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Choose a Major, Plug Into Life

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Choose a Major, Plug Into Life

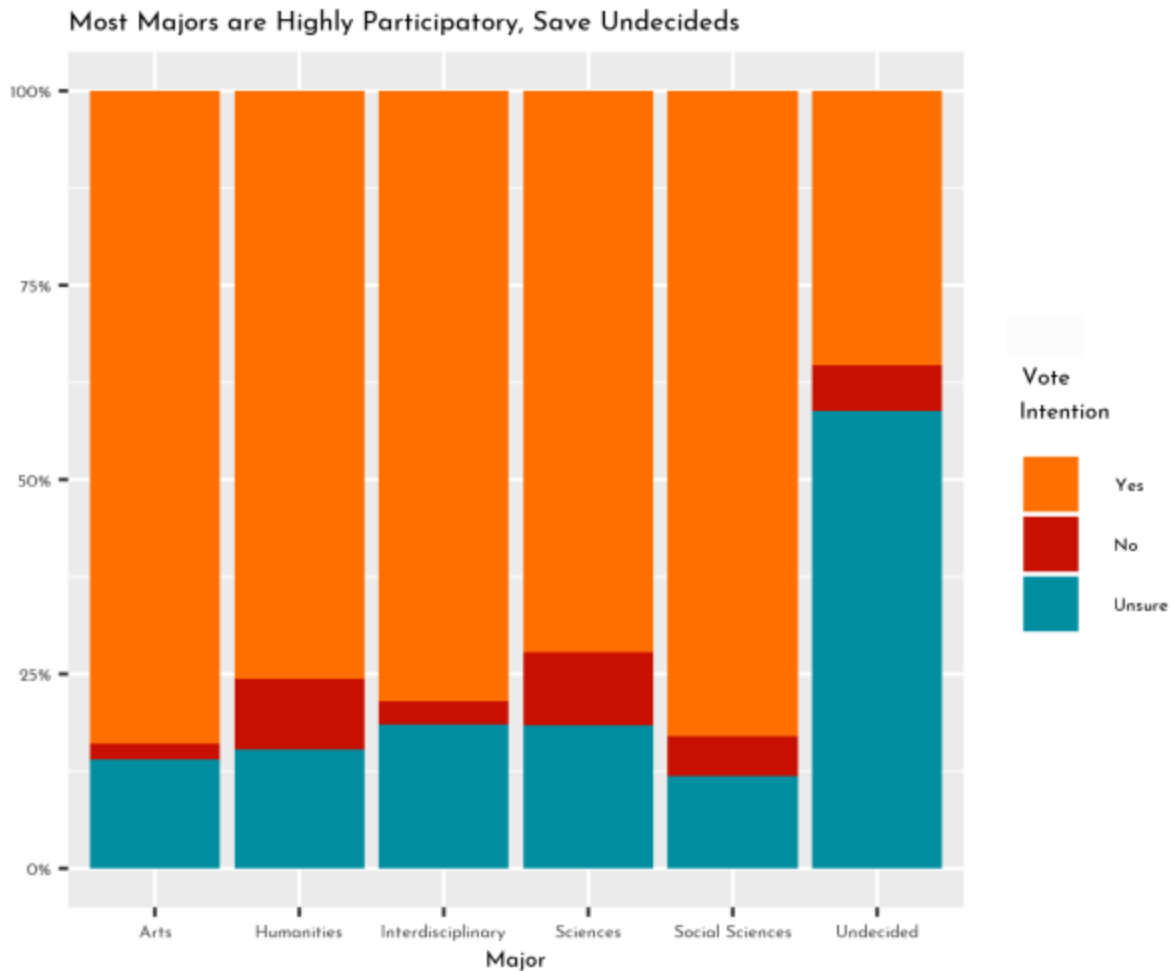
Paul A. Djupe

October 29, 2018

By Paul A. Djupe

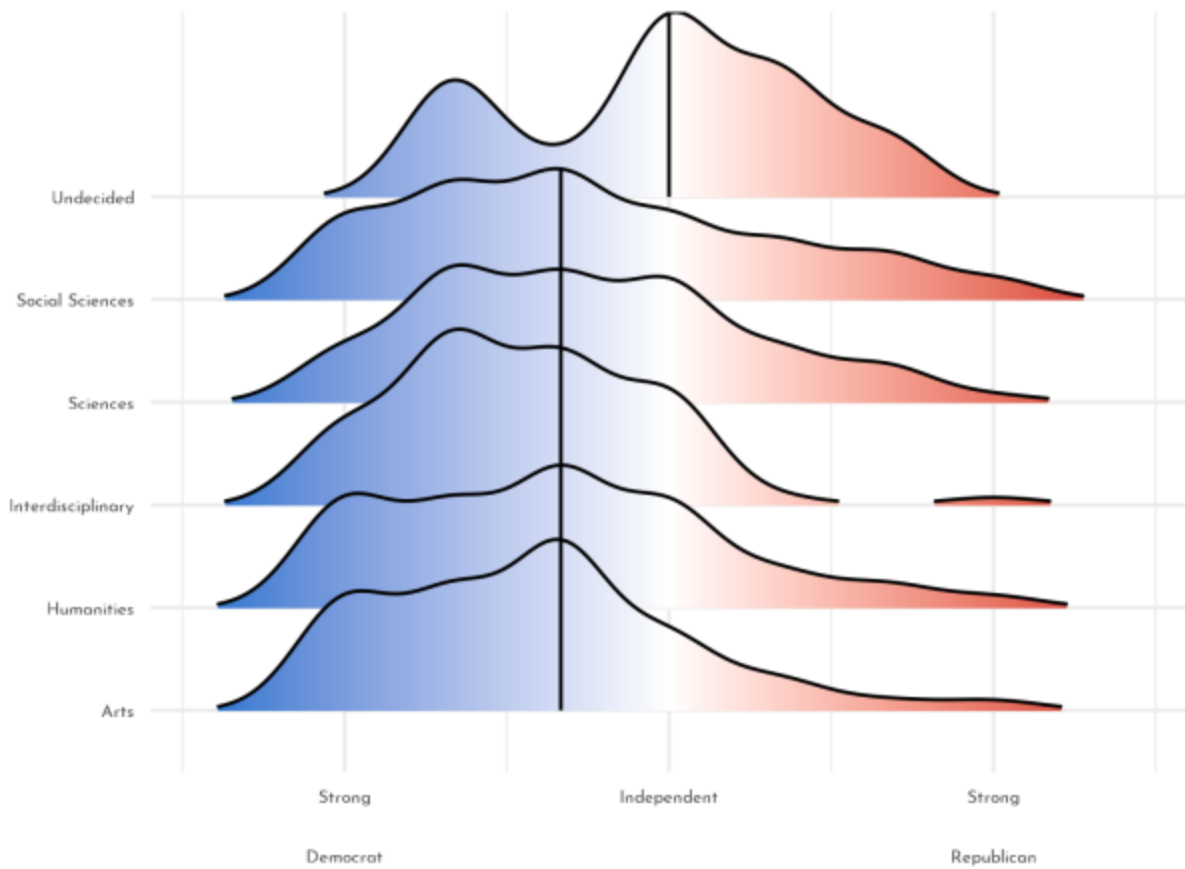
It must be so annoying to get The Question all the time. Every family gathering, I recall, was peppered with it, people pestering you probably because they didn't know what else to ask. "So what's your major?" is arguably one of the lesser questions about your four years in college. At least that's what liberal arts college devotees like to think. We argue that building the whole person through a wide-ranging, mind-stretching course of study is what matters. If we do the math, most majors are only $\frac{1}{3}$ of your 127 course credits. Does a major matter more than that?

I want to focus on political engagement, in part because it seems so disparate from choosing a major (unless that major is political science). Indeed, this post started in an entirely different mental space. I thought I'd pop out a few graphs that would show that social science majors are more political than others; the end. After the first analysis, it's clear we're not in Kansas anymore. Majors from all walks of the college's new brick sidewalks are about equally politically engaged (as captured by their intention in February 2018 to vote in the November 2018 elections). The one obvious standout are the Undecideds. Over 50% of them were "unsure" about whether they would vote! Here's our puzzle. Why?



I mean, wow. They are so different from the other majors. I wonder if it's just this measure. Are they also undecided about the political parties they might identify with? The figure below shows a pretty resounding yes. The median partisan affiliation for all other majors is "independent, leaning Democrat" except for the Undecideds – their average person is an independent and there are quite a few more independents among them as well.

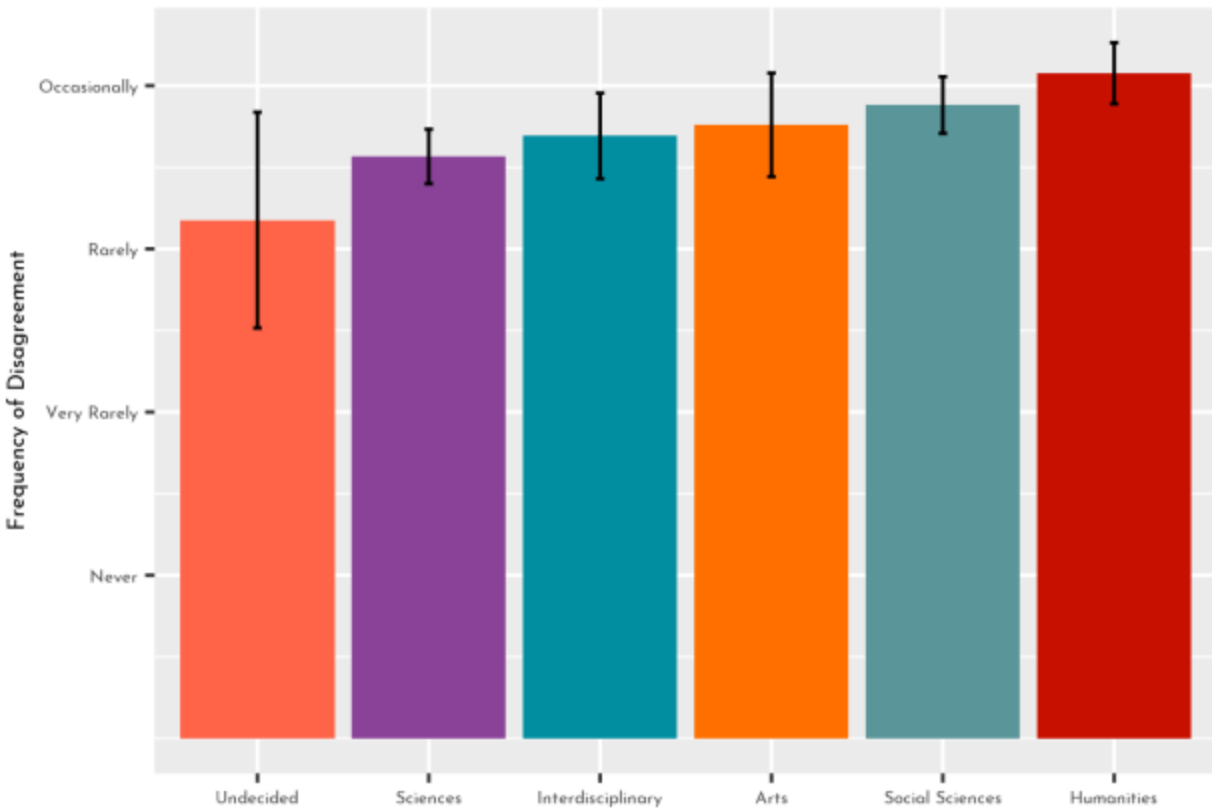
Everyone Leans Democratic, Except Undecideds



Source: February 2018

Turns out they also have fewer conversations across lines of political difference as the figure below shows, and probably for two reasons. For one, they have fewer opinions so they don't know when they are in disagreement, but they also surely have fewer political discussions.

Majors are Almost Indistinguishable in How Much They Have Discussions Across Lines of Disagreement



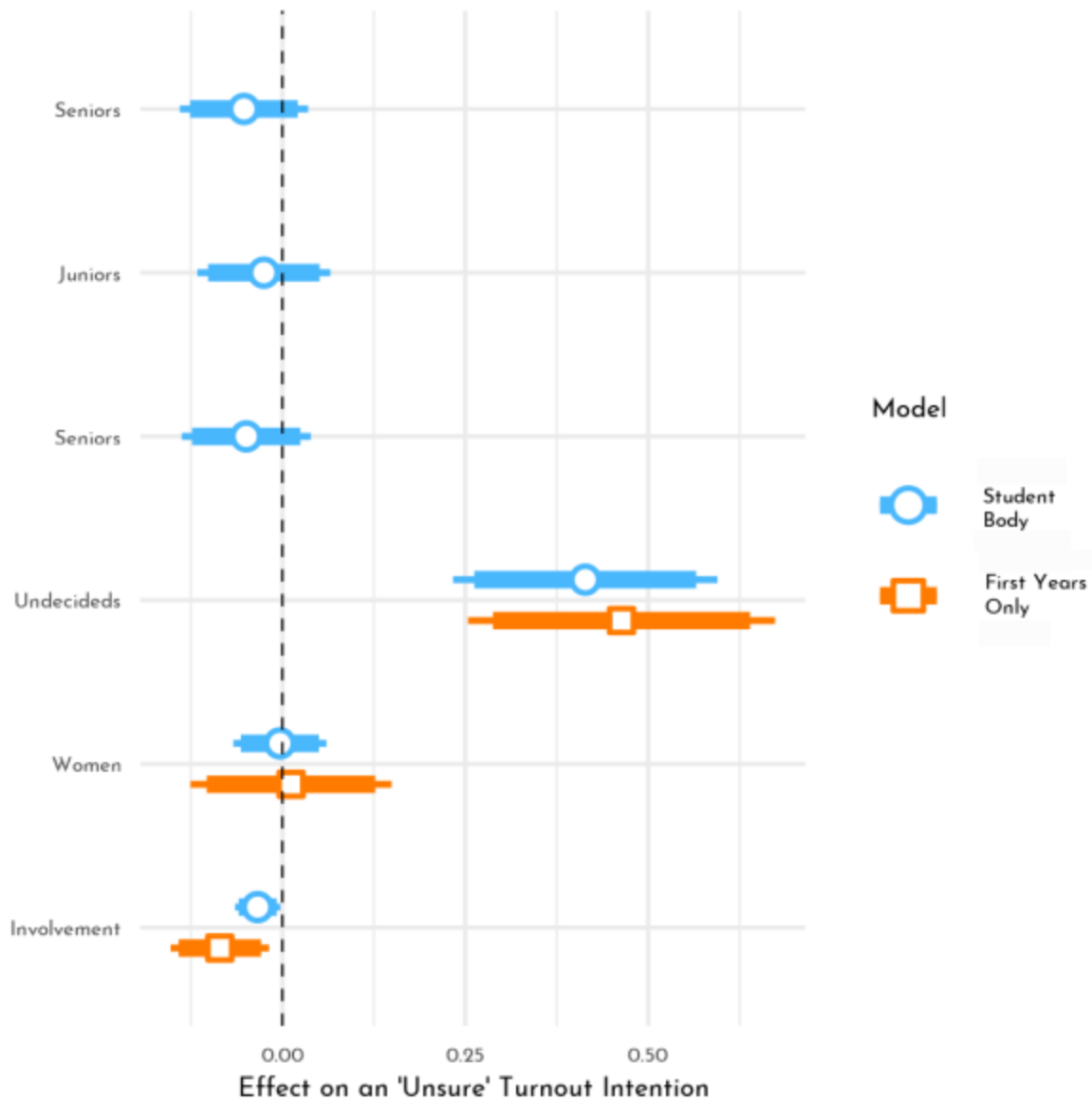
And they are also less decided about the Trump administration and are well distributed across the spectrum of responses. It's interesting to note that the social sciences and sciences majors are more politically diverse than the others. The Humanities, Arts, and Interdisciplinary majors have higher concentrations of liberal students. No surprises here except how distinct the Undecideds are.



What's up with the Undecideds? Sayeth The Gladfelter, who took a look at my figures, "So, those Undecideds are just uninvolved freshmen, right?" Well, yeah, they're almost all freshmen – 12% of freshmen were still Undecided by February (along with 1% of Sophomores). But they aren't uninvolved. In fact, the Undecideds are involved in nearly 3 types of activities compared to 2.5 of those who have declared a major. The lingering question is whether being an Undecided is still linked to political disengagement when we account for their class year, involvement, and gender (about 7% more women are Undecided).

The evidence below is from a model of turnout intention – a higher positive number means they are more "unsure" about voting. The blue estimates are for the entire student body sample, while the orange results show only the first years. Basically it doesn't matter what we throw in the model (I also tried some personality variables) – the Undecideds are 40-50% more likely to be politically disengaged.

Being Undecided on your Major Means More Than That



It's notable to me that the effect of involvement in activities drops the level of political disengagement, which probably tells us something about why the Undecideds are so unsure. Involvement in organized activities brings you into contact with a diverse array of people and those interactions help to shape and clarify your orientations toward the world. Majors do that too – you continue to have a range of conversations with some of the same people, which helps to anchor you on life's great questions. But I suspect that choosing a major has a different sort of effect, too. Choosing a major is a declaration of your intended place in the world, that you have certain kinds of interests, and that you are interested in working on certain kinds of problems. That naturally encourages citizenship because you are planting a stake. Moreover, I suspect choosing a major allows you to think about other things as well – it frees up cognitive space for other commitments, such as politics.

I used to say that it was ok to take your time picking a major – take a range of classes, see where you want to take some more. I'd like to revise that advice. Go ahead and declare a major right away. Take a range of courses, though, and see if you'd like to change your declaration. This is common practice anyway – nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of students change their major at least once. Having an answer for your friends and relatives is apparently worth much more than just getting them off your back. It helps you plug into the rest of life.

Paul Djupe is a local cyclist who happens to have taught political science at Denison since the Harry Potter series was first published. You can learn more about his work at pauldjupe.com.