Stay at Home or Travel to Rome: The Effects of Travel on Political Ideology

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ABSTRACT

International travel shapes one’s worldview; however, the extent to which international travel has an effect on one’s political ideology is relatively unknown. By reviewing survey data collected by the Associated Press and Americans Online (AOL), connections between political ideology, international travel experience, and the importance of travel for educational purposes were analyzed. After analysis it has been determined that the proportion of people who are progressive is higher when traveling abroad for educational purposes is a priority. Secondly, the effects of travel on political ideology are not dependent on where one travels abroad. Understanding the connections between political ideology, international travel experience, and travel for educational purposes is an important component in identifying the foundations and origins of individuals’ political ideology.

INTRODUCTION

“Travel far enough, you meet yourself” –David Mitchell

Ask just about any traveler for anecdotal evidence and they will more than likely tell you that international travel has impacted their life in one way or another. As a result of technological advances and globalization, it has become much easier to experience other cultures by traveling abroad. Many United States citizens have taken advantage of international travel opportunities and often comment on how these experiences have “changed” them. These “changes” can be noted in different areas of traveler’s lives. However, there is a lack of research surrounding how political ideology is affected by international travel. The extent to which international travel experience affects viewpoints on a number of political topics is relatively unknown.

Rick Steves, an award-winning author best known for his extensive travel guides and insightful television shows, argues that travel is inherently a “political act.” He points out in his book, Travel as a Political Act, that United States travelers should embrace the educational experiences international travel promotes and encourages travelers to leave their fierce nationalism at home. He believes that U.S. citizens have much to learn from the unique and diverse political structures and policies found abroad. Recognition and comparison of differences in political structure and policies in home and host countries may cause travelers from the United States to favor and endorse more progressive political policies and structures.

Additionally, travel abroad for educational purposes, such as “study abroad” experiences may have a distinct impact on political ideology. According to the 2013 Report on International Educational Exchange conducted by “Open Doors,” the number of American students studying abroad has tripled over the past two decades. It can be inferred that the influx of students who study abroad denotes a perceived value of an international, educational experience. Research conducted by Dr. Mary Dwyer and Courtney Peters indicates that individuals who have studied abroad have noted benefits that studying abroad has had in their own personal, intercultural, and career development. Individuals who study abroad or travel abroad for educational purposes may be impacted differently than individuals who travel abroad for other purposes.

The first hypothesis of this research was that those who were identified as progressive would be more likely to be traveling abroad in the future. Additionally, I hypothesized that those who were identified as progressive would be more likely to travel to “developing” countries. Lastly, I hypothesized that those who were identified as progressive would be more likely to perceive travel for educational purposes as beneficial or important.

METHODS

This study reviewed survey data that had already been collected in 2006. The data was collected by the Associated Press and Americans Online (AOL). The topic of the survey was “travel.”
Respondents to the survey were 49% male and 50% female. Majority of respondents identified as “white.” 66% of respondents identified as white; 12% identified as Hispanic. 11% identified as black. 3% as Asian. 1% as American Indian. 1% as other, and 6% “refused [to respond].”

There were five useful questions that were analyzed in this study. The relevant data collected included:

1. **Political party identification response**
   - Strongly Republican
   - Moderately Republican
   - Definitely Independent/ Neither
   - Moderately Democrat
   - Strongly Democrat
   - Don’t Know

2. **Are you planning to take a vacation trip in the next 12 months, or not?**
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don’t Know

3. **Do you plan on traveling abroad on a vacation trip in the next 12 months, or not?**
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don’t Know

4. **What will be the destination of your next vacation trip outside the U.S. in the next 12 months?**
   - Africa
   - Asia
   - Australia
   - Canada
   - Caribbean
   - Central America
   - Eastern Europe
   - Mexico
   - Middle East
   - South America
   - Western Europe
   - Other
   - None
   - Don’t Know

5. **Educational opportunities are ___ when deciding where to travel on vacations.**
   - Very Important
   - Somewhat Important
   - Not too Important
   - Not at all Important
   - Don’t Know

In order to most effectively analyze the responses to questions 1, 4, and 5 the responses were re-coded. Political party identification responses were separated into two categories: “Progressive” and “Not Progressive.” The assumption was made that those who identified as “Moderately Democrat” and “Strongly Democrat” could also be defined as “Progressive.” All other responses were assumed to be “Not Progressive.” Therefore, the responses were re-coded as follows:

1. **Political party identification response**
   - Strongly Republican → Not Progressive
   - Moderately Republican → Not Progressive
   - Definitely Independent/ Neither → Not Progressive
   - Moderately Democrat → Progressive
   - Strongly Democrat → Progressive
   - Don’t Know → Not Progressive

It was hypothesized that there may be a difference in individuals who visited “developed” countries and those who visited “developing” countries. Countries were sorted into these two categories: “Developed” and “Developing.” This wasn’t an easy task and subjective judgments had to be made. Ultimately, this is how the responses were re-coded:
4. What will be the destination of your next vacation trip outside the U.S. in the next 12 months?
   - Africa → Developing
   - Asia → Developing
   - Australia → Developed
   - Canada → Developed
   - Caribbean → Developed (Although parts of the Caribbean are definitely still “developing,” it was assumed that most Americans traveling to the Caribbean would not visit the portions that are “developing.”)
   - Central America → Developing
   - Eastern Europe → Developing
   - Mexico → Developed (Although parts of Mexico are definitely still “developing,” it was assumed that most Americans traveling to Mexico would not visit the portions that are “developing.”)
   - Middle East → Developing
   - South America → Developing
   - Western Europe → Developed
   - Other → Developed
   - None → Developed
   - Don’t Know → Developed
   - None

Lastly, the importance of educational opportunities when choosing a travel destination was also divided into two groups: “Important” and “Not Important.” The responses were divided as follows:

5. Educational opportunities are ___ when deciding where to travel on vacations.
   - Very Important → Important
   - Somewhat Important → Important
   - Not too Important → Not Important
   - Not at all Important → Not Important
   - Don’t Know → Not Important

New, re-coded responses are as follows:

1. Political party identification response
   - Progressive
   - Not Progressive

2. Are you planning to take a vacation trip in the next 12 months, or not?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don’t Know

3. Do you plan on traveling abroad on a vacation trip in the next 12 months, or not?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don’t Know

4. What will be the destination of your next vacation trip outside the U.S. in the next 12 months?
   - Developing
   - Developed

5. Educational opportunities are ___ when deciding where to travel on vacations.
   - Important
   - Not Important

These new responses were much simpler to analyze and provided a clearer picture of correlations.

New responses to question 1 were then compared to new responses to questions 2, 3, 4, and 5 to determine statistically significant relationships.

RESULTS

A one-way between-groups ANOVA revealed no significant differences between “progressivism” and vacation plans in the next 12 months p=. Similarly, another one-way between-groups ANOVA revealed no significant differences between “progressivism” and vacation plans abroad in the next 12 months p=. 
It was expected that those who were identified as “progressive” would be more likely to be planning vacations to destinations that were “developing.” However, a one-way between-groups ANOVA test revealed no significant evidence to support that assumption $p=0.945$.

However, when comparing progressivism to whether or not a person finds educational opportunities important when choosing a vacation destination, a significant difference was found $p=0.031$. This means that those who are progressive are more likely than those who are not progressive to value and consider educational opportunities when planning vacations.

![Educational Opportunities in Travel Relative to Progressivism](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Educational Opportunities in Travel Relative to Progressivism

This finding is statistically significant; as is displayed in Table 1, $p=0.031$.

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**CONCLUSIONS**

The results did not support the hypothesis that those who are labeled progressive are more likely to plan vacations in general or vacations abroad. Therefore, those who are not progressive are just as likely to plan and take vacations abroad as those who are progressive. I believe that when comparing data about international travel
experience in the past to progressivism, the finding would be different. I believe those who have had travel experience abroad are more likely to be progressive. When looking at international travel experience in the past, I think I would also find more significant differences between those who have traveled to “developing” countries and those who have traveled to “developed” countries. Unfortunately, this survey did not include data on past international travel experience. I was only able to look at individuals’ future plans for travel, which I believe had a significant impact on the findings.

It is interesting that those who are progressive are more likely to consider educational opportunities when choosing travel destinations. I would assume that this conclusion would be similar in comparison to study abroad as well, as study abroad experiences are essentially travel for educational purposes.

LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations of this study that are notable. The survey that was used in this analysis was conducted in 2006, and is therefore, a bit outdated. This data may not be able to provide an accurate description of current attitudes towards travel and the effects it has on political ideology.

Secondly, the survey only asked questions about future travel plans. “Changes” individuals may undergo are a result of traveling, therefore a study that compiled data of international travel experiences that an individual has already had may be more relevant to this

Thirdly, this study did not consider potentially relevant demographical information such as age and gender identification. Demographic information may have an effect on findings.

Lastly, in the future it may be insightful to compare more than one study to see if findings are consistent amongst other data gathered.

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REFERENCES/ LITERATURE CITED


