

The 2011 USCA Student Political Socialization Survey: An Initial Overview

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Introduction

Over about a four week period from November 8 until December 2, 2011, students in my Research Scopes and Methods classes helped administer an on-line survey of USCA undergraduates using the Lime Survey computer survey package. We targeted 1,000 students and successfully completed 531 interviews for a response rate of 53%, quite acceptable for a computer administered survey. To maximize the response rate, we offered four \$50 prizes in a drawing and followed up with several follow-up emails as well as telephone calls to prompt responses. The sample is reasonably representative of several known parameters of the USCA undergraduate student body. For example, the sample is 70% female, compared to the student body, which is 67% female. The sample is 26% African-American, compared to the student body, which is 28% African-American.

The survey was a partial replication of a similar survey performed in 1997, covering political identities, attitudes, knowledge, and sources of political information. In addition, we added a number of questions about family background and issue positions on a wide range of issues covering economic, social and scientific issues.

The purpose of this first report is to take a quick overview of our findings about this “millennial generation” of USCA students. We will make a limited number of comparisons with students in the 1997 survey as well as do a little exploration of the relationships among opinions and identifications and backgrounds in the 2011 survey.

Following Politics

Students are almost evenly divided with just over half saying they follow government and public affairs “some” or “most of the time” and just under half saying “hardly at all” or “only now and then.” Parents seem to have no influence on the extent to which

students follow politics. We found no relationship existed between parents following politics or parental education and students following politics. Following politics seems to have more to do with maturity and increased exposure to the world around them through college. The extent to which students said they follow politics increased significantly with age and between the freshman year and the senior year.

Political Efficacy

We asked two questions about whether students felt they understood politics and government and felt they could have “some say” about what government does to tap their sense of being able to be effective in bringing about change, what political scientists call “political efficacy.”

Combining these two questions into a compound measure, about a third of the students had low efficacy, about a third were right in the middle, and a third were at the high end. Interestingly, those who follow politics score significantly higher on their sense of political efficacy. And efficacy increased dramatically with increasing political knowledge. So paying attention to and learning about politics makes students feel more efficacious.

Political Trust

We asked three standard questions to tap students’ sense of political trust. 1) How much of the time they feel they can trust the government to “do what is right.” 2) How much tax money is wasted by government. 3) How many of the people running government are “crooks.”

Students were overwhelmingly distrustful, with 66% believing that government does what is right only “some of the time,” 57% feeling that government wastes “a lot of the money” we pay in taxes, and 64% feeling that “quite a few” of those running government were crooked. Back in our 1997 survey, the respective percentages giving the same response were 67%, 38%, and 38%. So while the percentage feeling that government does what is right only some of the time has not changed, a much higher proportion of students today feel government wastes a lot of money and that quite a few officials are crooked.

In 1997 trust had nothing to do with political knowledge. But a generation later the more that students know about politics, the less trusting they are. This is a noteworthy

emerging relationship—today to know about politics is to distrust government. Interestingly, following politics in the news has no significant impact on trust. Apparently students pick up enough stereotypes of corrupt politicians and governmental failures in popular culture to make them highly distrustful.

Political Ideology

More students self-identify as conservatives (43%) than as liberals (26%) or moderates (32%). Experience in college has a significant impact on these self-identifications. As we move from first year students to seniors, the percentage of liberals increase and the percentage of moderates decrease, but the percentage of conservatives remains the same. So we see some movement from moderate to liberal self-identifications as students move toward matriculation rather than conversion from conservative to liberal.

Social Issues

We asked about three social issues: the legalization of marijuana, gay marriage, and abortion. On marijuana students divided 5 to 4 opposing legalization, the more conservative position. On gay marriage the students were divided in the opposite direction at about 5 to 4 favoring allowing gay marriage. However, on abortion, only 16% took the clear pro-life position. The other 84% were evenly divided between the pro-choice position and the position that abortions should be allowed under certain circumstances such as health or rape or incest.

Overall, students seemed to take moderate to liberal positions on these issues. Year in school had no statistically significant impact on positions on these three issues, so positions were relatively stable across years in school.

Economic Issues

We asked students two questions pertaining to economic issues. First, we asked about taxing the wealthy. Second we asked about government spending and deficits. Among those who had opinions, by a 2 to 1 margin students preferred keeping taxes on the wealthy high to provide money to “help lower income people” over keeping taxes low so that the wealthy could invest in the economy and stimulate jobs. By almost the same 2 to 1 margin students preferred the government to run deficits in order to save jobs and stimulate the economy over cutting programs to reduce the deficits. On neither of these issues did opinions change with year in school.

Social Welfare Issues

We asked two questions pertaining to social welfare policy, one on fixing or phasing out Social Security, and the other on the role government should play in health care. By more than a 4 to 1 margin, students preferred fixing and keeping Social Security to phasing it out and replacing it with private savings. Year in school had no impact on student opinions on Social Security.

On health care, students overwhelmingly favor the government guaranteeing universal access to health care (68%). The remaining third were evenly divided between the status quo and a free market system with no government involvement. On health care seniors were significantly more likely to favor government involvement and less likely to support a free market approach. So this was one issue where opinion moved in a liberal direction as students progressed through school. We thought that age might play a role here with older students who are more likely to have families might be more likely to have difficulty in obtaining reasonably priced health insurance compared to younger students covered by their parents' policies. But we found no relation to age.

Scientific Issues

We asked students two questions about their acceptance of scientific findings, global warming and evolution. Of those who had opinions more than 4 of 5 students agree with the scientific finding that global temperatures have been increasing in the last 100 years.

On the question concerning the creation of human life, the students are decidedly more conservative with an almost even split between those who believe the literal biblical version of a world that is less than 10,000 years old (48%) and those who believe in evolution either driven by God (42%) or evolution taking place with no divine assistance (11%).

Year in school has no significant impact on opinions on either issue. One might think that those students majoring in math and the natural sciences would be the most likely to reject the biblical version of human creation. In fact, math/engineering, and science

majors were far more likely to support the biblical version than were humanities and fine arts majors (50% and 33% respectively).

Religious fundamentalism had far more to do with beliefs about the creation of human life than academic training. Only a little over a fourth of those who self-identified as non-fundamentalists believed the biblical version (29%), while nearly three-fifths of the religious fundamentalists supported the biblical version (59%).

Civil Liberties—censorship of books in public libraries

We asked whether a book supporting terrorism should be removed from a public library. This is a particularly salient issue to a generation that lived in the era of terrorism throughout most of their formative years. A 21 year old (the median age of our sample) would have been 11 years old when the twin towers were attacked in 9-11-2001.

Students who had opinions were evenly divided with no statistically significant difference between those who would not have the book removed (51%) and those who would remove the book (49%). Year in school may have a slight impact with seniors being about ten percentage points more likely to want to reject removing the book than freshmen, but the difference was not quite statistically significant ($p = 0.065$).

The Confederate Flag

The final issue we asked was whether the Confederate battle flag should be removed from the statehouse grounds in Columbia. This was the issue with the most conservative response of all eleven issues asked. Of those who had opinions, a plurality of 41% want to keep the flag flying, a fourth had mixed feelings, and the remaining third would remove the flag.

Opinions fell along ethnic lines and regional self-identification lines with non-southern whites supporting removal (by 4 to 1) and native southern whites supporting keeping the flag in place (by 2 to 1). As we saw with most other issues, year in school made no difference. Seniors were as likely to oppose removal as were freshmen.

Liberal or Conservative Issue Positions

We saw earlier that more students prefer a self-identification of conservative to liberal (43% to 26%). But if we recode all eleven of the issue questions into liberal, moderate, or conservative positions, we find that despite heavily conservative self-identifications, more students take liberal than conservative positions (34% to 13% with the remaining half in the middle). As is often observed by political scientists, Americans may speak conservatively, but they tend to like more liberal issue positions. USCA students seem to be no exception to this observation.

Ideological Self-identification and Issue Positions

We earlier noted that students shift in ideological self-identification from moderate to liberal between their first and senior year in school with conservatives remaining at about the same proportion. Do they have a corresponding moderate to liberal shift in issue positions?

We did see a slight percentage shift from moderate to liberal in issue positions, but it was much smaller than the shift in ideological self-identification and not statistically significant. Again, conservative issue positions were stable from freshmen to seniors. We would conclude that college does not significantly change students' issue positions, but it does help them better identify what labels to place on their positions, and may perhaps reduce the social stigma that is associated with self-identifying as a liberal in a culture that values the conservative label.

We also examined the congruence between ideological self-identifications and issue positions? Overall we found a strong relationship. Over two-thirds of those labeling themselves as liberals were at the liberal end of the scale of issue positions. However, only a third of those calling themselves conservatives actually were on the conservative end of the issue positions scale. Most conservatives were actually in the middle on issues. Self-identified moderates did fall mostly in the moderate range of the issue positions scale. Moderates and conservative frequently took issue positions that actually placed themselves on the liberal end of the issue positions scale (38% and 11% respectively). Misidentification in the opposite direction was much less frequent with only 3% of self-identified liberals and 4% of the moderates placing themselves on the conservative end of the issue positions scale. When we controlled by year in school, we found that congruence between self-identification and issue position increased with

each additional year in school. This reinforces the observation that college experience improves student's ability to match their identities with their actual issue positions.

Party Identification, Parents, and Party

We asked students their party identifications and the identifications of their mother and fathers as well. Mothers and fathers closely matched each other in party identifications with almost nine in ten having the same identification (Democratic, Republican, or independent). Of course this reinforced the influence of parents on students. And for the most part that influence worked quite efficiently in passing on identifications. About 80% of the Democratic and Republican parents produced offspring with identical partisan identifications. About 60% of the independent parents produced independent offspring. But interestingly, the leakage to either of the parties from independent parents was about two to one in the Democratic direction. Overall, this produced slightly more Democrats among children than among parents.

Nevertheless, both groups were strongly Republican in the balance between the two parties. The Republican/Democratic balance for mothers and fathers (when they agreed) was about 53% to 31% while it was about 45% to 34% among students. What was a 22 percentage point Republican advantage among parents shrunk to an 11 percentage point advantage among students.

Who were most likely to be Republicans and Democrats? White students were overwhelmingly Republican rather than Democrat (64% and 15% respectively), and blacks were even more overwhelmingly Democrat rather than Republican (83% and 2% respectively). So we see that ethnicity continues to divide along partisan lines among the millennials.

Self-identified religious fundamentalists were more likely to be Republican than Democrats (56% and 29% respectively), and non-fundamentalists were more likely to be Democrats than Republicans (42% and 31% respectively).

Non-southerners were more likely to be Democrat than Republican (46% and 25% respectively), and native southerners were more likely to be Republican than Democrat (53% and 30% respectively).

Our own students often confuse partisan identification with ideological identification. Of course they are related, but the relationship is far from perfect. Looking at ideological self-identification and partisan self-identification, we saw a strong relationship. Just over

70% of the liberals saw themselves as Democrats. Almost 40% of the moderates self-identified as independents. And 84% of the conservatives considered themselves to be Republicans. But that left substantial liberals as independents (18%) or Republicans (11%), and a substantial number of conservatives as independents (9%) or even Democrats (8%).

When it comes to taking liberal or conservative issue positions, the relationship with partisanship is much weaker. While 59% of the Democrats take liberal issue positions, only 25% of the Republicans take conservative issue positions. If students chose their party by positions they take on issues, at least on the basis of the eleven issues about which we asked, quite a few more would be Democrats. But early socialization of parents seems to trump issue positions in student partisan self-identification.

Political Knowledge

We asked students a number of political knowledge questions in both the 1997 and the 2011 studies. The seven questions that were identical in the two surveys were as follows: 1) the term of U.S. House members (the correct answer is 2 years); 2) the number of branches in the national government (three); 3) the name of the first ten amendments in the U.S. Constitution (the Bill of Rights); 4) the year in which the Constitution was written (1787); 5) the name of the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (John Roberts in 2011 and William Rehnquist in 1997—we accepted correct last names); and 6) and 7) the names of the two U.S Senators from their home state (correct answers varied with the home states of the students: for SC students in 2011, the answers were Jim DeMint and Lindsay Graham—again last names were scored as correct).

Table 1. Marginal Improvement in Political Knowledge, Except for Senators' Names

Question	1997 -- % Correct	2011 -- % Correct
U.S. House Term	40%	44%
# Branches Nat Govt	68%	73%
1st 10 Amendments	74%	72%
Year Constitution Written	7%	19%
Chief Justice	9%	16%
Name one Senator	67%	15%
Name two Senators	36%	19%

Students seem to have improved on five of the first six questions, suggesting some marginal improvements in political knowledge. However, they did notably less well in naming the U.S. Senators from their home state in 2011. We strongly suspect that this dramatic decline is not a function of knowledge. Rather, the decline is probably due to the difference in relative status of the senators who represented South Carolina in 1997 and in 2011 combined with the fact that the overwhelming majority of our students are from South Carolina. In 1997 the two U.S. Senators from South Carolina were the legendary Strom Thurmond, who never let any child graduate from elementary school without a letter of congratulations, and the slightly less legendary Fritz Hollings, who held the distinction of the longest serving “junior senator” from any state while Strom was in office. While the 2011 U.S. Senators from S.C., Lindsay Graham and Jim DeMint, certainly are nationally known figures, they fall far short of the legendary status and longevity of Fritz and Strom. Indeed, a number of students still listed Strom as their U.S. Senator in 2011, eight years after his death!

Looking at students in 2011, we see some important differences between groups. White students scored significantly higher than black students ($p = 0.026$). We found a gender gap. Male students scored significantly higher than female students ($p = 0.000$). Both the ethnicity and gender gaps are important because the very groups that have the most to gain from political activity are the least knowledgeable about the political system. Better students in terms of GPA scored significantly higher ($p = 0.019$). Thankfully, those students who register and vote know more than those who do not register or vote ($p = 0.003$). Older students scored significantly higher ($p = 0.000$).

Despite the fact that older students scored higher, student knowledge scores did not improve as students moved through their four years of undergraduate education. So the overall college experience did little to improve political knowledge, though maturity did improve knowledge. We also found that parental education was not significantly related to political knowledge scores.

What did improve scores? Paying attention to the news made a positive difference. Those students who more frequently followed news in printed newspapers, on tv, or over the Web scored significantly higher ($p = 0.000$ for each source). Taking a political science course in American Government made a significant difference ($p = 0.019$), but taking an American History course did not ($p = 0.149$).

Sources of News and Consumption of News

We asked how many days in the last week the students obtained news from television, traditional printed papers and from the Internet. Students in 2011 rely far relatively more in the Internet than either television or traditional printed newspapers (means of 2.72, 2.19, and 1.16 days in the previous week respectively). What is most striking here is not that the Internet is the main source or that printed papers come last for these millennials. Rather, we are struck with the fact that the averages are so low. Very few students are daily consumers of the news. Among daily consumers, the Internet again rules (12% reported seven days in the past week for the Internet; 5% for tv; and 2% for printed papers).

We should note that using one source was rarely exclusive. Those who frequently used one source were likely to frequently use other sources. The correlations among these three sources of news were all in the + 0.4 range and all significant ($p = 0.01$). Nevertheless, overall consumption was quite low.

We created a compound measure of news consumption by adding together all sources so that the new variable had a range of 0 (someone who used none of the three sources any day for the previous week) to 21 (someone who used all three sources every day for the previous week). Only 6 people reported a “perfect” score of 21. Only 36, or 7% of the sample, scored 14 or higher. A little over a third (36%) reported obtaining news from some source 7 days in the last week or more. At the other end, 13% reported a score of 0 over the previous week, and another 9% reported a score of 1. The grossly inattentive overwhelm the relatively attentive.

These low levels of news consumption are important. We have already noted that frequency of getting news improves political knowledge. Low political news consumers also are significantly less likely to register or vote.

Total media consumption was positively and significantly associated with having taken an American National Government class (4.7 versus 6.8 days, $p = 0.000$). It was also positively associated with having taken an American history class, but the shift was not as great (4.7 versus 6.1 days, $p = 0.001$). If we want to increase the consumption of political news, requiring taking either American Government or American History, as we have done, seems to have a positive impact.

As we saw in political knowledge, men were far more likely to report more days in consuming political news from some media source in the preceding week than women

(7.3 versus 4.9; $p = 0.000$). However, the difference between whites and blacks was less than a day and not quite statistically significant ($p = 0.08$).

Campus Activities and College Performance

Going to college is far more than just attending classes. With a third of our undergraduates living on campus, the school offers a range of activities and clubs and organizations. A little over half of our undergraduates reported no memberships in campus clubs or organizations. About a fourth reported being in one, and the remaining students reported two or more.

While getting involved in campus organizations is important because of the social skills and contacts these activities provide, involvement may also be linked to better overall academic performance, at least up to a point. We found that joining clubs and organization significantly improved GPA up to joining two clubs or organizations. But as the number increased to three or four, GPA began to fall significantly. This suggests that a healthy social life complemented and enhanced academic life, but more than two activities seemed to create an over-commitment that actually harmed academic performance. Students might be wise to concentrate their extra-curricular time into one or two activities, but be aware that getting too involved might have a negative consequence on their academic performance.

We found two significant barriers that might explain why so many students do not involve themselves in more campus activities. Working 20 or more hours a week in paid employment significantly reduced campus activities. Employment, an ever increasing burden on our students because of decreasing state support and increasing tuition, affects a large segment of our students. A fourth of our students reported working in excess of 20 hours a week. At the other end, 40% reported no paid employment outside of school.

Commuting times of 21 or more minutes to campus had a similar effect to that of employment on joining campus clubs and organizations. Almost a third of our students have a commuting time of more than 20 minutes. A little under one in ten commute for more than 45 minutes each way every day they come to campus.