

## Looking for Balance on Campus? Head South

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In an age of canceled college speakers and political indoctrination in K-12 schools, I am often asked where college students can go to be exposed to real viewpoint diversity and avoid a liberal monoculture.

The blunt truth is that aside from a handful of schools, few colleges have avoided the progressive wave on campuses across the country. But while progressives make a lot of noise, their hold on higher education is not geographically uniform. Today, our Southern schools remain places where Gen Z Americans – those currently in high school and college – can go to find the greatest number of politically open-minded students.

It's important to note that our nation's college students are not uniformly Democratic. National data from College Pulse shows that 37% of college students identify as strong or weak Democrats while another 11% identify as strong or weak Republicans. Fifty-three percent are Independents, lean a bit to the left or right, or are something else entirely. While there may not be partisan parity, lots of college students are not yet set in their political identity.

Students in search of a diversity of opinion should be wary of Mid-Atlantic schools, where the majority of students (51%) identify as Democrats, with just 9% calling themselves Republicans and another 41% classed as Independents, leaners, or something else. New England schools have a majority (48%) of Democratic-identifying students and a minority (10%) of Republicans. Southern schools, by contrast, show the greatest degree of partisan centrism. Over half of students in Southern schools (55%) are Independents, leaners, or something else, while a little over a third (34%) are Democrats and 10% are Republicans.

Students in the South are more likely (61%) than students in most other regions to say that neither major party represents their interests and outlook particularly well. That figure is a bit higher in the West at 63%, while 59% in the Midwest feel the same way. Compared to other regions, the South is in the upper cluster. In sharp contrast, New England students answer differently; 39% like the Democratic Party, while just 50% say that no party represents their interests. Many students in New England are unhappy with the status quo, but their disaffection numbers are notably lower than those of students in the South.

However, it's important to note that Southern students are in no way politically disengaged or apathetic. Sixty-four percent of Southern students report engaging with politics – a number

comparable with rates in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, and West. The number is a bit higher for students in New England (69%).

Students around the country are concerned with many of the same issues: 31% of students in the South, 37% in the West, and 34% in the Mid-Atlantic say that the environment and climate change are the issues of most concern. Next in importance are inequalities between the rich and the poor, racial inequality, and gun policy. While some regional variation exists – reproductive health is a greater concern in New England and the Midwest, and gun control a greater concern in the Midwest and South – students across regions are largely committed to addressing the same issues, even if their approaches to doing so differ.

If high school students want a politically heterodox education, they should look to the South. At Southern schools, they will not be sheltered from 21st-century ideas or the realities of the world; they also won't be cocooned in a liberal bubble with so many like-minded student peers. Of course, variations exist: conservative and independent students can still find community and thrive at certain progressive institutions. Often, such student cohorts are tight-knit, given the dominant liberal environment on campus. (This includes famously progressive Sarah Lawrence College in the Mid-Atlantic, where I teach, and where my former students have gone on to work across the political spectrum, from the ACLU to the Cato Institute.)

To find an environment of politically open-minded peers, students should look beyond the ivied walls and gates of storied colleges in the Northeast to the open quads and fields of many Southern colleges and universities. They may find greener pastures where they least expect it.