

Political Professors and the Perception of Bias in the College Classroom

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ABSTRACT


This article addresses three related questions. Does voicing a political ideology in class make a professor less appealing to students? Does voicing an ideology in class make a professor less appealing to students with opposing views? Does the intensity of professors' ideology affect their appeal? We conducted survey experiments in two public national universities to provide evidence of the extent to which students may tolerate or even prefer that professors share their political views and under which conditions these preferences may vary. Results from the experiments indicate that expressing a political opinion did not make a professor less appealing to students—and, in fact, made the professor more appealing to some students—but the perception that a professor's ideology is particularly intense makes the class much less favorable for students with opposing views. Students are indifferent between moderately political and nonpolitical professors.


In 2017, the Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, echoed the feeling of many conservatives in railing against academic culture. “The faculty, from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think.” The accusation that professors are too liberal and are indoctrinating their students is not new (Bloom 1987; Horowitz 2010), and the decades-long repetition of this message in conservative circles may be affecting public opinion. In 2019, a Pew Research Center study found that 59% of Republicans believed higher education had a negative effect on the United States, continuing a trend that the nonpartisan think tank first detected in 2016 (Kreighbaum 2019). The claim that academics are politically to the left of the general public has been confirmed by several studies (Langbert and Stevens 2020; Stolzenberg et al. 2019). The hypothesis that this ideological tendency of the faculty influences students' ideologies, however, has not received much substantive support in the literature (Marianni and Hewitt 2008; Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009). The type of preferences that students have in terms of the ideology displayed by their professors is much less understood. Many observers assume that partisan displays by professors are naturally frowned on by students, but the research on this is sparse.

Giersch (2020) found, in fact, that political neutrality is the best option for professors if they are trying to attract a maximum number of students. However, there also is interesting variation in how students respond to ideological professors. Conservative teachers, for example, tend to be more polarizing than liberal teachers, and the negative reaction of liberal students to conservative professors tends to be stronger than their positive reaction to like-minded professors. We expand on this work by examining in closer detail the extent to which students avoid professors who bring politics into the classroom. This article addresses three related questions. Does voicing a political ideology in class make a professor less appealing to students? Does voicing an ideology in class make a professor less appealing to students with opposing views? Does the intensity of professors' ideology affect their appeal? We conducted survey experiments in two public universities to provide evidence of the extent to which students may tolerate or even prefer that professors share their political views and under which conditions these preferences may vary.

IDEOLOGICAL PROFESSORS AND STUDENT PREFERENCES

Several studies have questioned the portrait favored by conservative pundits that college students are exposed to relentless ideological indoctrination. Woessner and Kelly-Woessner (2009) found that although students could identify their professors' party affiliations, they apparently did not think they inappropriately promoted them during class time. For the most part, professors are more subtle than how they often are portrayed. Other scholars found little evidence of professors manipulating students'

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ideologies, despite repeated claims of indoctrination in higher education (Larregue 2018; Linvill and Havice 2011; Mariani and Hewitt 2008). Woessner and Kelly-Woessner (2014) similarly found that most conservative students do not feel ostracized or discriminated against on campus, but they do hold universities at least partly responsible for the dearth of conservatives choosing academia as a professional career.

Although Giersch (2020) found that students prefer politically ambiguous professors, it may be the case that they object to only the most intensely partisan instructors and those who allow politics to bias their evaluation of students. Given the findings of Woessner and Kelly-Woessner (2009) that students feel that liberal professors, in fact, are open to hearing students' opposing viewpoints, it may be that students find a little partisanship from their professor to make class more interesting than none at all. This would please students who seek a comfortable and open learning environment that allows them to think about issues in new ways. Professors taking more assertive partisan positions, conversely, could provoke affective polarization, leading to hostility and avoidance (Iyengar et al. 2019). This study examines more closely how students react to partisan politics from their professors, testing the proposition that they may welcome a certain amount of politicking by opposite partisans as long as it is accompanied by political tolerance.

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RESEARCH DESIGN

We tested three specific hypotheses about student preferences regarding politics in the classroom. First, we tested the hypothesis that voicing a political ideology in class makes a professor less appealing to students. Second, we tested the hypothesis that voicing an ideology in class makes a professor less appealing to students with opposing views. Third, we tested the hypothesis that the effect of expressing an ideology depends on the intensity of the expression.

To test these hypotheses, we obtained data from two experiments in distinct but similar public research universities. All participants were asked to indicate their political ideology (e.g., extremely liberal or somewhat liberal). Respondents then received a fictitious [RateMyProfessor.com](https://www.ratemyprofessor.com) profile with a gender-neutral name created by the researchers (see the online appendix). Each participant was shown one of six different versions: control, politics without bias, moderately conservative, moderately liberal, very conservative, and very liberal.

All six versions of the [RateMyProfessor.com](https://www.ratemyprofessor.com) profile included three reviews by students. Two reviews rated the professor as "good" with vague comments about good teaching. These two reviews appeared in all six versions. The third review described the professor as "average" without any additional comment for the control but included the comment, "likes to get into controversial political topics, but your opinion won't affect your grade," for the "politics without bias" treatment. The nonpolitical control condition, therefore, has no mention of politics, whereas the other treatments vary in the manner and content of how politics is

incorporated. The "moderate conservative/liberal" treatments included the comment, "Kind of liberal/conservative, which I'm not, but it didn't affect my grade." The "very conservative" and "very liberal" treatments included a comment that read, "Very conservative/liberal! Constantly pushes the Republican/Democrat agenda. Fair grader, though." We intentionally chose these wordings to keep the politics of the professor separate from concerns about unfair grading and poor-quality teaching.

Participants who were perfectly moderate could receive any one of the six versions. Students who self-identified as at all liberal received either the "control," "politics without bias," "low bias conservative," or "high bias conservative" version. Students who were at all conservative received either the "control," "politics without bias," "low bias liberal," or "high bias liberal" version. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the frames. We did not expect a perfectly even distribution because partisan respondents were not given treatments that conformed to their own political identity. The "politics without bias" and "no politics" treatments could be assigned to anyone.

All participants were asked, "How likely is it that you would sign up for this professor's course?" with five options ranging from "very likely" to "very unlikely." The first hypothesis was tested by observing the difference between the "politics without bias" condition and the control, which did not mention any partisanship on

the part of the professor. If students receiving the former expressed more interest in the class, this indicated that expressing ideology is not in and of itself a liability as far as students were concerned.

The second hypothesis was tested by contrasting the effect of the "low bias" treatments among partisan respondents. In other words, did partisan students have a preference between professors who are presented as having a different partisan identity than their own and a professor for whom no political activity in the classroom was reported?

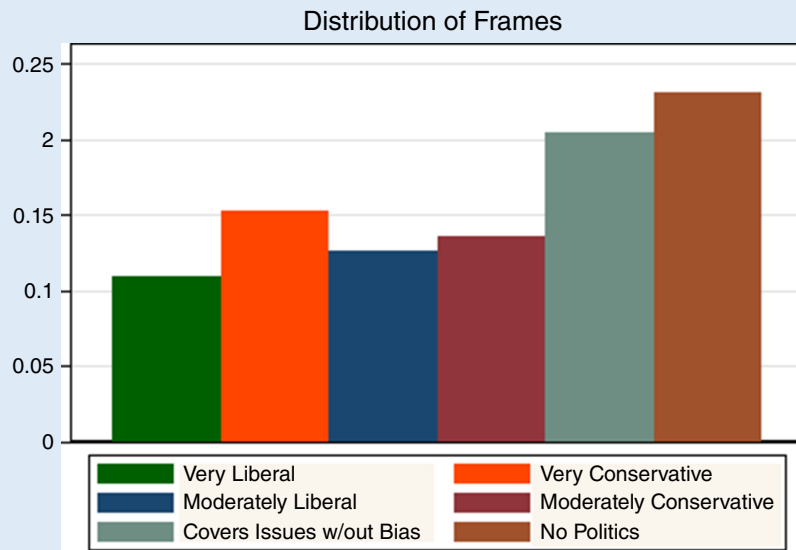
The third hypothesis was tested by observing the average effect of students who were exposed to a treatment reporting strong partisan activity versus those in which only moderate or no activity was expressed. We also controlled for the gender of the respondent (female=1), whether the student was a political science major, and the university attended.

SAMPLE

The experiments were conducted at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) and the University of South Alabama (USA) in the spring of 2020. UNCC is a research university with a student body of almost 30,000 and an acceptance rate of more than 60%. According to [niche.com](https://www.niche.com), it has a relatively conservative culture, ranking 703 of 1,674 in its list of the "Most Conservative Colleges in America." USA also is a large research institution but only half the size of UNCC in terms of its student body and with a more generous acceptance rate of almost 80%. USA is similar in terms of political culture, ranking 618 on [niche.com](https://www.niche.com)'s list. Focus-group sessions conducted by the researcher at

Figure 1

Distribution of “Rate My Professor” Frames



Note: Partisans were not exposed to frames confirming their own bias.

UNCC with students associated with College Democrats and College Republicans indicated that the campus political culture is “neutral” with little political activism (Giersch 2020). Surveys at USA indicated that the student body is divided equally among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, and political participation is low (Liebertz 2021).

The recruitment strategies for participants in the two experiments were distinct and may account for some of the differences in the results. At UNCC, most respondents were solicited from introductory political science classes that meet a general-education requirement. At USA, information about the survey was sent to all university professors, who then were asked to share the survey with their students. An announcement also ran for two days in a university-wide email bulletin. Of the 1,461 total respondents, 681 were from USA and 780 were from UNCC. In both cases, students took the survey via the online Qualtrics platform. Table 1A in the online appendix reports the distribution of student ideology, gender, and major, as well as how these characteristics were distributed across the various frames. The sample skewed toward women, with males representing only 38% of respondents. In terms of political ideology, there was substantial variation with about 28% of the overall sample identifying as moderate, 31% as conservative, and 41% as liberal (Liebertz and Giersch 2021).

RESULTS

To test the first hypothesis, we observed the difference between the “politics without bias” and “no politics” treatment conditions. Because the dependent variable was an ordinal measure, we tested all hypotheses with ordered logit regressions. Figure 2 is a coefficient plot demonstrating the effect of each frame (from both campuses combined) when compared against the control of “no politics.” The figure shows that the “politics without bias” condition was strongly preferred. This suggests that instead of wanting

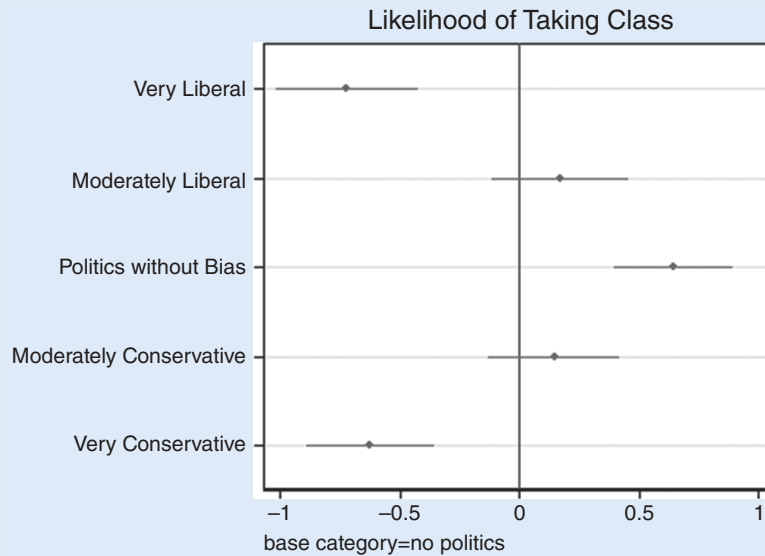
Table 1
Likelihood of Taking Class (Both Campuses)

	(1)	(2)	PS Majors
Very Liberal	0.466*** (0.078)	0.486*** (0.088)	0.199*** (0.085)
Moderately Liberal	1.223 (0.201)	1.185 (0.206)	0.842 (0.330)
Politics without Bias	1.859*** (0.267)	1.901*** (0.288)	1.065 (0.338)
Moderately Conservative	1.223 (0.195)	1.155 (0.193)	0.869 (0.313)
Very Conservative	0.565*** (0.088)	0.535*** (0.087)	0.382*** (0.140)
Political Science Major		1.290** (0.167)	
University of South Alabama		0.540*** (0.061)	
Female		1.580*** (0.171)	1.456* (0.325)
N	1,461	1,333	300
R ²	0.022	0.029	0.039

Notes: Odds ratios; standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

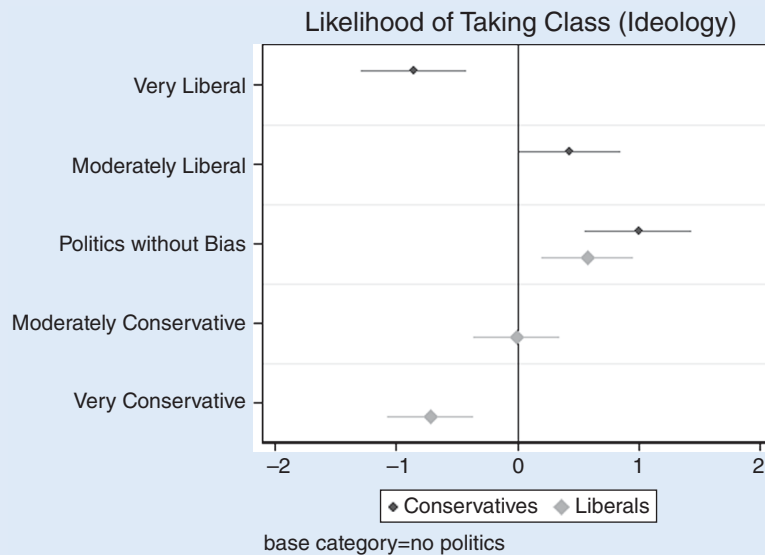
professors to be perfectly neutral and nonpolitical, students like the idea of their teachers bringing politics into the classroom—as long as it is done fairly. Table 1 reports the results of ordinal logistical regressions in the form of odds ratios. When we controlled for other factors, students exposed to the “politics without bias” condition rather than the “no politics” treatment were 86% more likely to express a higher category of favorability toward

Figure 2
Coefficient Plot Indicating the Effect of “Rate My Professor” Style Frames



Note: Data from UNCC and USA are combined.

Figure 3
Coefficient Plot Indicating the Effect of “Rate My Professor” Style Frames, by Ideology



taking the class. In model 2, we controlled for gender, major, and university and found that identifying as female and majoring in political science were associated with a greater appeal of the professor; attending USA was associated with less appeal. Including these variables in the regression did not change the substantive results for any of the hypotheses. In model 2, students receiving the “politics without bias” treatment were 90% more apt to choose a category expressing a higher likelihood of taking the class.

To test the second hypothesis, we examined the effects of the “moderately liberal” and “moderately conservative” treatments. The coefficient plot in figure 2 shows that the average effect of both frames is to the right of zero, indicating a preference for some explicit partisanship rather than none at all. The error bars, however, cross zero so we cannot conclude with 95% confidence that there is, in fact, a positive preference in this regard. Nevertheless, it is interesting that, at worst, students had an equal preference for professors who express moderate partisanship

Table 2
Likelihood of Taking Class (by Ideology)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
Very Liberal		0.579 (0.205)	0.425*** (0.112)
Moderately Liberal		0.782 (0.287)	1.545* (0.391)
Politics without Bias	1.783** (0.406)	1.193 (0.410)	2.720*** (0.728)
Moderately Conservative	0.993 (0.215)	1.040 (0.370)	
Very Conservative	0.490*** (0.106)	0.424** (0.143)	
Political Science Major	1.537** (0.307)	1.031 (0.283)	1.160 (0.274)
University of South Alabama	0.517*** (0.092)	0.575** (0.132)	0.591** (0.124)
Female	1.630*** (0.291)	1.539** (0.332)	1.359 (0.265)
<i>N</i>	548	333	406
<i>R</i> ²	0.039	0.025	0.053

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses.
p* < 0.10, *p* < 0.05, ****p* < 0.01.

different from their own as they did for nonpolitical professors. This calls into question Giersch's (2020) conclusion that most students prefer a professor who is politically ambiguous.

Figure 3 and table 2 separate conservatives and liberals from moderates. When combining results from both campuses and excluding moderates, we found more confirming evidence that conservatives prefer a moderately liberal to a nonpolitical professor. Specifically, conservatives were 55% more likely to express a higher category of favorability toward a class if they were exposed to the "moderately liberal" professor condition rather than the control. The same cannot be said for liberals, however, who

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expressed no difference in preference for a class taught by a "moderately conservative" professor. This may indicate that conservative students are more open to having their political ideas challenged in the classroom.

Finally, we tested the third hypothesis by observing the effects of the "very liberal" and "very conservative" treatments. Figure 2 indicates that there was a strong aversion to professors whose partisanship in class was particularly intense, at least among students who did not share their professor's ideology. Conservative and moderate students were 51% less likely to choose a higher category of favorability toward a class when the professor was very liberal, and liberal and moderate students were similarly 46% less likely to do so when confronted with a very conservative professor

(see table 1, model 2). These effects were consistent across both universities, although conservative and moderate students at the University of South Alabama appear to be significantly less averse to a liberal professor. It is interesting that table 2 demonstrates that moderates were put off by a "very conservative" professor but not by a "very liberal" one. Although the effect of the "very liberal" treatment is negative, it is not significantly different than zero. This evidence is consistent with Giersch (2020), who observed that students are more skeptical of conservative professors than they are of liberal professors.

Model 3 in table 1 restricts the results to only political science majors, and it is interesting that only the coefficients for the "very liberal" and "very conservative" treatment conditions were statistically significant from zero. Conservative and moderate students majoring in political science were 82% less likely to choose a higher category of favorability toward a class if it was taught by an outspoken liberal partisan. Liberal and moderate students were similarly 63% less inclined to express more likelihood of taking a class taught by an intensely political conservative.

DISCUSSION

Critics of the generally liberal professoriate often assume that students prefer their professors to be nonpolitical; however, we found that this is not necessarily the case. Students in this study were most drawn to classes taught by professors who raise political issues in the classroom but who do so fairly and without explicit reference to their partisan affiliation. Even when given the example of a professor of the opposite ideology, students were not necessarily turned away. They seemed to regard this situation as comparable to taking a class taught by a nonpolitical professor, and there even was evidence that conservatives prefer professors who are explicit about their moderate liberalism rather than those who avoid politics altogether. This is a particularly interesting finding given that the narrative in conservative media is one in which right-leaning students are victimized by the explicit left-wing politics of their teachers. Moreover, scholars' understanding of ideology and personality traits tends to suggest that conservatives avoid the unfamiliar but that preference disappears

in less-threatening contexts (Crawford 2017; Sibley, Osborne, and Duckitt 2012), which may be the case in an imagined college classroom.

In our analysis, conservative students differed from liberal students not only in their interest in taking a class with a moderately liberal professor but also in the strength of their preference for taking a class with a political professor without a named ideology rather than a nonpolitical professor, which liberals also preferred but to a smaller degree. Are conservative students more tolerant of professors who bring politics into the classroom; if so, why? One explanation may be that if professors are most often liberal (or often assumed to be), conservative students may have become accustomed to learning from

professors with opposing views. Liberal students are less likely to have had such an experience and may find the prospect more intimidating as a result. This also may explain why Giersch (2020) found that students identifying as Democrats wanted to

cowed by professors known to raise opposite political ideas, students in our study were not deterred from taking a class as long as the professor was known as fair and not too intensely partisan.

Far from being cowed by professors known to raise opposite political ideas, students in our study were not deterred from taking a class as long as the professor was known as fair and not too intensely partisan.

avoid conservative professors, whereas Republican students were not opposed to learning from liberal professors. Despite the divergent behaviors in response to the “no bias” and “low partisanship” treatments, liberal and conservative participants in this study expressed dislike for a “strongly partisan” professor to a similar degree. Whereas the main lesson from this study is that students want professors to discuss politics when they are not excessively partisan, there also are interesting differences between liberal and conservative students that warrant further research.

This study had the benefit of being conducted in two different settings to provide more robustness to the results. Although the experiment was not perfectly replicated on both campuses, the general results are similar. Among students at both UNCC and USA, the preferred classroom setting is one in which the professor explicitly brings up political issues but in a fair and partisan-neutral way. At both campuses, the least-favorable scenario is one in which a professor is intensely partisan and of a different ideology than that of a student.

There nevertheless are weaknesses to the present study. Although the two sites are similar in terms of type of institution, geographical region, and political culture of the student body, there are differences as well. At USA, respondents were overwhelmingly female and few were political science majors. At UNCC, there was close gender parity and a strong presence of political science majors. In both cases, the survey instrument was embedded in larger surveys covering several unrelated topics. These other topics were not consistent across the two sites, and other content in the survey may have affected student responses. Although representative samples are not as important when conducting experimental research, in neither study were students selected in a random process. It is possible that the type of students who were willing to take the survey is systematically different than their peers and that this affected how they respond to the treatments, which were randomly assigned. Neither are both schools representative of the general student population at large; therefore, these results are not generalizable.

Despite these drawbacks, this study improves our understanding of an important phenomenon regarding the issue of professors' political bias but which often is ignored: the preferences of students. We perhaps should resist the notion that students require a classroom environment in which professors are completely silent about their political preferences. Not only is this scenario dubious pedagogically, it also does not even appear to be what is preferred by students themselves. Far from being

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication materials are available on Harvard Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/LLI8HS>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000640>. ■

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