The Ivy League's Missing Conservatives

A Comparative Study of the Ivy League and American Higher Education

BUCKLEY INSTITUTE

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Executive Summary

The college campus has been a focus of national debate for years. Public confidence in American higher education has plummeted, dropping to just 38% this year after a brief jump in 2025. Seventy percent of Americans believe higher education is heading in the wrong direction.

A significant portion of the discourse about what is wrong with the college campus is centered on the ideological one-sidedness of many American college campuses. From top leadership to administrative offices, from the faculty lounge to the dormitory, one ideological and political orthodoxy reigns. As a result, bad ideas are nurtured rather than challenged, those who dissent from the campus orthodoxy are ostracized, and the pursuit of truth suffers.

Much of the past debate surrounding the campus ideological bubble has focused on university faculty and leadership. However, a significant factor in shaping campus culture—the ideological makeup of the student body—has been left largely unexamined. Of course, America's youth, in college or not, traditionally lean left. It would not be surprising for the campus to lean left as well.

But the research below shows that America's elite universities, and those of the Ivy League in particular, have taken that ideological imbalance to a new level. Polling from several different organizations, including the Buckley Institute, demonstrates that the Ivy League has a dearth of conservatives compared to the national college student population.

While nationally, conservatives comprise between 20% and 25% of the undergraduate population and liberal students make up as much as 52% across surveys reviewed for this report, the Ivy League is a different story entirely. According to 2025 data from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE):

- At the average Ivy League university, 13% of students identify as conservative, over one-third lower than the national average.
- No Ivy League university had a higher percentage of conservatives than the national average.
- Every Ivy League university exceeded the 52% national average liberal student population.

Among the Ivy League, Yale and Brown stood out for their student body ideological imbalance. Yale had the highest liberal student share at 73% and the third-lowest conservative share at just 12%. Brown had the second-highest liberal student share at 71% and the second-lowest conservative student share at 11%. Cornell had the lowest conservative student share in the Ivy League at just 10% but is home to a student body that is 60% liberal. Cornell had the largest share of moderates in the Ivy League at 20%.

Among the top 30 universities, excluding the Ivy League, there were few that matched or exceeded the FIRE national average for conservative students. The average breakdown of students among this group of elite universities came in at 65% liberal and 15% conservative.

To be sure, not all elite institutions have opted to shortchange young Americans with dissenting views equally:

- Princeton's conservative population was only one point lower than the FIRE national average and its liberal student population only five points higher, making it the closest to the national average in the Ivy League.
- The California Institute of Technology was the closest to the FIRE national average among the top 30 non-Ivies with a 51% liberal student population and a 19% conservative student body share.
- Among the top 30 non-Ivies, only the University of Notre Dame, the University of Florida, and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill had a higher conservative student percentage than the FIRE national average.

The theories about why conservatives are underrepresented at elite universities focus on a combination of student self-sorting, possible institutional admissions bias, and academic specialization preferences. The self-sorting effect is prominent. A 2025 Carnegie report, *The Impact of Politics on College Choice*, found that 24% of students, including 43% of liberals and 19% of conservatives, considered it either highly important or absolutely critical that their future college campus student population have political views similar to theirs.

This ideological homogeneity can be significantly detrimental to student educational quality, public support, and the fundamental truth-seeking mission of higher education. When students aren't exposed to opposing perspectives, they are more likely to graduate unprepared for a politically diverse world outside of campus. Furthermore, accepting taxpayer funding while cultivating one-sided ideological environments puts universities in a risky position. Conservatives are not likely to continue supporting universities that make them feel unwelcome.

The Liberal Undergraduate Student Body

Young people leaning to the left is not a new phenomenon. Though some recent polls have found segments of the young population leaning right, America's youth still retain a predilection for liberal politics.

That phenomenon extends to the college campus as well, where liberal ideology holds sway. In a review of recent national polls of college students, the data largely showed that liberals greatly outnumber both moderates and conservatives. In three national polls from 2025, liberal students comprised between 47% and 52% of the national college student population. By contrast, conservatives comprised between 20% and 25% of the national college student population. The shares of each ideological group stayed relatively consistent over the past three years.

Poll	Liberal/Left	Moderate/Center	Conservative/Right
American College Student Freedom, Progress, and Flourishing Survey (2025)	**52%**	**23%**	**25%**
Buckley Institute National Undergraduate Survey (2025)*	**47%**	**28%**	**20%**
FIRE College Free Speech Rankings (2025)*	**52%**	**14%**	**22%**

*Figure 1: National Polls of American College Students; * Percentages may not add up to 100% because "Other" and non-response categories were omitted from the chart.*

Ideological Leaning of America's College Students Over the Past Three Years

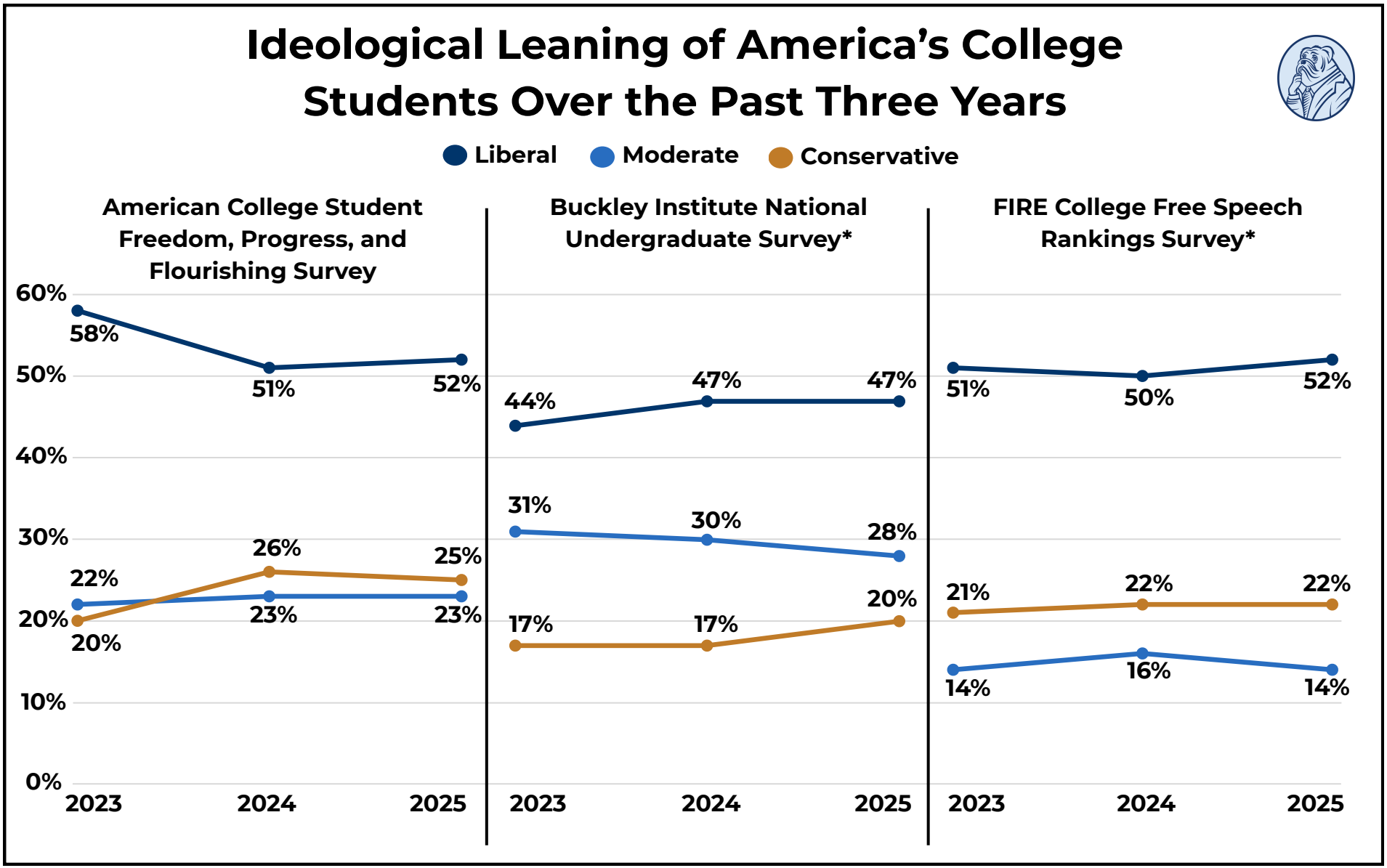

*Figure 2: Ideological Leaning of America's College Students Over the Past Three Years; * Percentages may not add up to 100% because "Other" and non-response categories were omitted from the chart.*

The Ivy League vs. the National College Student Population

The Ivy League holds a hallowed position in the American psyche. Acceptance to one of these universities is seen as an imprimatur of future success and a one-way ticket to a better future.

That makes the ideological divide between campus and country all the more important. Recent polling indicates that conservatives are underrepresented on many, though not all, of America's Ivy League college campuses. According to data from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression's 2025 College Free Speech Rankings, the conservative share at the average Ivy League university (13%) is over one-third lower than that of American college students overall (22%).

The range of conservative representation in the Ivy League student body is wide. On one end of the spectrum, Columbia's conservative student share matches the national college student percentage of 22%. On the other, Cornell's conservative student population comes in at less than half that (10%). Brown is the next lowest with a slightly higher 11%. No Ivy League university had a conservative student population that exceeded the national average.

By contrast, every Ivy League university exceeded the FIRE national average for percentage of liberal students. Yale led the pack with a 73% liberal student population compared to 52% nationally. Brown came in second place in this regard with a 71% liberal student body. Princeton had the smallest share of liberal students, coming in at just five points above the national average.

The imbalance extends not only to self-reported student ideological leanings but to student perception of the campus ideological culture as well. Over the past three years, Buckley Institute surveys found that between 80% and 90% of Yale students described the Yale political environment as liberal, with between 30% and 40% describing it as very liberal.

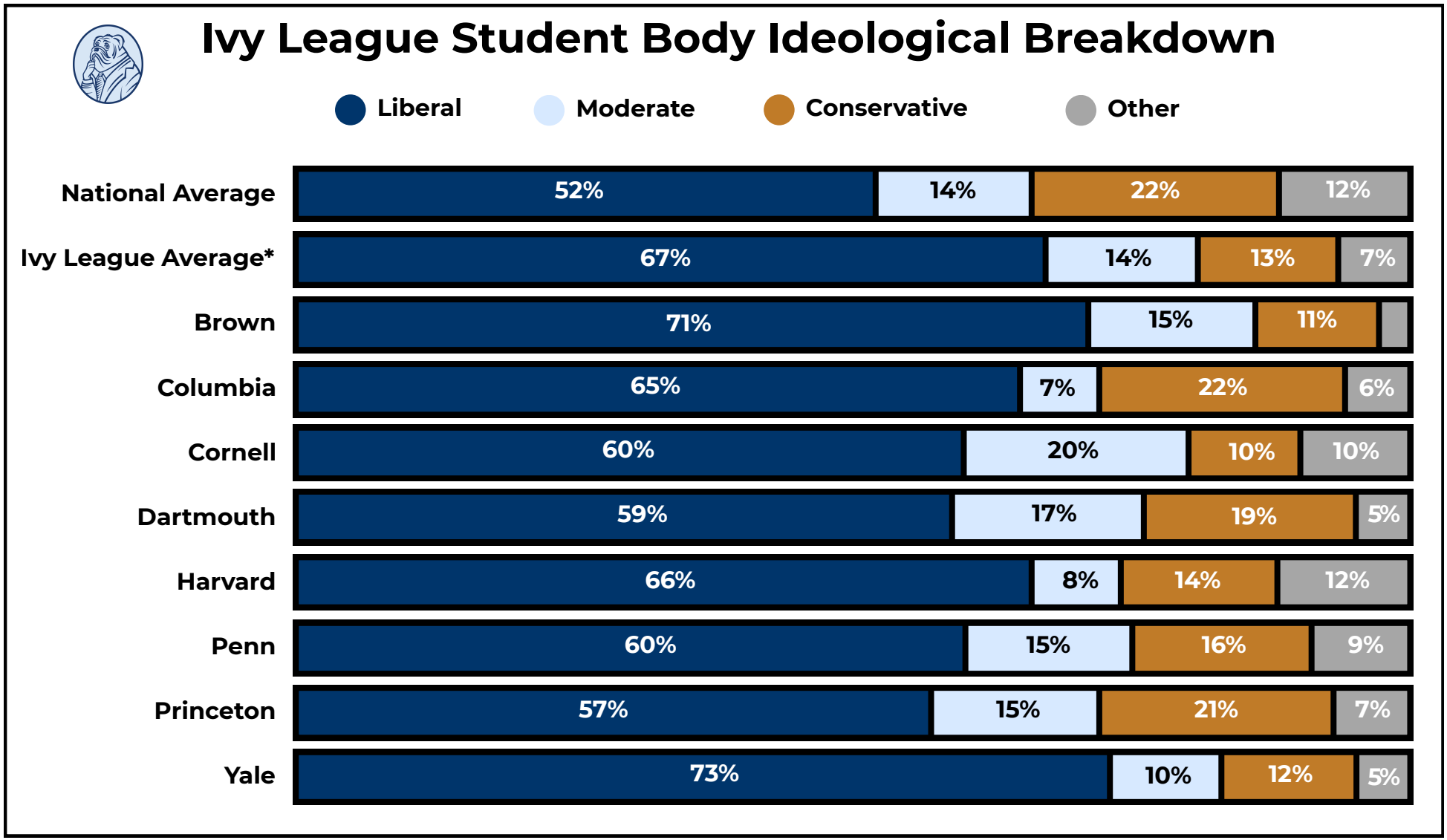

*Figure 3: Ivy League Student Body Ideological Breakdown; Source: FIRE College Free Speech Rankings (2025); * The Ivy League average was calculated using raw FIRE data.*

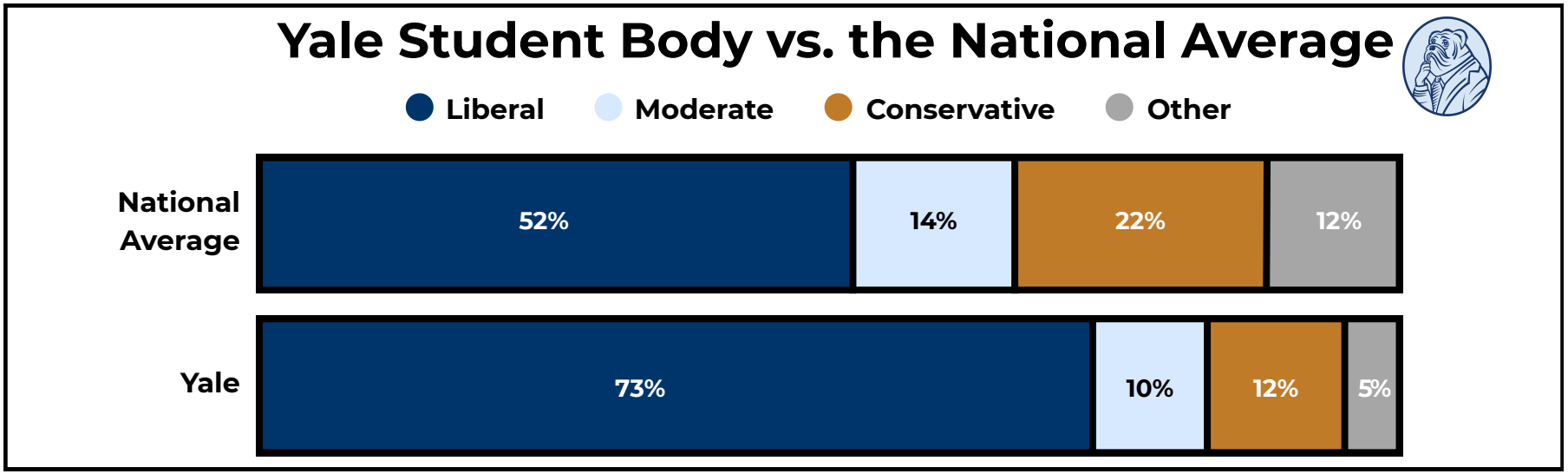

Figure 4: Yale Student Body vs. the National Average; Source: FIRE College Free Speech Rankings (2025)

Ideology	Yale, 2025			Yale, 2024		
	Buckley Institute Yale Undergrad Survey*	FIRE College Free Speech Rankings*	*Yale Daily News* Freshman Survey*	Buckley Institute Yale Undergrad Survey*	FIRE College Free Speech Rankings*	*Yale Daily News* Freshman Survey*
Liberal	71%	73%	72%	68%	69%	67%
Moderate	10%	10%	13%	9%	11%	18%
Conservative	13%	12%	10%	15%	16%	9%

*Figure 5: Yale Student Ideological Breakdown in 2024 and 2025; * Percentages may not add up to 100% because "Other" and non-response categories were omitted from the chart.*

America's Elite Universities vs. the National College Student Population

This research also covered the ideological breakdown of student bodies outside of the Ivy League. In particular, the *U.S. News and World Report*'s top 30 universities, excluding the Ivy League, performed slightly better than their Ivy League peers.

While FIRE's 2025 national college student survey found an ideological breakdown of 52% liberal and 22% conservative on college campuses, the average top 30 non-Ivy institution came in at 65% liberal and 15% conservative.

Unlike in the Ivy League, individual universities in the top 30 non-Ivies group did outperform the FIRE national average. Three universities in this group had a higher conservative population than the 22% average: University of Notre Dame, University of Florida, and University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. Emory University matched the national average, while Duke came in at 21%.

On the liberal side, only four universities came within two points of the national average: California Institute of Technology, Carnegie Mellon University, University of Florida, and Vanderbilt University.

Notre Dame was the only university with a significantly smaller liberal population than the national average, giving it a nearly even liberal to conservative split at 43% to 39% respectively. Vanderbilt University and the California Institute of Technology had the highest moderate shares at 21% and 20% respectively.

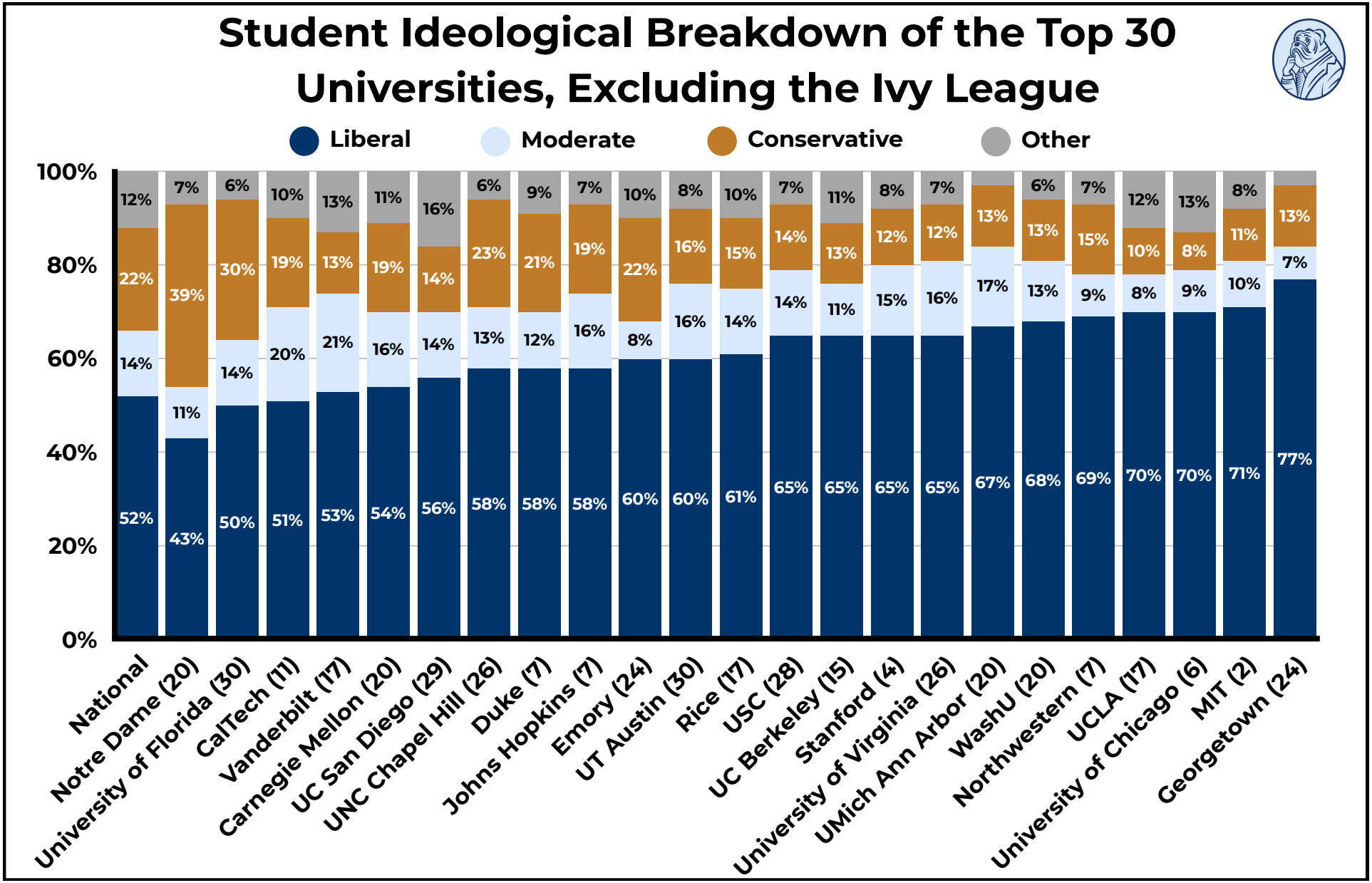

Figure 6: Student Ideological Breakdown of the Top 30 Universities, Excluding the Ivy League; Source: U.S. News and World Report/FIRE College Free Speech Rankings (2025); NOTE: Some universities are tied in the rankings.

Assessing the Sources of the Gap

There are many theories as to why conservatives seem to be missing from elite university campuses. Of course, as long as America's youth remain liberal, it makes sense that the college student populations will lean liberal as well. But that doesn't explain the ideological gap between the country's student population and that of the nation's top colleges and universities.

A report from Brown University's Annenberg Institute found that since 1982, college and university campuses have become more polarized. The authors went on to conclude that "little of the growing dispersion of political views across colleges can be explained by changes in the sorting of students along standard observable characteristics like race, gender, academic preparation, geographic origins, or even religion."

Opting Out

One prominent theory is that conservative students look at the ideological environment on campus and opt out entirely. Rather than deal with a campus hostile to their beliefs, conservatives choose campuses that are at least less unwelcoming to their perspectives.

According to a 2026 survey from the Buckley Institute, 55% of undergraduates said "the political climate among the student body and the political values of the school were an important factor" when deciding which college or university to attend. Liberal students (67%) were significantly more likely than conservatives (39%) to take campus political culture into account.

Similarly, a 2025 Carnegie report found that 24% of students considered it either highly important or absolutely critical that their future college campus student population have political views similar to theirs. That was true of 43% of liberal students and 19% of conservatives. Seventeen percent of students said they would not consider attending a college or university in a state with politics that differ from their own, including 18% of conservative students and 14% of liberal students.

Parents play a role in political filtering as well. The 2026 Buckley survey found that 44% of undergraduates took their parents' perspectives on the campus political climate into account in making their matriculation decision. Here, too, liberal

students (48%) were much more likely to agree than conservatives (36%), though by a smaller margin than when considering their own concerns. The Carnegie report found that in many cases parents have strong feelings about the political climate of their child's future campus. Twenty-two percent of liberal parents said their children should not consider a college in a state with politics that differ from those of the parent versus 16% of conservative parents who said the same.

A 2024 national survey of undergraduates by sociologist Neil Gross confirmed the importance of politics in the college search. Of those students surveyed, four out of five were aware of their university's political reputation and half of those "said it had played a role in their decision to attend."

Not only do students look for campuses that are ideologically similar, but they also seem willing to pay more for the experience. The 2025 Annenberg Institute report surveyed over 1,000 undergraduates and found that liberal students were willing to pay $2,617 more to attend a college with a 10-point lower share of conservative students and $1,162 more for a 10-point higher share of liberal students. Conservatives were willing to pay $2,201 more to attend a college with a 10-point lower share of liberals.

Bias in the Admissions Process

One possible source for the dearth of conservatives is elite university admissions offices.

The Buckley Institute's own research found a dramatic lack of ideological diversity among the staff in the Yale Admissions Office. Across the 26 employees in the Yale College Undergraduate Admissions Office who were most likely to impact admissions decisions (excluding administrative staff), 69% were registered Democrats while 31% were unaffiliated. There were zero registered Republicans. This could mean that parts of the application review process might be colored by the politics of those tasked with taking the first read.

Even when there is no overt or intentional filtering, university admissions officers sometimes look for characteristics or interests that could bias against conservative applicants. In 2018, a Yale admissions officer wrote, "For those students who come to Yale, we expect them to be versed in issues of social justice."

Even more innocuous directives, like a commitment to diversity, can filter out conservatives who might be judged a poor fit with the liberal politics of the admissions office. The Princeton University Office of Admission still has a stated goal of bringing "together a varied mix of high-achieving, intellectually gifted students from diverse backgrounds." The Princeton Dean of Admissions reportedly "expressed her commitment…to admitting a diverse student body" and previously helped "recruit and sustain a student body diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography." The University of Pennsylvania advertises that the Dean of Admissions' previous "leadership at Bowdoin College advanced both diversity and selectivity, with an increasing number of students of color, first-generation students, and students on financial aid." That commitment, she explained, would not change after the Supreme Court's ruling banning affirmative action in admissions. In November 2022, Dartmouth's Dean of Admissions said race was "a foundational part of someone's identity" and asked, "how can you meet an applicant without knowing this part of their personhood?"

Language like this proliferates not only in the Ivy League but across American higher education, signaling to potential applicants, conservative and non-conservative alike, that politics matter in the application process.

The lack of clarity about what exactly a university is looking for in its applicants can leave students uncertain about whether politics play a part. In its 2026 report, Yale's Committee on Trust in Higher Education pointed to a particular conflict within many admissions offices. Universities like Yale, the report authors explained, claim to make a holistic assessment of applicants on the one hand—sometimes even stating that low test scores are not a barrier to acceptance—while saying they prioritize academics on the other. "The absence of any clear academic standard is difficult to reconcile with a mission built on academic excellence," the report concludes.

Students worried their politics might not be welcome on campus could easily interpret that ambiguity as room to discriminate.

Academic Funneling to the Sciences

Another theory for the relatively stark ideological imbalance on elite college campuses is that conservatives concentrate more in the hard sciences while many top universities, like those of the Ivy League, distinguish themselves in the humanities and social sciences.

The support for this theory is mixed. Buckley Institute's national surveys indicate that a higher share than average of conservative undergraduates are attracted to business, math, and hard science majors. And while conservatives were underrepresented in the social and behavioral sciences, there was a larger share in the humanities in 2023 and 2024 than the Buckley survey's national conservative student average.

FIRE surveys since 2023 found a higher relative concentration of conservatives/libertarians in the business field. Additionally, in 2023 and 2024, FIRE found a higher share of conservatives/libertarians in STEM relative to other majors, just above the group's ideological share nationally. At the same time, FIRE data found a significantly lower concentration of liberals/democratic socialists in business relative to the total student body. That group was overrepresented routinely—sometimes dramatically so—in the arts and humanities.

Why it Matters

At the heart of the question about the elite American campus' missing conservatives is whether it matters. Obviously, students who are excluded from campus because of their politics are disadvantaged. As Yale's Committee on Trust in Higher Education explained, "an Ivy League education also opens doors to prestigious careers and opportunities, including in government and politics." Further, accepting billions in taxpayer dollars from conservatives and liberals alike and then discriminating against half of the ideological spectrum on political grounds is an easy way to lose government funding.

But does ideological homogeneity on America's campuses, elite and otherwise, negatively impact the educational experience of all students?

The Echo Chamber and Student Self-Censorship

One area where ideological uniformity seems to have a notable negative impact is student self-censorship. A report from Vanderbilt University and Washington University in St. Louis, for example, argued that "the liberal skew in the professoriat may play an indirect role...in discouraging full participation in academia on the part of students who find themselves culturally and politically alienated from their professors." An ideologically monolithic student body could likewise alienate students from their peers.

That assessment is backed up by data. The Buckley Institute's most recent Yale undergraduate survey found that while 39% of students reported self-censoring on campus often, a much larger 79% of Republicans did, versus 42% of independents and 29% of Democrats. When the campus and the student body are overwhelmingly ideologically one-sided, those students not in the ideological majority feel pressured to stay quiet.

39%
OF YALE STUDENTS SELF-CENSOR IN CLASS OFTEN

79%
OF YALE REPUBLICANS SELF-CENSOR IN CLASS OFTEN

And when students self-censor, either in class or around campus, the ability to learn suffers. In the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, University of St. Thomas School of Law's Michael Stokes Paulsen argued that in a campus echo chamber, students "cease to think…Minority views within the student body…are suppressed almost casually. Those holding non-conforming views become discouraged, repressed. Eventually, they give up."

Yale's Committee on Trust in Higher Education addressed this point clearly in its report: "Our committee spoke with hundreds of Yale students, faculty, alumni, and administrators about the issue of ideological conformity…[N]early everyone we spoke to agreed on one thing: Echo chambers do not produce the best teaching, research, or scholarship."

The Importance of Hearing Different Perspectives

While ideological echo chambers are detrimental to student experience, increased exposure to differing perspectives is critical to the pursuit of knowledge.

As Yale Law Professor Keith Whittington explained in the academic journal *Social Philosophy and Policy*:

> *Modern universities do many things, but at their core they are truth-seeking institutions. Their central mission is to advance and disseminate knowledge…If universities are to perform that function, they need to be able to gather together a diverse range of scholars and students united by their willingness to question orthodoxies and pursue the truth.*

Unless even dominant ideas are challenged, all students lose out. "Mill thought we would be at our intellectual best," Whittington explained, "if we could surround ourselves with people with whom we disagreed."

In *Education Sciences*, a peer-reviewed journal, Harvard Professor of Epidemiology Tyler J. VanderWeele pointed out that "engagement with others gives us an opportunity to correct our own biases and positions…[and] to refine, correct, or change the positions of others":

> *For this process of evaluation and assessment of evidence and of arguments to work well, however, we need exposure to and engagement with those with different perspectives.*

VanderWeele further explained that this is true not just in the realm of philosophy and ideas, but even "research on how to reduce racial health and income disparities, for example, has arguably been impaired by lack of sufficient scrutiny and critique." Research into and reversal of the recent increase in suicide, he argued, is hampered by a "lack of ideological diversity."

Summing up the issue, Whittington warned that students who aren't exposed to different ideas "understand less about the world and…understand it less well."

After all, even if a campus is ideologically monolithic, the rest of the world certainly isn't. Gallup polling has found a roughly even split of Republicans and Democrats nationwide for decades. A four-year education among only those who share the same view will likely leave students unprepared for a world where they have to confront opinions of all kinds.

Of course, while the college campus is overwhelmingly liberal, it is not left to conservatives alone to either bear the brunt of or push back on the dominant campus intellectual culture. Moderates can often help create an intellectual environment more conducive to hearing diverse ideas, or at least to creating oases on campus where doing so is easier. However, this group too is shortchanged on campus. While the percentage of the public identifying as independent has been between the mid-30s and mid-40s for decades, it sits at around a third of that among college students nationwide and in America's top colleges and universities. At Georgetown, for example, FIRE data has the moderate share of the student body at just 7%, below the conservative population's 13%.

Declining Trust in American Higher Education

The declining trust in American higher education can likely be attributed, at least in part, to the ideological echo chamber on campus.

In July 2026, Gallup reported that American trust in higher education had fallen to 38%, a drop from 42% the year before

and 57% in 2015. A lot but not all of the drag comes from Republicans, only 23% of whom have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education. In a similar vein, an October 2025 Pew poll found that 70% of Americans believe higher education is heading in the wrong direction, including 77% of Republicans.

The Vanderbilt University and Washington University report commented on this as well, pointing out that the liberal faculty lean could "play an indirect role in undermining public support for universities." Presumably, an echo chamber at any level of the university community would limit support from those on the ideological outside.

Indeed, when the Buckley Institute reported in late 2025 that 27 of Yale's 43 undergraduate degree-granting departments had zero Republicans on faculty, Elon Musk called it "truly outrageous bigotry." His tweet was viewed 19.7 million times.

Methodology

This report utilized polling, surveys, and analysis from third-party individuals and organizations and is subject to the limits of the original data collection. Additionally, at the time the research for this report was conducted, many of the surveys cited in this report, such as FIRE's College Free Speech Rankings, had not yet published 2026 data. That data has since been released.

Data analysis conducted for this report used ideological leaning rather than political affiliation. In general, survey data was broken down between liberal, moderate, and conservative. When applicable, terms like left, left-leaning, or progressive were treated as liberal, neutral as moderate, and right or right-leaning as conservative. Accordingly, gradations (e.g. leaning, slightly, somewhat, very) of conservative/right or liberal/left were grouped with their respective ideological leaning rather than as moderate/centrist.

Where relevant, democratic socialists were included in the liberal/left category and libertarians were included in the conservative/right category.

The ideological averages of the Ivy League and the top 30 non-Ivies were calculated using FIRE's 2025 unweighted raw survey data.

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