515–28).

This research explores whether or not the gender gap is present among students at the University of North Georgia. From Fall 2016 though Fall 2017, 122 surveys were collected in Introduction to American Government classes. Given the research presented in the past, we would expect to see a positive significant relationship between ideology and gender among students (Norrander and Wilcox 2008, 503–23).

While the gender gap is the main focus of this project, various researchers suggest that age (Flanigan et al. 2015, 195), marital status (Clark 2012, para. 15), education (Flanigan et al. 2015, 187–88), religion (Newport 2014, para. 1–12), religious attendance (Liu 2008, para. 1–2), military status (Leal and Teigen 2017, 99–110), race (Flanigan et al. 2015, 186–88), and region (Scala, Johnson, and Rogers 2015, 118–23) might have a significant relationship with political
behavior as well. These factors are also considered in this analysis. Understanding these trends is important to understanding more about the American electorate.

**Background**

**History**

On the surface, politics may seem simple. For example, people would like to think that voting for the right person is as simple as making a trip to the polls. However, elections are much more complex. Voting habits tend to be fluid and change with the issues of the day. That being said, several voting trends have remained constant over the years (Flanigan et al. 2015, 182–209).

The difference between male and female voting habits can be attributed to the history of elections in the United States. Elections are very complicated and have changed drastically over time. Simple rules such as who can vote have come into question time and time again. Voting rules have had a profound impact on the outcome of elections and the creation of policy. Therefore, it is no surprise that these rules have impacted voter’s ideology and behavior as well (Whitaker 2008, 50–52).

When the United States was founded, people who could vote were limited to white males who owned land in the area in which they wish to vote. This rule severely limited the number of voting participants. Thirty years later, popular participation became the main concern of the day. Nonlandowning males demanded to vote, and provisions were made to accommodate them. This opened up a door to a much larger voting pool, but over half the country still could not vote. It was not until the late 1800s that African Americans were able to participate in the political process. Despite legal provision, this group was still blocked for many years by people who wished to prohibit their right to vote. In the 1900s liberals fought against voter discrimination and supported voting rights for African Americans. Around the same time, liberals also supported female suffrage. Today the majority of both females and minority groups tend to identify as liberal (Whitaker 2008, 170–73).

Over the years females have also relied on an activist public sector for access to jobs, public social provision for help with child care, and other parental responsibilities and income-maintenance programs. Given this history, it is no surprise that different gender groups have tended to vote very differently in elections (Manza and Brooks 1998, 1235).

**Current Gender Gap**

Recent elections show that the gender gap is still very much alive and well. Pew suggests that this trend has stayed pretty much consistent. Figure 1 shows both male and female registered party members from 1990 to 2016. In 2016, 54%
of females identified with the Democratic Party and 42% of males identified as Republican. This went in line with the gender gap in party identification dating back to 1990. This data shows that gender gap has stayed consistent throughout the 1990–2016 period among registered voters (Chaturvedi 2016, para. 1–16).

Just as females were more likely to identify as Democrat, they were also more likely to support Democratic candidates. In 2012, Obama led by 14 points among females (53% to 39%) and Clinton also led by 14 points among females. This shows that even forty years later, gender is a factor that candidates cannot ignore if they want to succeed (Clark 2012, para. 12–13).

Males and females also remain divided on several issues, including views of government and its role. Specifically, males and females differed on two issues in the 2012 survey on public priorities for the president and Congress. These issues included domestic programs and education. In a January survey, 72% of females cited education as a top priority, compared with 57% of males.
Nearly 58% of females rated helping the poor and needy as a top priority, compared with 46% of males (Clark 2012, para. 15–21).

In the 2016 election, Pew Research found that 37% of registered voters identify as independents, 33% as Democrats and 26% as Republicans (Jones 2018, para. 3). Researchers had expected to see a historically large gender gap in 2016 due to the first female to be nominated for the presidency. Instead of a dramatic gender gap, the difference between male and female votes in 2016 was only slightly larger than in other recent elections (Burden, Crawford, and Decrescenzo 2016, 415–32). With 52% of females supporting Clinton over Trump, this was roughly a 24-point edge over Trump. However, this change was only slightly larger than the 15-point advantage Obama held in 2012 (Fingerhut 2016, para. 60). This data shows that the gender gap is not only still in existence, but it is also consistent.

In the 2016 presidential election there was only a slight gender gap. Political identification has also stayed relatively consistent. According to Pew Research, 56% of females identified as Democrats or lean Democratic, while 37% affiliate with or lean toward the GOP. The share of females identifying as Democrats or leaning Democratic was up by four points since 2015 (Jones 2018, para. 3).

In the 2018 midterm election, the gender gap was wider than it had been in nearly two decades, with women favoring Democratic candidates in their district by 19 percentage points (59% to 40%) and men favoring Republican candidates by 51% to 47% (Tyson 2018, para. 4). This data suggest that while issues may be different from how they were in 1980, the gender gap still remains a very relevant part of the US political landscape (Jones 2018, para. 6).

Researchers used to characterize the gap by saying that women were less conservative than men. They often cautioned that, simply saying “women are liberal and men are conservative” is too simplistic. However, in our increasingly polarized world, that may no longer be true. It appears now that women are liberal and men are conservative.

**Other Factors to Consider**

While the gender gap is the main focus of this project, there is more to a political actor than just their gender. Political socialization tells us that political beliefs and values come from socializing with other people. People tend to socialize with many different groups in their lifetime, and this creates many factors to consider. A lot of research indicates that age (Flanigan et al. 2015, 197), marital status (Clark 2012, para. 14), education (Flanigan et al. 2015, 186–87), religion (Newport 2014, para. 1–12), religious attendance (Liu 2008, para. 1–2), military status (Leal and Teigen 2017, 99–110), race (Flanigan et al. 2015, 186), and region (Scala, Johnson, and Rogers 2015, 118–23) might also have an effect on voter behavior.
Age as a social group is often overlooked but has recently grabbed some attention. In general, young people tend to not be politically active. Recently, the youth have turned out to vote in much higher rates than usual, and there is a clear difference in the way youth are voting and the way other generations are voting. In 2012, 44% of youth voters identified as Democrat. While people 65 years and older were more evenly divided, with 36% identifying as Democrat and 37% as Republican (Flanigan et al. 2015, 195). Research reported by Pew shows that in the 2016 election, 53% of older voters preferred Trump over Clinton, while 55% of younger voters preferred Clinton (Tyson and Maniam 2016, para. 13–14). This has happened because recently young people have been more likely to say they are liberal (Flanigan et al. 2015, 195). Whatever the reason might be, the difference in the voting habits of different generations calls for age to be considered as a construct.

Researchers also suggest that married females tend to gravitate toward the Republican Party and unmarried females are more likely to identify as Democrats. In 2011, fully 62% of single female voters identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party. Only 31% of single female voters identified with or leaned toward the GOP. Forty-five percent of married females identified as Republican, while 48% identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party (Clark 2012, para. 14). Flanigan et al. (2015) explains that this discrepancy between gender and marriage status is caused by cross pressuring. People often have more than one identity. They could be female with liberal views but being married to a conservative person challenges those views.

Many people care little about politics, and it plays a small part in their personal relationships. In few primary groups is politics of any consequence, so things that happen in the group that lead to political homogeneity are of low salience … Ordinarily, primary groups do not tolerate high levels of political tension and conflict. (Flanigan et al. 2015, 195–96)

This pressure for families to be politically homogenous might account for this marriage gap. As a result, females tend to align more with their husband’s political beliefs.

Flanigan et al. (2015) also tells us that religion plays a significant part in shaping political identities. College-educated Protestants make up a significant part of the Republican Party. Even so, both parties normally have substantial proportions of people with different education levels (185–95). However, a study conducted by Pew suggests that there is a growing educational divide in voters’ party identification. Fifty-eight percent of voters with a four-year college degree now identify as Democrats or lean Democratic. Only 36% of graduates...
affiliate with the Republican Party or lean toward the GOP. Voters with no college experience have been moving toward the GOP. In 2014, 42% of those without a college degree identified with or lean toward the Republican Party (Jones 2018, para. 4). In 2016, Trump’s advantage among those without a college degree was at a 39-point advantage. According to Pew, this is the largest advantage any candidate received since 1980. Almost 67% of noncollege voters supported Trump and only 28% of those voters supported Clinton (Tyson and Maniam 2016, para. 7). This impressive divide among college and noncollege voters calls for more investigation.

Another constant trend is race. The Democratic Party tends to be more diverse in terms of racial and ethnic composition. For example, African Americans make up a quarter of the Democratic Party but less than 1% of the Republican Party. Additionally, there has been an increase of support for the Democratic Party in the Hispanic community. In 2000, Hispanics made up 9% of the Democratic Party and that increased to 18% in 2012. Researchers suggest that diversity of race in the Democratic Party can be attributed to changing issues and how parties present themselves to the public (Flanigan et al. 2015, 195). In the 2016 election, about half of white voters identified with the GOP or lean Republican. African American voters aligned with the Democratic Party at an overwhelming 84% rate (Jones 2018, para. 8). In fact, Clinton enjoyed an 80-point advantage among African Americans (Tyson and Maniam 2016, para. 8). Hispanic voters aligned with the Democrats, while Asian American voters also largely identify as Democrats or lean Democratic at 65%. According to Pew, these statistics show little signs of changing in the future (Jones 2018, para. 8).

Research suggests religion is a strong indicator of political identity, particularly in the United States. According to data collected from 2008 to 2014, nonreligious Americans have been for the most part Democratic. Nearly half of Republicans report as being very religious (Newport 2014, para. 6–7). In 2016, Pew suggested that the number of people who identify as nonreligious is growing. Religiously unaffiliated voters, who made up just 8% of the electorate two decades ago, now constitute about a quarter of all registered voters. Religiously unaffiliated voters now account for a third of Democratic voters (Jones 2018, para. 91–95).

Flanigan et al. (2015) adds to the religious conversation by saying that religious attendance can even have an effect on voter behavior. This happens because group interaction reinforces opinions and motivates individuals to participate. Regular churchgoers can more easily pick up on group norms and political views tend to be more uniform. This has a powerful impact on social behavior and political views (Flanigan et al. 2015, 190–92).

Kaufmann (2004) discusses how religion compares to the gender gap. In general, females tend to identify as more religious than males. Despite this trend,
fewer females identify as Republican. If females see themselves as more religious, then why do they identify with a party that is not known for religious values? Her conclusion is that gender is more important than religion. This is an interesting theory and something worth exploring (Kaufmann 2004, 491–511).

Leal and Teigen (2017) suggests that experiences and socialization in the military might have an effect on the voting behavior of former military members. Additionally, conservatives tend to take on and support policy platforms related to supporting the military as a whole. This suggests that those who have military experience might lean a little bit conservative.

Finally, region can be a strong predictor of ideology and party identification partially in the southern part of the United States. Scala, Johnson, and Rogers (2015) use both individual and aggregate data to explore the growing political diversity in rural America. They point out that residents of urban communities tend to be more liberal. However, people living in more rural areas tend to be conservative. This could be due to many factors including less diversity in rural areas and a more traditional culture found in less populated areas (Scala, Johnson, and Rogers 2015, 118–23).

Social groups make up an important part of our lives and how we define ourselves. Often, we are stuck in those groups for our entire lives. So, it makes sense that these groups would affect us and the way we view politics. While there are many more factors to consider (Flanigan, et al. 2015), marital status (Clark 2012, para. 14), education (Flanigan et al. 2015, 186–87), religion (Newport 2014, para. 1–12), religious attendance (Liu 2008, para. 1–2), military status (Leal and Teigen 2017, 99–110), race (Flanigan et al. 2015, 186–87), and region (Scala, Johnson, and Rogers 2015, 118–23) are important constructs that political scientists tend to focus on. These demographics have clear observable voting trends associated with them. Analyzing these factors along with gender will give a much fuller picture of our population.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants in this study included 128 students who were enrolled at the University of North Georgia (UNG) over three semesters covering two academic years. Six of these students did not give their permission for their responses to be used, and therefore only 122 survey responses were used in this analysis. These students were taking Introduction to American Government classes on UNG’s campus in Dahlonega, Georgia. Dahlonega is in the northeast part of Georgia, in the southern region of the United States. The American Government course fulfills core degree requirements for UNG students and is required for certain degree majors. This makes the class rosters of these American
Government courses some of the most broadly representative in the university. In addition, these rosters are broadly representative because, while students have some input into registering for classes, many other factors besides the degree requirements noted above, like class size limits and the simple logistics of registration, restrict student choice in these matters.

Students self-identified as 18% liberal, 41% moderate, and 41% conservative. Both a correlation and a multiple regression analysis were run in an effort to create a clear cohesive picture of the data. The constructs were gender, age, marital status, education, race, region, cadet status, religion, and religious attendance. The University of North Georgia has an extensive cadet program. The possibility that military status might affect voter identification along with the military culture at this university calls for cadet status to be considered as a construct (99–110).

Females made up 45.9% of the study participants and males made up 54.1%. Students were given the option to choose other for gender, but none of the students chose this as an option. The age of students ranged from 18 to 28 years of age. The highest percentage of students were 18 years old (49%); 26.2% were 19 years old. The third largest students were 20 years old at 16.4%. The remaining students were 21 years of age and older.

Marital status reported by students was overwhelmingly single or unmarried, with 98.4% of students reported being single, 0.8% married, and 0.8% divorced. Educational status was measured in the students’ status at the school. This is a freshman course and it was assumed that most students would not have a degree yet; 66.4% of participants reported being freshman in college, 23.8% were sophomores with more than a year of credit hours, 7.4% of participants were juniors, and 0.8% reported being a senior with more than three years of credit hours.

In the survey, students were asked to choose the race that best aligns with how they identify themselves. The racial makeup of participates were 6% Asian, 1.6% African American, 6.6% Hispanic, 1.6% native American, 77.9% White, 2.5% Mixed, and 4.9% other. Of these students, 4.1% reported living most of their lives in an urban environment, 68% of the student reported living in a suburban area, and 27.9% reported living in a rural area. Students were asked to report whether they were currently a cadet. Cadets made up 13.9% of the survey participants and 86.1% of students reported not being a cadet.

When measuring for religious affiliation, students were given the option of choosing Christian, Jewish, Islam, or other; 76.2% of participants identified as Christian, 1.6% identified as being Jewish, 0% as Islam, and 21.3% as other. Religious attendance was measured in attending religious services weekly, sometimes, and never. Students’ responses were evenly split: 34.4% reported
attending religious services weekly, 32% reported attending services sometimes, and 33.6% reported never attending services.

It is important to consider these demographics because it can tell us a lot about the makeup of the participants. While constructs like gender and religious attendance were evenly split, several other constructs did not have as much diversity. This could have an effect on the results of this study and also point out to some improvements that can be made in the future.

Measures and Procedure

The demographics questionnaire collected basic demographic information voluntarily from study participants. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions and was administered after participants had completed all other assessments. See the Appendix for a sample of the demographic survey. The research was collected during Fall 2016 through Fall 2017 at the University of North Georgia. The study was completed as a research project intended to examine correlational relations between ideology, gender, age, marital status, education, religion, race, and region. The target sample population included individuals aged 18–29 years.

Respondents were asked to participate in an anonymous survey during their American Government 1101 class. The survey took participants approximately five to ten minutes to complete, and participation in the survey was necessary to complete the assignment, but students were given the option of not releasing their responses. In an effort to minimize the risks to confidentiality, data storage was held at the accountability of the researchers on a password-protected computer. Information such as individual names and other personally identifiable information was excluded.

The form did include questions about gender, race, age, years of education, year in school (e.g., freshman, sophomore, first-year master’s), and race/ethnicity and asked participants to self-identify their ideology. While ideology and party identification are two different things, this study choose to ask students just to identify their ideology. Throughout the literature, ideology and party identification are often used interchangeably. In fact, Flanigan et al. (2015) tells us that it would be difficult even to separate the two concepts.

Ideology works in much the same way partisanship as a long-term predisposition that shapes attitudes and behavior … Partisanship and ideology are related to each other, and increasingly so given the partisan sort, and it would be very difficult to untangle the causal connections between the two. No doubt some individuals adopt a party because it fits their ideological world view or because their admired party leaders are so labeled. (Flanigan et al. 2015, 257)
In this study, ideology was used as a construct because party identification was not available. However, ideology can be used instead of party identification because in today’s polarized world, party is closely related to ideology (Saad 2018, para. 1–15).

In fact, surveys by Gallup demonstrate that Democrats are becoming more consistently liberal. In 2001, 25% of Democrats identified as conservative and 30% identified as liberal. Since then, the percentage of Democrats identifying as liberal has risen by about a point each year (Saad 2018, para. 7). In 2017, nearly half of Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters say they are liberal, while 37% identified as moderates and 15% said they were conservatives (Jones 2018, para. 16–17).

For many years, conservatives made up the vast majority of Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters. According to Jones (2018), two-thirds of Republicans identify as conservative, 27% as moderates, and 4% as liberals. Due to increasing polarization, ideology can be closely linked with party identification. Conservatives tend to be Republican and liberals tend to be Democratic (Jones 2018, para. 1–5). Researchers can learn a lot about the gender gap by observing party identification as well as ideology (Saad 2018, para. 1–15).

A correlation analysis investigated relationships among independent variables. We utilized SPSS for all statistical procedures, and the information was reported in aggregate form with no identifying information linking respondents to their responses. In addition to the correlation analyses, a multilinear regression analysis was conducted. Multiple regression can bring out relationships that do not appear in a correlation study; additionally, significant correlations may also disappear (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, and Buchner 2008, 1149–50). By running a regression analysis in addition to a correlation analysis, we hope to add a level of depth to this study.

Results

Response Rate and Statistical Assumptions

Passive recruitment was the only method utilized. Some students did not do the assignment or did not complete the assignment. Due to this type of recruitment, we cannot report an accurate response rate. Preliminary analyses were conducted to test for missing data, outliers, and violations of assumptions. Missing data was noted for the six participants and were excluded from final analysis. Scatterplots and normal probability plots tested for assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

R² of this model is 0.320. That means that the linear regression explains 32% of the variance in the data. The linear regression’s F-test has the null hypothesis that there is no linear relationship between the two variables (in other
words, \( R^2 = 0 \). With \( F = 5.865 \) and 65.575 degrees of freedom, the test is significant; thus we can assume that there is a linear relationship between the variables in our model. Finally, we checked for normality of residuals with a normal P-P plot. The plot shows that the points generally follow the normal (diagonal) line with no strong deviations. This indicates that the residuals are normally distributed. No assumptions were violated for the analyses used in this study.

The results of this study showed that while gender did have a positive relationship with ideology as indicated by other studies, this construct was not significant among this sample. Age, cadet status, marital status, education, and race were also not considered statistically significant. However, religion, religious attendance, and region did prove to be significant factors in this study.

**Correlate and Multiple Regression**

A correlation was run on all demographic constructs. The correlation table can be found in Table 1. Gender did have a positive relationship with ideology but did not have any statistical significance. However, there was a significant statistical relationship between region (.000), religion (.000), and religious attendance (.003). In an effort to create a clear understanding of this data set, a multiple regression analysis was run in addition to a correlation analysis.

The coefficients on the regression model are in Table 2. The coefficient \( B \) for gender is 0.079. This indicates that even after regression analysis, gender still had a positive relationship with ideology, as predicted. However, gender is not significantly different from 0 because its \( p \) value is .580 which is higher than 0.05.

The \( B \) coefficient for religion (−1.53) is significantly different from 0 because its \( p \)-value is 0.006, which is smaller than 0.05. Religion is coded as 1 = Christian, 2 = Jewish, 3 = Islam, and 4 = other. Ideology is coded as −1 = liberal, 0 = moderate, and 1 = conservative. So, for every unit increase in religion, we would expect to see a −.153-unit decrease in ideology, holding all other variables constant. These results suggest that most UNG freshmen who identify as Christian are likely to also identify as conservative.

Finally, residence (.246) is significantly different from zero because its \( p \)-value is .039, which is less than 0.05. For every unit increase in residence, we can expect to see a .246 increase in ideology. Residence is coded as 1 = Urban, 2 = Suburban, and 3 = Rural. So, for every unit increase in residence, we can predict a .246 increase in ideology. That means if participants spend a lot of time in a rural area, they are more likely to identify as a conservative.
Table 1: Studying the Gender Gap Correlation Analysis

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<td></td>
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Analysis

Gender

Based on historical (Flanigan et al. 2015, 190) and current data (Fingerhut 2016, para. 60), we had predicted that gender would be positively associated with ideology. The coefficient was indeed in the expected direction, indicating some ideological differences based on gender. However, the coefficient was not statistically significant.

The gender gap remains a noteworthy trend in national databases (Fingerhut 2016, para. 60). Researchers like Howell and Day (2000) suggest that the gender
gap may have more of an effect on political issues rather than on self-identified ideology or political party identification. Our research does not dispute that argument. It is important that researchers continue to observe this trend to better understand the gender gap and its relationship to the political process.

### Religion

The coefficient for religion was significant (.153). This should not be surprising because religion has been identified as a significant construct in many national studies. Friesen and Ksiazkiewicz (2015) provide evidence that there is an overlap between religious and political views. They suggest this overlap may be due to underlying principles regarding how religious groups and political parties believe society should be organized. This research shows there is a very strong link between religious identity and political identity (793–95).

According to a study conducted by Pew Research in 2016, a religious gap has existed for many years and has been growing. The religiously unaffiliated tend to identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party. There is also a growing nonreligious population. In 1994, about half (52%) of religiously unaffiliated voters identified as Democratic. Today, that figure is 68%. Figure 2 shows that 77% of white evangelical voters lean toward or identify with the Republican Party, while just 18% have a Democratic orientation. Since 77.9% of participants in our study identified themselves as Caucasian/White and 41% of those people identified as conservative, we should not be surprised that religious came up as a significant predictor (Jones 2018, para. 71–75).

The coefficient for religious attendance was also significant (−.268) in our study. This significance indicates that people who attend church are more likely...
Figure 2: Religious Tradition

Source: Jones (2018).

to identify as conservative. This supports Flanigan’s (2015) observation that regular attendance of religious services tends to reinforce existing conservative beliefs (192–95). In addition, a Pew Research study also shows that those who attend church regularly are more likely to identify as Republican and conservative. For example, Barack Obama had very little support from Protestants who attend church at least once a week; just 17% of this group supported him. By contrast, 37% of white evangelicals who attend services less frequently supported Obama (Liu, 2008, para. 1–2).

Newport (2017) suggests that religion tends to be a strong indicator throughout the United States and particularly in the South. In a national study, researchers found that 41% of Georgia residents identify as being very religious (as identified by religious attendance). It’s possible that in southern states like Georgia, religion is a stronger indicator of ideology than gender (Newport 2017, para. 1–12). Our data revealed that religion is an important construct among University of North Georgia students. If religion is an especially strong indicator in Georgia, this data clearly reflects that significance and adds to that conversation.

Region

Region also had a significant correlation with ideology at .246. That means if participants spend a lot of time in a rural area, they are more likely to identify as a conservative. This data seems to reflect an emerging trend observed by other
researchers. Scala, Johnson, and Rogers (2015) used both individual and aggregate data to explore the changing political landscape in rural America. They point out that residents of urban areas tend to be more liberal and rural communities tend to be more conservative (118–23).

Since the 1990s, voters in urban counties have leaned toward the Democratic Party rather than the Republican Party. Figure 3 shows how this trend has continued to grow from 1994 to 2017. Jones’s (2018) study on the 2016 election shows that 62% of urban voters identify as Democratic or leaning
Democratic. Those who live in suburban areas tend to be evenly divided. This has changed very little over the last two decades (para. 67–70).

Jones (2018) describes this trend as a Democratic advantage. Since 1998, urban communities have enjoyed this Democratic advantage. Democrats have even had a double-digit advantage among urban voters. Urban voters as whole remain solidly Democratic (para. 67–70).

Rural areas in the United States have historically been electorally diverse. From 1999 to 2009, they were about equally divided in their partisan leanings. In fact, Democrats like US Senator Tom Harkin once thrived in the mostly rural state of Iowa. However, a new trend has developed over the last dozen years. Voters in rural areas have increasingly started leaning in a more Republican direction. However, this has not always been the case. Today, the GOP leads in a 16-percentage-point advantage among rural voters (Jones 2018, para. 67–70).

According to these recent national studies, region is becoming a strong indicator of ideology. Specifically, the rural advantage for Republicans seems to be an emerging trend. Most participants in our study identified as living either in a rural or suburban environment. Therefore, the significance we found indicates that the Republican rural advantage is very much alive and well among University of North Georgia students. Our data provides a snapshot of a primarily rural and suburban population. Showing that even in this small localized example, rural advantage is just as prevalent as in national surveys. This article also verifies the significance of other studies and calls for more research to be done on the Republicans’ rural advantage. In the future, this and similar research could lead to a better understanding of this urban/rural divide.

Future Research

One should not overestimate or underestimate the significance of these findings. This research provides an interesting picture of the political inclinations of a subset of students at a major regional university. More research will help provide a better understanding of the connection among these constructs. Future studies should consider certain actions. The data collection phase for this project was subject to major time restrictions and used data already collected for a classroom project. These restrictions limited the size of the sample. Although this study was limited, it still provided the opportunity to explore potential relationships for future studies. The relationships identified in this data set will become the focus of future research.

This study lays the groundwork for long-term research. Although the results of this analysis were not expected, they point to an important direction for future researchers. Paying special attention to region as a construct could potentially give other researchers a snapshot of this emerging urban/rural divide. In time, this data may show the nature of the urban/rural divide as a trend. It will be
interesting to see if region is a consistent factor or if its significance might vary over time.

While ample evidence exists that our sample is broadly representative of the UNG student body (see the Methods section above), a larger sample may improve the generalizability and external validity of future studies. To improve sample participant quantity and quality, a future study could utilize probability sampling to ensure a more diverse sample.

Another way to improve generalizability is to change the way the survey assesses ideology and political identification. This study relied on a simple 3-point self-identification scale. Individuals could answer liberal, moderate, or conservative. A new set of surveys could incorporate a 7-point ideology self-identification scale (Suh 2016, para. 1–5). Many national research databases, including the American National Election Studies (ANES), use the 7-point Likert scale to measure ideology. Incorporating this scale would give researchers a more comprehensive view on the population’s ideology. It would also make it possible to directly compare data from UNG students to national databases like ANES (American National Election Studies 2018).

Next, a future study might also incorporate issues as a variable rather than just controlling for demographics (Hansen 1997, 73–103). Conducting a similar study, Norrander and Wilcox (2008) looked at how ideology relates not only to gender but also to income and religion. They suggest that the gender gap is more prevalent when we look at policy views rather than party identification alone (519–23).

Howell and Day (2000) suggest that researchers should measure political issues that have demonstrated gender gaps and that have been linked to differences in voting behavior. These political issues can be measured by using the Social Welfare Scale, Opposition to Strong Government Scale, Opposition to Handgun Control, Conservative Ideology, Feminism Scale, and Racial Attitudes Scale. A future study should incorporate these scales along with demographics (Howell and Day 2000, 858).

The ultimate goal of this study was to contribute to the understanding of the gender gap and the effects of demographics on the American electorate. This study identified region, religion, and religious attendance as statistically significant predictors of ideology. In terms of political science, researchers may want to focus more on these constructs. This may be beneficial to understanding how individuals obtain and maintain their political beliefs and values.

Conclusion

Political beliefs and values are very important factors to voters. These factors have a profound effect on how people choose to vote and how they
identify with political parties. Over the years, different social groups have tended to act in similar ways. Understanding these beliefs and to what social groups those beliefs belong is important to the understanding the American electorate as a whole (Flanigan et al. 2015, 182–209).

Since the 1980s, there has been an observable difference between the way males and females vote. Males tend to vote more conservatively than females (Whitaker 2008, 9–12). This trend could be due both to historical policies in the United States and to a clear difference between how genders view issues (Norrander and Wilcox 2008, 503–15). Whatever the reason, the gender gap has remained strong in our current political culture and shows no sign of going away (Jones 2018, para. 6).

This research explored whether or not this gender gap is present among University of North Georgia students. Given the research presented in the past, we would expect to see a positive significant relationship between ideology and gender in our research (Norrander and Wilcox 2008, 519–23).

While the gender gap is an important factor, age (Flanigan et al. 2015, 185–87), marital status (Clark 2012, para. 14), education (Flanigan et al. 2015, 185–87) religion (Newport 2014, para. 1–12), race (Flanigan et al. 2015, 185–87), military status, and region (Scala, Johnson, and Rogers 2015, 118–23) might also have an effect on voter behavior. These indicators were included in the correlation and multiple regression analysis. The results of the analysis concluded that gender, age, marital status, race, and cadet were not significant predictors in this sample.

While there were limitations to this study, there is evidence that other constructs might be worth investigating. The significance found with religion (Newport 2014, para. 1–12), religious attendance (Liu 2008, para. 1–2), and region (Jones 2018, para. 67–70) were consistent with findings presented by Pew Research and Gallup. Newport (2017) explains that Georgia as a whole tends to identify as very religious (1–11). This shows that the significance found among UNG students regarding religion is consistent with Georgia voters as while. Jones (2018) even suggests there is a Democratic advantage in rural environments. It could be that Georgia’s religious culture and rural environment has a strong effect on the ideology of its citizens. However, this calls for further investigation (para. 67–70).

Studying demographics cannot tell researchers everything about the American electorate, but it can shed some light on the actions of political actors. The results of this study indicate that researchers should pay more attention to these constructs. Studying them can give researchers a better understanding of voters and ultimately attribute to the demystification of the political process.
Appendix

Ideology Quiz

Fill in the blank at the end of each item with one of the appropriate choices.

Consent. I allow the use of information on this survey in academic research which may be presented or published (Note: you will never be personally identified). Yes or no: 

Class. For which class are you taking this survey? POLS 1101 or other (specify): 

Demographics

Age: 

Gender. Female, male, or other: 

Currently a Cadet? Yes or no: 

Marital Status. Single, married, separated, or divorced: 

Class. Fresh, soph, junior, senior, or grad: 

Religion. Christian, Jewish, Islam, or other: 

Religious Attendance. Weekly or more, sometimes, or never/almost never: 

Race/ethnicity. Mainly Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, White, Mixed, or Other: 

Residence. In what kind of area have you spent most of your life?

Urban (large city, like Atlanta), Suburban (single-family housing), or Rural (farms, sporadic housing): 

Self-Identification Survey

Please complete this section before you take the online quiz.

Ideology. Which word do you feel most closely identifies your beliefs?

Liberal, Moderate/Centrist, or Conservative: __________

Government. Which choice do you feel most closely identifies your feelings about government? In general, do you think government is something that helps us by becoming involved in our lives (more government helps), hurts us by becoming more involved (less government is better), or is a fairly neutral force (“it depends”)?

Helps (positive), Neutral (“depends”), or Hurts (negative): __________

References


