Political Self-characterization of U.S. Medical Students

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BACKGROUND: There have been no prior studies of the political self-characterization of U.S. physicians-in-training, and little is known about physicians’ political leanings or the critical relationship between medical issues and political orientations of physicians and physicians-in-training.

METHODS: All medical students in the class of 2003 at 16 nationally representative U.S. schools were eligible to complete three questionnaire administrations (at freshman orientation, entrance to wards, and senior year).

RESULTS: Among these medical students, 5% self-characterized as politically very conservative, 21% conservative, 33% moderate, 31% liberal, and 9% as very liberal. Being male, white, Protestant, intending to specialize in Surgery or anesthesiology/pathology/radiology, or currently or previously being married significantly (P≤.001) increased the likelihood that a student self-identified as very conservative or conservative. Disagreement or strong disagreement with the statements “I'm glad I chose to become a physician” and “Access to care is a fundamental human right” were also both associated with being very conservative or conservative. Being more liberal was reported by blacks and Hispanics; those intending to become ob-gyns, psychiatrists, and pediatric subspecialists; and atheists, Jews, and adherents of eastern religions.

CONCLUSIONS: U.S. medical students are considerably more likely to be liberal than conservative and are more likely to be liberal than are other young U.S. adults. Future U.S. physicians may be more receptive to liberal messages than conservative ones, and their political orientation may profoundly affect their health system attitudes.

KEY WORDS: medical students; physicians; politics; political orientation; attitudes.

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Table 1. Political Self-Characterization of U.S. Medical Students by Demographic Characteristics

|                          | Number of students | Conservative |        | Moderate |        | Liberal |        | Chi-square | P value |
|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------|--------|----------|--------|---------|--------|------------|---------|
|                          |                    | % (SE)       | % (SE) | % (SE)   |        | % (SE)  |        |            |         |
| Total                    | 4,918              | 26 (3)       | 33 (2) | 41 (4)   |        |         |        |            | 0.03    |
| Time point               |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            |         |
| Freshman orientation    | 1,843              | 25 (3)       | 36 (2) | 39 (4)   |        |         |        |            | 0.0001  |
| Entry to wards           | 1,618              | 27 (3)       | 31 (2) | 43 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Senior year              | 1,457              | 26 (3)       | 33 (2) | 41 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Gender                   |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            |         |
| Female                   | 2,260              | 18 (2)       | 32 (2) | 49 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Male                     | 2,654              | 33 (3)       | 34 (2) | 33 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Mother's education       |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            |         |
| Not a high school graduate | 81                | 17 (4)       | 43 (6) | 40 (5)   |        |         |        |            | 0.0002  |
| High school graduate     | 240                | 27 (4)       | 35 (4) | 38 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Some college             | 284                | 33 (6)       | 34 (4) | 33 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| College graduate         | 625                | 28 (3)       | 38 (2) | 35 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Graduate school          | 549                | 20 (3)       | 35 (2) | 46 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Medical school           | 60                 | 17 (5)       | 38 (6) | 45 (7)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Father’s Education       |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            |         |
| Not a high school graduate | 79                | 22 (7)       | 40 (9) | 38 (6)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| High school graduate     | 178                | 22 (5)       | 36 (5) | 42 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Some college             | 163                | 23 (4)       | 40 (5) | 36 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| College graduate         | 420                | 30 (4)       | 34 (3) | 35 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Graduate school          | 696                | 25 (3)       | 34 (2) | 41 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Medical school           | 296                | 23 (4)       | 39 (3) | 38 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Ethnicity                |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            | <0.001  |
| Asian                    | 932                | 17 (3)       | 41 (2) | 42 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Black                    | 388                | 9 (2)        | 33 (4) | 58 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Hispanic                 | 201                | 15 (3)       | 32 (4) | 53 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Native American/Other    | 242                | 23 (4)       | 40 (4) | 37 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| White                    | 3,141              | 32 (4)       | 31 (2) | 38 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Specialty†               |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            | 0.2     |
| Primary care             | 1,423              | 25 (4)       | 33 (2) | 43 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Nonprimary care          | 2,752              | 27 (3)       | 32 (2) | 40 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Individual specialty     |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            | <0.0001 |
| Anesthesiology/pathology/radiology | 342  | 34 (3)       | 34 (3) | 32 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Emergency med            | 338                | 25 (5)       | 34 (3) | 41 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Family med               | 477                | 31 (3)       | 28 (2) | 41 (6)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| General internal med     | 366                | 24 (4)       | 35 (2) | 41 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Med subspecialty         | 455                | 24 (4)       | 32 (4) | 44 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Ob/gyn                   | 268                | 16 (4)       | 24 (4) | 60 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Pediatrics               | 537                | 21 (3)       | 36 (3) | 43 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Psychiatry               | 116                | 17 (7)       | 27 (3) | 56 (7)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Surgery                  | 647                | 34 (3)       | 37 (2) | 29 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Pediatric subspecialty   | 153                | 25 (5)       | 22 (2) | 53 (6)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Other                    | 437                | 27 (3)       | 31 (2) | 42 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Undecided                | 698                | 23 (3)       | 39 (3) | 38 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Urology                  | 34                 | 29 (10)      | 32 (8) | 38 (9)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Religion                 |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            | <0.0001 |
| Atheist/None             | 879                | 9 (1)        | 29 (2) | 63 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Buddhist                 | 78                 | 9 (4)        | 42 (8) | 49 (8)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Hindu                    | 231                | 8 (2)        | 41 (4) | 51 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Muslim                   | 119                | 21 (8)       | 43 (4) | 36 (8)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Catholic                 | 1,105              | 30 (3)       | 35 (3) | 35 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Jewish                   | 323                | 17 (3)       | 26 (3) | 58 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Other Christian          | 814                | 31 (2)       | 41 (3) | 28 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Protestant               | 1,102              | 45 (5)       | 30 (2) | 26 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Other                    | 235                | 9 (3)        | 30 (4) | 61 (5)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Ever been married        |                    |              |        |          |        |         |        |            | 0.0005  |
| Yes                      | 1,002              | 39 (5)       | 31 (2) | 30 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| No                       | 3,885              | 23 (2)       | 34 (1) | 43 (3)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| I’m glad I chose to become a physician | 2,523  | 26 (3)       | 33 (2) | 42 (3)   |        |         |        |            | 0.002   |
| Strongly agree/Agree     | 315                | 29 (3)       | 25 (3) | 46 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Neutral                  | 103                | 33 (5)       | 26 (4) | 41 (6)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Access to care is a fundamental right | 3,781  | 22 (2)       | 34 (2) | 45 (3)   |        |         |        |            | 0.0001  |
| Strongly agree/Agree     | 592                | 38 (4)       | 32 (3) | 30 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |
| Neutral                  | 366                | 53 (5)       | 27 (3) | 20 (4)   |        |         |        |            |         |

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could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. When necessary, we used Dillman’s 11 5-stage mailing process to maximize response rates. Whereas the political orientation questions were not validated, several other variables (including dietary habits and actual counseling practices) were extensively tested, with strong findings for validity.12

Our outcome of interest for this paper was students’ self-characterized political identification, which was reported as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, and very liberal. Independent variables tested for association with the primary outcome were time point in medical school, gender, specialty, self-defined ethnicity, religion, having ever been married, intended specialty, and Likert-scaled responses to the statements: “I’m glad I chose to become a physician,” “Access to care is a fundamental right,” “Doctors have a responsibility to promote prevention with their patients,” and “Having a high prestige career is important to me.” Bivariate associations between our outcome and independent predictor variables were tested using the chi-square test.

### RESULTS

Of medical students across all 3 years, 5% self-characterized as politically very conservative, 21% conservative, 33% moderate, 31% liberal, and 9% very liberal. Being male, white, Protestant, intending to specialize in Surgery or Anesthesiology/Radiology, or currently or previously married significantly ($P \leq .001$) increased the likelihood that a student self-identified as very conservative or conservative (Table 1). Liberalism was somewhat bimodally distributed by maternal education level ($P = .0001$); similarly, students were most likely to be conservative when their fathers possessed only a bachelor’s degree ($P = .0002$). Disagreement or strong disagreement with the statements: “I’m glad I chose to become a physician” and “Access to care is a fundamental human right” were also both associated with being very conservative or conservative. Being more liberal was reported by blacks and Hispanics; those intending to become ob-gyns, psychiatrists, and pediatric subspecialists; and Atheists, Jews, and eastern religions. Years in medical school, primary versus nonprimary care intentions, interest in prevention, and importance of prestige to one’s career were not significantly associated with political self-characterization.

### CONCLUSIONS

Only a quarter of the population we surveyed self-characterized as conservative or very conservative, with nearly twice as many medical students characterizing as liberals versus conservatives and as very liberal versus very conservative. This population of medical students is considerably more liberal than as shown in a 2003 Gallup Poll of other young Americans (Table 2).13

The only other recent large study of the political self-characterization of U.S. physicians or physicians-in-training is our WPHS,14 which also showed that more (women) physicians self-characterized as liberal (28%) or very liberal (9%) than conservative (21%) or very conservative (6%).14 The Women Physicians’ Health Study also showed that conservatism was more common among older than younger women physicians, although we cannot know whether the higher rates of liberalism among younger women physicians (and the slightly higher rates among the physicians-in-training we studied in this article versus women physicians overall) are a cohort effect or the effect of aging. Also, both in WPHS and in this medical student study, African Americans and psychiatrists were more likely to be liberal. A dissimilar finding was that Asians and Hispanics in WPHS were considerably less likely to be liberal than were other ethnicities, and this was true even when adjusted for country of origin.

We found strong relationships between political orientation and demographic and professional characteristics and atti-

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**Table 1. (continued)**

| Political self-characterization* | Number of students | Conservative (%) (SE) | Moderate (%) (SE) | Liberal (%) (SE) | Chi-square P value |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| **Doctors have a responsibility to promote prevention with their patients** | | | | | |
| Strongly agree/Agree | 4,299 | 26 (3) | 33 (2) | 41 (4) | 0.1 |
| Neutral | 345 | 30 (2) | 37 (2) | 33 (3) | |
| Disagree/Strongly disagree | 45 | 31 (6) | 22 (8) | 47 (8) | 0.5 |
| **Having a high prestige career is important to me** | | | | | |
| Strongly agree/Agree | 594 | 27 (3) | 33 (2) | 40 (4) | |
| Neutral | 381 | 25 (3) | 36 (3) | 39 (4) | |
| Disagree/Strongly disagree | 403 | 27 (2) | 29 (4) | 44 (5) | |

*Percent (SE) of students responding: very conservative 5% (1), conservative 21% (2), moderate 33% (2), liberal 31% (2), and very liberal 9% (1)

†Undecided students are excluded.

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**Table 2. A Comparison of the Politics of U.S. Medical Students and Other Young U.S. Adults**

|          | Liberal (%) | Moderate (%) | Conservative (%) |
|----------|-------------|--------------|------------------|
| U.S. medical students | 40 | 33 | 26 |
| U.S. 18- to 24-year-olds | 30 | 39 | 29 |
| U.S. 25- to 38-year-olds | 23 | 36 | 39 |
tudes. Some others have also found that receptivity to organized programs for sociomedical problems depend on political orientation, and that, for example, nursing students’ political affiliations correspond with their attitudes about mental illness. However, a cross-sectional survey on the attitudes and practices of pediatric critical care attending physicians and nurses at 31 pediatric hospitals in the United States \( (n=110) \) and nurses \( (n=92) \) found no association between political or religious affiliation and attitudes about end-of-life care.\(^\text{16}\)

Very little information is available on the political characteristics of students outside the health professions. A survey of law students conducted in the early 1970s revealed that atheists and agnostics, and more women and minority students (vs white male students) identified as liberal or “left,” and that Orthodox Jews and Catholics tended to be more conservative than those from other religious backgrounds (although no summary statistics on orientation were provided). The study also found that women were more likely than men to choose reformist motivations to study law, such as service to the underprivileged.\(^\text{17}\)

Although we know little about U.S. men physicians’ politics, it is clear that U.S. medical students (of both genders) and women physicians are considerably more likely to be liberal than conservative. As medical educators, organizations, and policy makers seek to represent and harness the clinical and political energies of U.S. physicians, they would do well to recognize that more physicians may be more receptive to liberal messages and actions than to conservative ones. Furthermore, political orientation is important because it profoundly affects health system attitudes. For example, given that liberal students were far more likely to agree that access to health care is a fundamental human right, the political orientation toward prevention. Am J Prev Med. 1987;3:12–8.

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