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# Dating Violence Policy: Making the Grade

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*Dating violence rates affect an unacceptably high percentage of youth. This paper tests a model to understand the considerable variation in state dating violence policy comprehensiveness. Independent variables in the model are state political culture, partisan control of political institutions, prevalence of dating violence, and median household income. Bivariate results show partial support for preliminary hypotheses. Regression analysis indicates that strength of Democratic Party control of governmental institutions is the only variable in the model that achieved statistical significance. Implications and recommendations for future research are provided.*

*Key words: dating violence, social policy, political culture, political party influence in policy-making*

Dating violence among adolescents is a serious public health concern that occurs across all social, economic, cultural, and ethnic groups (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Some studies suggest that up to 40 percent of high school students have had experiences with dating violence (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004). The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) survey reported that, in the United States, about 10 percent of high school students experience physical abuse such as being slapped, hit, or physically hurt on purpose by

their boyfriend or girlfriend (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2008). Dating violence affects teens' physical and psychological development and well-being (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003), and threatens the stability of communities (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good, & Kleinman, 1995; Fischbach & Herbert, 1997; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). Strong correlations exist between youth being victimized by physical dating violence and higher levels of depression, and poorer educational outcomes (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Filson, Ulloa, Runfola, & Hokoda, 2010); such youth are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including episodic heavy drinking, sexual intercourse, attempted suicide, pregnancy, smoking and physical fighting, than non-victimized youth (CDC, 2006).

Studies on teen dating violence often concentrate on the impact of victimization, help-seeking, risk and protective factors, and the evaluation of prevention efforts or interventions. Few studies (Campbell, 2005; Largio, 2007) have focused on policy issues related to dating violence, and we know little about what influences the content of dating violence policies. Examination of the factors associated with more comprehensive dating violence policies across the United States may help us better understand how to promote policies to address the alarming rates of adolescent dating violence. In this study, we examine the influence of a number of variables on the comprehensiveness of states' dating violence policies.

All fifty states in the USA have some form of domestic violence civil protection order legislation. Legal policies to address adolescent dating violence are often embedded in those domestic violence policies (Sousa, 1999). Dating violence policies vary dramatically from state to state (Break the Cycle, 2010).

States developing adolescent dating violence policies face significant challenges. The definition of dating violence is challenging in itself. There are few definitions of what constitutes a dating relationship. For example, adolescent dating relationships are often brief, so youth differ in their conceptions of dating. Teens also use different words for dating relationships, and the words describing dating partners change frequently and vary in different parts of the country (Pittman, Wolfe, & Wekerle, 2000). Definitions of violence are difficult to

capture. Adolescents may form different opinions and judgments about violent incidents based on the context of the situation. Culture also plays a vital role in adolescents' perceptions of what constitutes violent incidents (Lee, Takaku, Ottati, & Yan, 2004). Another challenge to developing dating violence policies is the use of specific language and terms (i.e., dating violence) so teens understand that these policies exist to help them (Largio, 2007).

None of the foregoing research addresses the determinants of dating violence policy, specifically, or of intimate partner violence policy more generally. Given these differences in policies between states and the lack of prior research to explore the topic, it is natural to wonder what relates to the variation between states on this policy issue. In this study, we examine the comprehensiveness of each state's dating violence policies, and relate the policies to the prevalence of dating violence and other policy-relevant variables.

### Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework examines factors internal to the particular state, a common strategy for comparative state policy research (Matisoff, 2008; Wiener & Koontz, 2010). According to Weiner and Koontz (2010), the internal determinants approach studies characteristics of states that occur within those states' borders. Typical factors include problem severity, social and cultural history, economic conditions, and political party strength. While these variables have been tested in many different policy arenas, only a few are used in any one study. As there appears to be no extant research on the determinants of dating violence prevention policy particularly, we look at four variables that are internal to the state in this research: political culture, partisan control of government institutions, problem prevalence, and state socio-economic level.

#### *Political Culture*

A state's political culture refers to its inhabitants' orientations toward key objects of the political system and toward the individual's role in that political system (Almond & Verba, 1965; Silver & Dowley, 2000). Political culture consists of political views, characteristics, and the core values which are shared

by individuals within a society, and it influences the social and legal policies of a society (Fisher & Pratt, 2006; Mead, 2004; Shock, 2008).

Elazar's (1972) theory describes three subcultures relating to the purpose and role of government in the United States: moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. The core value of moralistic political culture is the concept of "commonwealth," which is that citizens have an obligation to participate in government. It stresses the commitment to communal power and believes in government intervention into any activities considered antithetical to the public interest (Elazar, 1972). States with a predominantly moralistic political culture are likely to have a higher level of political liberalism, with less political corruption and more progressive political attitudes (Elazar, 1972).

The individualistic political culture is characterized by private entrepreneurship and conservative values. Individualistic political culture considers politics as a specialized activity for professionals, with the expectation of limited participation by the general public (Elazar, 1972). States with individualistic political culture tend to embrace limited government intervention into private activities.

Traditionalistic culture upholds the paternalistic and elitist values that encourage a hierarchical society. It accepts government's positive role for the community and welfare of its citizens. However, the traditionalistic political culture emphasizes securing and maintaining the existing social order, which includes male dominance in the family and workplace (Elazar, 1972). Participation of citizens in politics is expected to remain within society's elites.

State political culture has been found to be a significant determinant of policies relating to the death penalty (Fisher & Pratt, 2006), the stringency of voter identification laws (Hale & McNeal, 2010), educational policy (Louis, Thomas, Gordon, & Febey, 2008), the implementation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (Mead, 2004), and the agenda-setting impact of newspaper coverage (Tan & Weaver, 2009).

*Partisan control of governmental institutions.* The term "governmental institutions" in this study refers to the political governing bodies in the states, i.e., the legislative assemblies

and the governorships. Partisan control of these governmental institutions shapes the policies that emerge from the give and take of lawmaking. The Republican and the Democratic Parties are associated with conservative and liberal values, respectively. In recent decades, the Democratic Party has been linked with liberalism and progressiveness and the willingness to use government policy to decrease the severity of social problems (such as dating violence) (Fowler, 2004). On the other hand, the Republican Party has been more connected with laissez-faire policies, fiscal conservatism, and the promotion of personal responsibility (Fowler, 2004). Thus, we believe that political party of legislators and governors will influence the enactment of dating violence policies.

#### *Dating Violence Prevalence and Economic Resources*

We believe that the level of dating violence in a state impacts the likelihood that there will be action taken regarding the problem. Jones and Baumgartner (2005) show how publicity regarding a problem increases the chances of legislation in many different policy areas. While it may take only a single horrific example to push an idea into law, it is also possible that a continuing series of years of problems lead government officials to act (Kingdon, 2002). We thus believe that legislation is more likely in states where the problem is greater. States with a higher level of economic resources in terms of average income per household are believed to be more likely to invest in legislative action to solve social problems (Brunner, Ross & Washington, 2011).

The following hypotheses were tested: (1) Political culture of the states will be associated with the comprehensiveness of the states' dating violence policy, such that moralistic political culture will have the highest grade, followed by individualistic and then the traditionalistic cultures; (2) Greater Democratic Party control of the governmental institutions in a state (governorship, Senate, and, state House of Representatives) will be positively associated with the comprehensiveness of the states' dating violence policy; (3) The greater the prevalence of dating violence at the time of enactment, the greater the level of comprehensiveness of dating violence policy will be; and (4) The higher the state's median household income, the more comprehensive the policy will be.

## Methods

All of the states of the USA were considered for inclusion. While the District of Columbia is treated as a state in some comparative state policy research, it was excluded in this project as it does not have the political culture variable. Nebraska was also eliminated as it has a nonpartisan, unicameral state legislature (Council of State Governments, 2010). Montana and Alaska were omitted due to having a non-partisan state legislature during the time studied.

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable in our study is the grades of dating violence policies given to all states by the nationally regarded advocacy group 'Break the Cycle' (2010). The grades published in 2010 are based on the comprehensiveness of dating violence laws in effect in December, 2009. We briefly describe how this group developed a grade for each state. A higher grade is related to greater ease in obtaining a civil domestic violence protection order for a teen, and a broader range of grounds for granting such protective orders (Break the Cycle, 2010).

The level of difficulty in accessing civil protection orders (CPO) for teens was based on 10 indicators related to the recommended policy criteria advocated by the experts on dating violence at Break the Cycle (Break the Cycle, 2010). The experts in dating violence scored and weighted the following indicators: (1) minors can be granted CPOs; (2) dating relationships recognized for CPO acquisition; (3) minors can file for CPO on own behalf (10%); (4) parental notification requirement; (5) same sex couples qualify for CPOs; (6) CPO granted against a minor respondent; (7) other options available if minor cannot file for CPO; (8) qualifying definitions of abuse for filing CPO; (9) minor's request for CPO heard in courts familiar with domestic violence; and (10) modifiability of the CPO (Break the Cycle, 2010). According to Break the Cycle (2010),

States that met the criterion received ten points for the indicator and those with the most adverse policy received zero points. Intermediate policies were assigned point values between 0 and 10. States earning

at least eight points received an A, states earning at least 7 points received a B, those earning at least 6 points received a C, and those earning at least 5 points received a D. However, states that did not permit minors to obtain a CPO or permit dating relationships to qualify for a CPO received automatic failing grades. (p. 5)

Break the Cycle (2010) rated dating violence policy comprehensiveness for all 50 states. Grades of the states' policies were originally coded with a letter grade, A (most comprehensive) to F (most limited). We coded the policy grade in similar fashion, and treat it as a continuous variable with five values: A = 5, B = 4, C = 3, D = 2, and F = 1.

#### *Independent Variables*

The independent variables in this study are: (1) political culture, (2) partisan control of governmental institutions, (3) dating violence prevalence; and (4) median household income of the state. This section describes each variable.

*Political culture.* Based on the Elazar's (1972) theory of states' political culture, we used Johnston's (1983) classification scheme to classify all 50 states into three broad groups. All states were coded according to their dominant political culture. We have operationalized political culture as a categorical variable where 1 represents the traditionalistic political culture, 2 represents the individualistic political culture and 3 represents the moralistic political culture.

*Partisan control of governmental institutions.* We originally developed three variables to represent the state's level of partisan control of the governmental institutions: party majority in the state Senate, party majority in the House of Representatives, and party affiliation of the governor at the time of enactment of the most recent dating violence policy. We then created a composite variable to use in our hypothesis testing. We assigned the value of 1 if the chamber's majority or governor's affiliation was Republican and 2 if it was Democratic for each of the three institutions. We summed these three scores so that the final variable ranged from 3 (total Republican control of the governmental institutions) to 6 (total Democratic control of the governmental institutions in that state). In the two cases

where there was a bipartisan coalition in the legislatures or non-partisan governor, the case was dropped, as the objective of this study is to understand the impact of partisan control of governmental bodies on dating violence policy.

*Dating violence.* Data on dating violence prevalence were collected from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS), conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2006, 2008). YRBS is a voluntary school-based biennial survey that uses a nationally representative sample of students attending ninth to twelfth grades in public and private schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia (CDC, 2006). Dating violence prevalence rate is the percentage of high school students (9th - 12th grade) who experienced dating violence (being hit, slapped, injured, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend) during the 12 months preceding the survey (CDC, 2008). In our analyses, we use information collected in 2007 (CDC, 2008), because it is the year most closely preceding the year the dating violence policies were assessed for comprehensiveness, and because the data published in 2008 are the most comprehensive of the data series, with information from the most states.

*Median state income.* Information relating to state median household income in 2009 was collected from the United States Census Bureau (2011).

### *Analyses*

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the overall situation of dating violence policy grades, political culture, partisan control, dating violence prevalence, and state median income. Bivariate analyses, ANOVA and t-tests were used to examine the relationships between the independent and dependent variables. The number of cases in our study is 47, although the number of states for which we have a measure of dating violence prevalence is just 34, thus decreasing the number of cases in the regression analysis testing the policy model. Because of the limited number of states, which increases the likelihood of committing a Type II error, we used an alpha level of .10 to determine statistical significance.

## Results

### *Descriptive Analysis*

*Dating violence policies.* Dating violence policies are, in general, not very comprehensive. In 2010, six (13%) of the states had an "A" grade policy and 14 (30%) states had policies with a grade of "B." The grade of "C" was awarded to 13 states (28%), while four (9%) earned a "D," and 10 states (21%) had a grade of "F."

*Political culture.* Almost half of the states ( $n = 23$ ; 49%) have a moralistic culture, 34% ( $n = 16$ ) have a traditionalistic culture and 17% ( $n = 8$ ) have an individualistic culture.

*Partisan control of governmental institutions.* In 2009, states leaned slightly towards the Democratic Party. Nine states (19%) had single-party control by Republicans and 13 states (28%) had two out of three institutions in the Republican camp. Eleven states (23%) had mostly Democratic control of institutions and 14 (30%) were controlled by Democrats exclusively.

*Prevalence.* The dating violence prevalence rate for the year 2007 (CDC, 2008) was used in this study because it was the most recent year prior to the assessment of the laws in all of the states. It thus represents the data that legislators and governors were most likely to turn to in considering whether dating violence was a problem for their states or not. Nationally, in 2007, more than one in ten high school students reported experiencing physical dating violence ( $M = 11.5\%$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ).

*Median household income (2009).* The median household income ranged from a low of \$52,034 in New Mexico to a high of \$94,441 in New Jersey. The average median income was \$69,454 ( $SD = \$11,024$ ).

### *Bivariate Hypothesis Tests*

We earlier presented four bivariate hypotheses. This section examines the results of testing these hypotheses.

$H_1$ . We hypothesized that states with a moralistic political culture will receive the highest policy grade, followed by the individualistic culture and then the traditionalistic culture. The results lend support to the hypothesis, but are not statistically significant [ $F(2, 44) = .687$ ,  $p = .508$ ]. Moralistic states have the highest mean policy grade ( $M=3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ), followed

by individualistic states ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ) and traditionalistic states ( $M=2.75$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ).

$H_2$ . We predicted that Democratic political party control of the governmental institutions of the state (Governorship, State Senate, and, State House of Representatives) will be positively associated with a higher policy grade (showing greater policy comprehensiveness) for the state. The composite variable of partisan control creates an overall picture of unified versus divided government. Using the variable relating to overall partisan control, the correlation of policy grade (greater levels of comprehensiveness) and partisan control (more Democratic control) shows a positive correlation of .465 ( $p = .001$ ), showing a strong linkage between these two variables.

$H_3$ . In our third hypothesis, we predicted a positive correlation between the prevalence of dating violence (2007) and the grade of the dating violence policy of the state (2010). States with a grade of A ( $n = 4$ ) had an average prevalence of 10.00 percent. States with a B grade ( $n = 11$ ) had a prevalence of 11.25 and those with a grade of C ( $n = 11$ ) had a slightly higher victimization rate of 11.83. Policy at the D level ( $n = 2$ ) was associated with a prevalence rate of only 8.75 percent, far below that of even the A states. States with a grade of F ( $n = 7$ ) did have the highest prevalence rate, at 13.00 percent. These results, however, do not reach the level of statistical significance [ $F(4, 30) = 1.982$ ,  $p = .123$ ].

$H_4$ . We hypothesized that the higher the state's median household income, the higher the policy grade would be. States with a grade of F have a median household income of \$64,565, those with a D have a median household income of \$69,740, and those with a grade of C have a median household income of \$71,095. States with a grade of B, however, only have a median household income of \$69,245, or a bit less than those at the D grade level. States with an A grade have the highest median household income, \$74,340. Despite showing a trend as we hypothesized, these results are not statistically significant [ $F(4, 42) = .849$ ,  $p = .502$ ].

In sum, we have one hypothesis (political control) that is supported using bivariate significance tests. We have two hypotheses (political culture and median state income) that are trending in the expected direction, but do not reach statistical significance. Our final hypothesis (prevalence of the problem)

has results in the opposite direction of what we hypothesized, though these results are not statistically significant.

### *Model Testing*

The bivariate analysis conducted so far indicates some, though limited, support for several of our hypotheses. Overall, results of the regression analysis to test our full model indicate results similar to the bivariate analyses. Only one of the variables impacts the dependent variable significantly: partisan control of the institutions of government by Democrats, ( $\beta = .566$ ,  $t(34) = 3.916$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), as shown in Table 1. All other variables are below the threshold for statistical significance. The model had an adjusted r-square of .331 [ $F(4, 30) = 5.201$ ,  $p = .003$ ].

Table 1: Regression Analysis Results

Independent variable	Standardized regression coefficient ( $\beta$ )	<i>p</i>
Political culture	.655	.517
Partisan control of the institutions of government by Democrats	.566	.000
Percentage of high school students who experienced dating violence (2007)	-.236	.120
2009 State median income	.074	.667

## Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to understand better the forces that shape the comprehensiveness of dating violence policy at the state level. We created a literature-based model to explain the grade of state dating violence policy. When tested, the results of the study found only partial support for the model. We found that Democratic partisan control of governmental institutions is a statistically significant predictor of higher policy grades. We also found that political culture followed the pattern we hypothesized (moralistic culture led to the most

comprehensive policies, traditional culture was associated with the most limited policies, and individualistic culture was correlated at an intermediate level), but not to a statistically significant level. We determined that states with higher levels of median income tend to have higher policy grades (again, however, this is not a statistically significant relationship).

One test had results that ran counter to our expectations. While we believed that a higher prevalence of dating violence would lead to higher policy grades, we found an opposite pattern to be the case (though it is not a statistically significant).

When testing the overall model, results show that the model is useful in predicting the dependent variable, though only one independent variable (Democratic partisan control of governmental institutions) is statistically significant. The strength of this one variable is impressive and underscores the importance of political party affiliation in predicting policy choices.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

There are several limitations to this study. First, the small size of the potential sample of states reduces the ability of statistical analyses to arrive at statistically significant results. This limitation was addressed by using a broader definition of significance, .10 rather than the typical .05 level. Yet, with missing data on some variables, particularly the prevalence rates of dating violence at the state level, the final  $n$  for the regression analysis is only 34 cases, much lower than we would like. This loss, one-fourth of the initial sample of 47, makes it difficult to discover any but very strong effects. The small number of cases compared to the number of variables may be the cause of low levels of significance rather than fatal flaws in the model.

Measurement concerns exist as well. The YRBS data, used to determine dating violence prevalence, were collected only from youth in school. The CDC (2008) reports that in 2005, at least 3% of youth in the 16–17 year age group were not enrolled in a high school, thus these data do not represent all persons of the age group under this study. Additionally, the YRBS relies on self-reports. The extent of youth under-reporting or over-reporting of their dating violent behaviors was not assessed in measuring prevalence. There was some variation

in data collection across states and some states did not report data on all variables. Despite its limitations, the YRBS is the most comprehensive measure we have of physical dating violence prevalence across states and so was used in this research.

### Implications and Conclusion

Despite these limitations, several results bear notice and the topic needs to be explored further. Perhaps the most eye-opening result is the generally low level of comprehensiveness of dating violence policy states have on the books. Out of 49 states, only a few had policies strong enough to earn an "A" grade in 2010 (Break the Cycle decided not to create grades in 2011, so, while laws may have changed since then, we do not have a comparable measurement of them). This fact indicates the severe limitations of most policies in protecting teenage victims, according to the criteria of Break the Cycle.

The most important policy-related implication emerges from the finding that the party in control of state governmental bodies strongly influences dating violence policies. This result supports previous studies' findings on the influence of political party on social, legal, and environmental policies (Gershtenson, Mangun, & Smith, 2004; Young, Farrell, Henderson, & Taxman, 2009). States with Democratic majorities in the legislature are shown to have more comprehensive dating violence policies, a fact that should be important in mobilizing advocates on the topic to participate actively in electoral campaigns at the state level.

Researchers interested in teen dating violence, gender and women's studies, and social policy can use this study as a springboard to conduct further research to: (1) collect and obtain more data on dating violence to know the actual prevalence rates, along with other related demographical and socio-economical indices; (2) identify other socioeconomic and political factors that influence such policies; (3) measure the impact of policies on prevalence of dating violence (and other forms of violence); and (4) explore other legal procedures or options that can be used to protect the victims of violence. Additional research is needed. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand the effect of these factors on the development and

prevalence of risky behaviors. A longitudinal study is needed to identify the direction of associations between dating violence and strength of the policy. Research is also needed to understand how dating violence policies differentially impact male and female adolescents, since we know that the dynamics and consequences of dating violence vary by gender (Banister & Schreiber, 2001; Silverman, Raj, & Clements, 2004).

While this study is merely an initial step to understanding the correlates of dating violence policy, the results indicate it is possible to better comprehend the relationship between dating violence policies and variables that influence the policies. Very few studies have addressed the role that policy variables, such as partisan control of governmental institutions, might have in impacting policy concerning dating violence among adolescents. Variables that are important in understanding the formation of other types of policies seem to be less important in shaping dating violence policy. Future research efforts are needed to provide greater understanding of how policy in this arena is formed and the impact of more comprehensive policies on the prevalence of dating violence in a state.

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