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Recommended Citation

Djupe, Paul A., "Are there Partisan Rebels Anymore? Whither Alex P. Keaton" (2021). *Faculty Publications*. 1801.

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Are there Partisan Rebels Anymore? Whither Alex P. Keaton

Paul A. Djupe

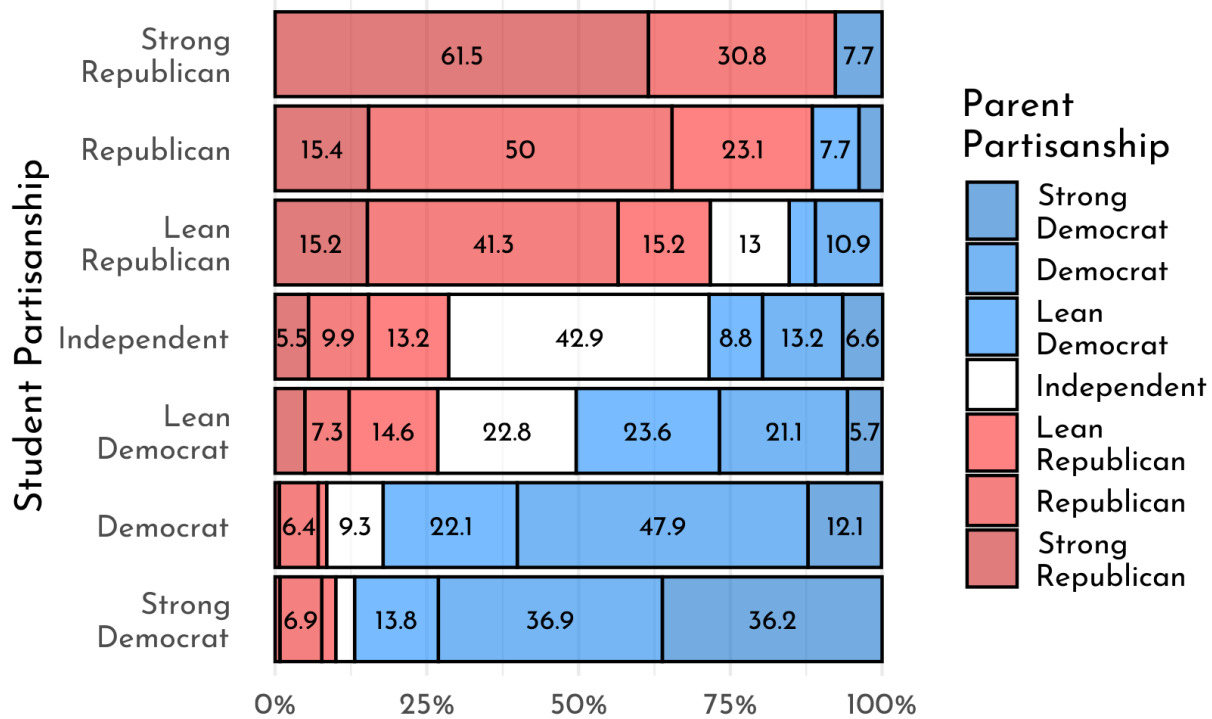
February 22, 2021

By Paul A. Djupe

A hundred years ago in the 1980s, Alex P. Keaton was the Wall Street-worshipping, Republican child of reformed hippies on the sitcom Family Ties. Played by Michael J. Fox, Alex was a mystery to his parents – where did he come from? But the 1980s were a different time, when partisan animosity wasn't so extreme. By 2010, about 40 percent of partisans would be upset if their offspring married someone from the other party where it has remained stable through to 2020 (fascinating results show Democrats are more open to their child marrying someone with all sorts of different backgrounds). Of course, this assumes that their offspring share their same party affiliation. Is that true?

In October 2020, just before the presidential election, we asked nearly 600 Denisonians how they identified with an American political party as well as how their parents tended to identify (“On average, which of these party labels best describes YOUR PARENTS?”). The results in the figure below show a tremendous amount of intergenerational transmission of partisanship. Of the strong student identifiers, about 90 percent of parents do not identify with the other party. The diversity grows from that point, so that only 43 percent of independent students suggest their parents are independents as well and are otherwise about evenly divided between Republican and Democratic parents. To me, this doesn't look like a lot of rebellion.

Not a Lot of Partisan Rebels



Source: October 2020 Survey.

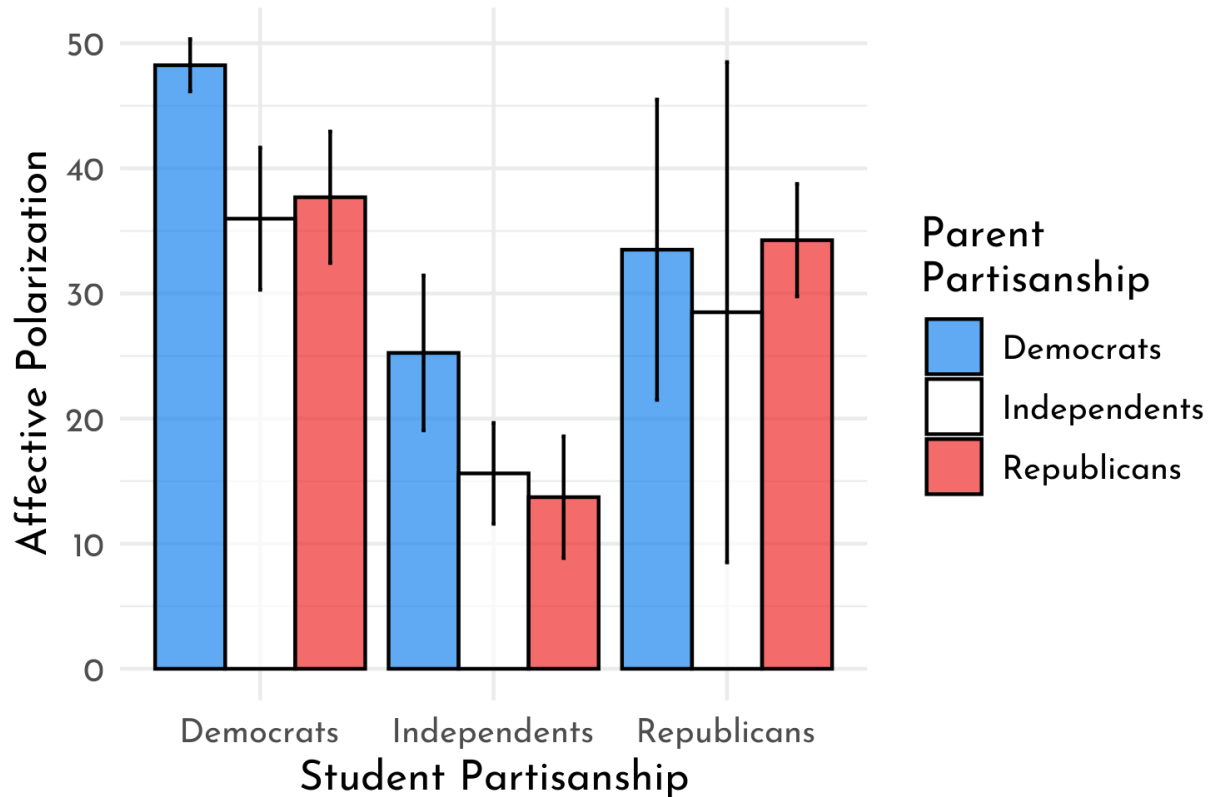
One of the major problems facing current American politics is the level of partisan animosity, even hatred. Growing portions of American partisans believe the other side is a danger to the nation. We often attribute this way of thinking to another trend – the growing social sorting of the US by partisanship as well as attributes that are linked to politics. The rural/urban divide is one, seen quite dramatically in Ohio with its blue urban islands in a rural sea of red. But we could point to race, class, and others.

So this is what makes student-parent partisan diversity particularly interesting – its an opportunity for people who care about one another to talk across this important line of difference. Does such a political friendship generate less extreme, warmer feelings toward the other side?

The figure below shows what my species (political scientists) calls “affective polarization” – the difference in warmth felt toward opposing groups (here Democrats and Republicans). The bigger the difference, the more they love their side and despise the other. The largest possible score is 100 (giving 100 to their party and 0 to the other). It’s important to remember that feelings were running pretty hot in the fall of 2020 and Democrats were fired up about the opportunity to remove Trump from office. That may be part of the explanation for why student Democrats with Democratic parents show the highest level of affective polarization.

There's only a bit of evidence to suggest that partisan diversity in the family encourages tolerance and it's among Democrats – when Democratic students have independent or Republican parents, their polarization level drops. Partisan diversity doesn't do much for independents or Republicans. Of course one reason why is that independent and Republican students already face a lot of diversity on a daily basis – that is, they face other students who are unlikely to share their affiliation since the campus is heavily Democratic.

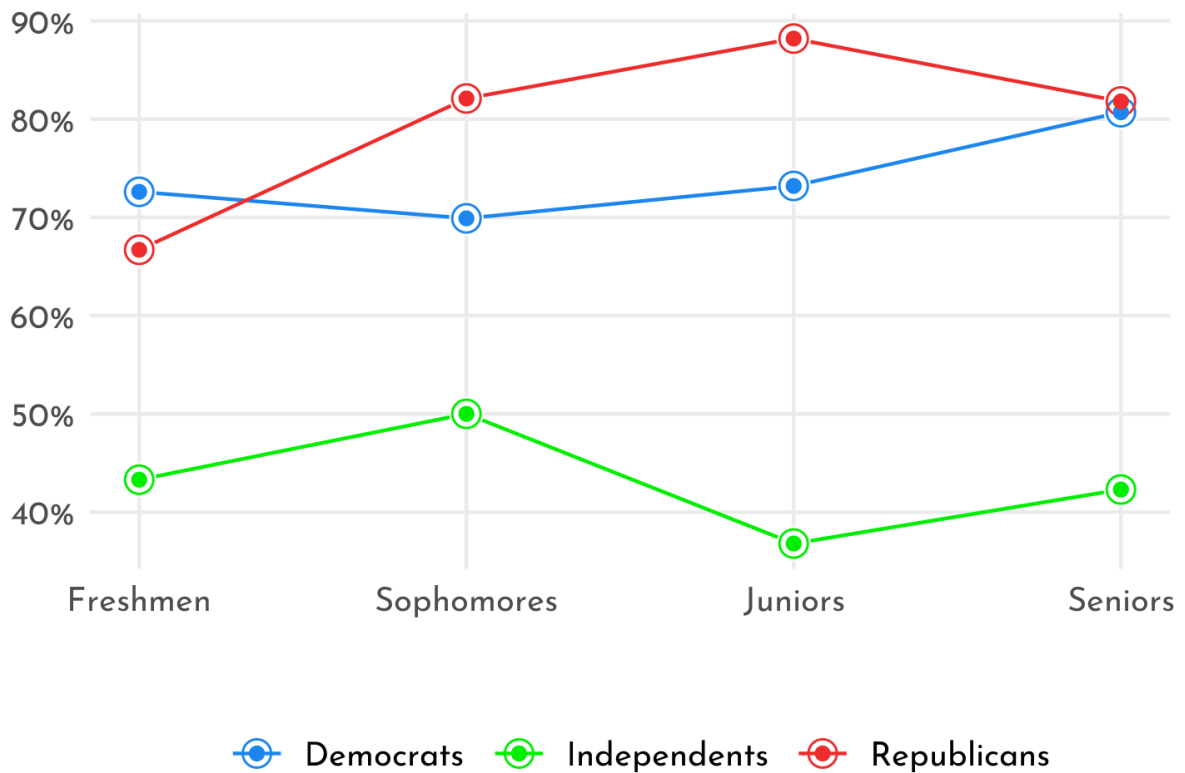
Does Partisan Diversity in the Family Reduce Affective Polarization?



Source: October 2020 Survey.

Perhaps this link changes over time. It is easy to imagine that students come to college with a deeper imprint from their parents that attenuates with four years of college. The Denison mission, after all, encourages you to become a discerning moral agent, which screams individualism. That's why it's surprising that we see so little change across class years and, if anything, sharing partisan affiliation with parents *increases* with class year. About 70 percent of freshmen report sharing the same partisanship, which climbs to 80 percent for current seniors. It's no surprise that independents have much lower rates of sharing partisanship. Of course, this isn't showing how individuals change across four years, and is merely comparing what current members of classes share – it's possible that the classes are simply composed a bit differently.

Sharing Partisanship with Parents May Increase with Classyear



Source: October 2020 Survey.

I like to think that a Denison education helps prepare you to have deeper, more substantive conversations. On that theory, perhaps we go home for Thanksgiving and raise political questions to find out what our parents actually believe. You might even like what they have to say. Or, it's possible that you have an influence on them! I know my parents started recycling after I came home from college and pushed them on it. Perhaps a growing harmony with your parents' leanings is not surprising after all.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught social science research methods and political science at Denison for millenia. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on [Twitter](#) and you should be too, along with [your president](#).