A Tale of Two States: An Analysis of Sex Education in Alabama & New York

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A Tale of Two States: An Analysis of Sex Education in Alabama & New York

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of Political Science,
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Political Science
and
graduation from The Honors College

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May 2022
Abstract

Sex education policy in the U.S has been debated throughout the years largely because of its rates of teen births and sexually transmitted diseases which rank among the highest in developed countries. States are left to their own discretion to decide what kind of sex education curriculum they will implement in schools. The federal government can incentivize states’ education policies but sex education, in particular, has been dealt with differently depending on the federal administration. Despite the change in federal administrations, the federal government’s influence has tended to lean towards promoting abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) sex education begging the question of why states do not mandate comprehensive sex education (CSE). California is viewed as the model state for mandating CSE in its public high schools. A comparison of two different states, Alabama, and New York, try to identify the casual mechanisms that have allowed for neither state to mandate CSE. All of this in an attempt to understand more broadly what the issue of sex education means for politics and American democracy.

Keywords: Sex education policy, Abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM), Comprehensive sex education (CSE)
Acknowledgements

The process and completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support I received from various people. First, thank you so much to my thesis advisor Patricia Strach for seeing the potential in my ideas and for offering clarity and insight when I found myself lost in the research hole. Thank you as well to my professor the Spring semester of my sophomore year who encouraged me to pursue this topic beyond the means in which I initially created it to shed more light on this issue.

Another thank you to coworkers and supervisors of my internship this Spring who encouraged me every step of the way to focus on my research and listened attentively as I explained my process.

Lastly, thank you to my friends and family who recognized the dedication and time it took for me to complete this and always provided me with the strength to continue writing.
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Introduction

Sex education policy in the U.S has been debated throughout the years largely because of its rates of teen births and sexually transmitted diseases which rank among the highest in developed countries. This debate has been centered around two types of sex education which have been understood to be representative of the most prominent ideologies in the political arena of the U.S. First, a comprehensive sex education (CSE) curriculum advocates for the inclusion of teaching about contraception and reproduction in addition to teaching about abstinence. Second, an abstinence-only until marriage (AOUM) sex education curriculum includes instruction solely about abstinence from sex until marriage. States are left to their own discretion to decide what kind of sex education curriculum they will implement in schools. The federal government can incentivize states’ education policies but sex education, in particular, has been dealt with differently depending on the federal administration. Despite the change in federal administrations, the federal government’s influence has tended to lean towards the abstinence-only category through three major policies: the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), the Community-Based Abstinence Education program (CBAE), and the Title V Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage program (AOUM) which all provide grants to states on the basis of promotion of an abstinence-only taught sex education curriculum. Although the former two have since been eliminated, Title V which was implemented in 1996, still predominantly encourages an abstinence-only sex education curriculum in states. With this policy, states will only receive federal funding for sex education if it meets four of the eight points listed as the definition of abstinence education (Constantine et al., 2007).

Yet, differences remain between states as they choose their own way of implementing a sex education curriculum. Because states must choose whether to teach a CSE or AOUM
education, they are often more persuaded to choose the latter given that they also would like to receive funding from the federal government. Sex education is required in public schools in thirty states as well as in the District of Columbia while only 28 of the 30 states that require sex education also require education about HIV (KFF, 2018). Not only can sex education in states range in the degree of implementation but its definition also ranges depending on the criteria for sex education. Some states have or do not have a policy for abstinence-only sex education while others cover it alongside other information or only have abstinence-only sex education. There is also a difference in definition such as whether an HIV and STI prevention curriculum is included when teaching sex education. Whether an abstinence-only sex education curriculum solely teaches abstinence or also includes teaching about HIV and STI prevention, influences the degree how which states choose to regulate sex education in schools.

My research question asks the following: Why do both New York and Alabama lack a mandated comprehensive sex education curriculum in public high schools despite the stark polarity of their political setting? What does California’s success in implementing a mandated comprehensive sex education curriculum in its public schools tell us about what is needed for comprehensive sex education to be implemented in New York and Alabama? To carry out my research, I conducted an in-depth case study on both comprehensive sex education and abstinence-only until marriage sex education in New York and Alabama, using articles from scholarly sources, journals, newspapers, and editorials. Through this case study, I created four possible explanations in which I tested the cases of New York and Alabama in comparison with California’s case: 1. political party affiliation, 2. Health outcomes, 3. Interest group/ advocacy organizations influence, 4. Federal funding and 5. Religion. I found that of the four explanations, the best possible explanation was religion.
Literature on Sex Education

Schools began teaching about sex education to address two issues: rising concerns about nonmarital adolescent pregnancy that arose in the 1960s as young people were increasingly leaving home and, because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic after 1980. Both shaped the need for and acceptance of formal instruction for adolescents on life-saving topics such as contraception, condoms, and sexually transmitted infections (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Yet, the federal government has been shown to largely be influencing states to take a more AOUM approach to their sex education curriculums, which has posed many problems for researchers and supporters of CSE. “A 2007 report on state-funded, abstinence-only programs found the programs had no measurable impact on increasing abstinence or delaying sexual initiation among youth” (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). The concern is that the federal government’s push for AOUM falls short of being of help to lower rates of STIs especially among young people. If AOUM programs are supposed to be increasing rates of abstinence amongst young people, but also fail in doing so, then AOUM fails in proving to be effective for all the reasons each federal administration since the 1980s has chosen to allocate funds for states to use. Thus, it is imperative that with this in mind, we investigate three states, two similar to each other and starkly different from the other in political ideology. Two states that are completely different from each other are both similar in that they do not mandate CSE to be taught in their sex education curriculums.

Scholars have analyzed existing reasons for the divide in sex education teachings between AOUM and CSE as well as possible explanations for AOUM’s prevalence in many states’ curriculums. Articles by Beh and Diamond (2006) and Rufo (1997) discuss the idea that sex education has become so politicized that the issue of sex education becomes lost. That is, sex education used to be about teaching young adults the importance of sexual health in preventing
diseases but, with the turnover of each new federal administration, came a change in the way sex education was both viewed and implemented. These authors attest that the politics associated with implementing policy eventually turned sex education away from this purpose into what it is now being viewed as a way of influencing underaged people to engage in sexual activities. These two academic articles offer further discussion to what the issue of sex education beyond the politics of CSE and AOUM means for society as a whole. While it does point to one of the larger issues of sex education, they fail to offer a more direct explanation for why CSE is not mandated by states. It also does well in pointing out that AOUM influences both the federal government and parents; however, it does not include reasons as to why CSE would be the better choice.

Other literature analyzes the shortcomings of an AOUM curriculum as it is currently adopted by the federal government as their approach to adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Articles by Ott & Scantelli and research conducted by Mark and Wu (2022), discuss data and evidence that shows AOUM education excludes accurate information needed to be effective in reducing teen pregnancy rates while evidence supports that a CSE actually leads to a decline in teen pregnancy rates (Mark & Wu, 2022; Ott & Scantelli, 2008). An AOUM sex education curriculum has been “shown to exclude important information about contraception to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases and are ineffective in delaying sexual activity among youth” (Stanger-Hall & Hall., 2011). While this research aids in my final conclusion that CSE is the best possible option for sex education, it neglects to mention other reasons as to why it would be better aside from it being a way to reduce teen pregnancy rates. Like this study also mentions, in reaching the conclusion that federal funding for more CSE leads to reductions in teen births, they also neglect to account for what exactly is being taught in a CSE curriculum.
My literature will also discuss a concrete definition of CSE and why when looking at New York and Alabama, neither state has been able to successfully implement it.

In the same token, literature elaborates on this issue of CSE and what it means to be “comprehensive” as there too are still shortcomings to the information included in CSE curriculums. These articles discuss the way sex education that is described to be comprehensive, lacks teaching in many aspects such as ensuring communication about consent or inclusion on sexuality that is not heterosexuality. They offer a suggestion for what it would take for sex education to truly be considered comprehensives: “Through new legislation and updated state standards, policymakers should encourage sex education requirements that include instruction on healthy relationships, communication, intimacy, consent, and sexual assault prevention especially since only 24 states require education about consent and healthy relationships in their sex education curriculum (and this is only for states that have a sex education curriculum)” (SIECUS, 2022). This suggestion points to what could possibly be a failure of CSE advocates to take into account when giving CSE the title of being comprehensive. As society continues to look for new and better ways to ensure that young adults are well informed about their sexual and reproductive health, it might also do well for this to be a consideration going forward, which is something I will elaborate on in my conclusion. While the literature can explain more problems with the comprehensive aspect of CSE, it also solely discusses what CSE lacks without pointing to what can also be gained from CSE. My literature will provide a holistic perspective both of why CSE is best to be taught while also providing further evidence of what it lacks and what can be done to fix it.

Kantor and Levitz’s (2017) article analyzes the reasoning of political party affiliation among parents and suggests that my explanation that political party affiliation has an impact on
why CSE hasn't been mandated is false. While the literature does suggest that political party affiliation does not have an impact on who is more likely to support mandating a CSE, this article conducted this study amongst parents. If political party affiliation can truly be ruled out as a reason and does not have an impact on the desire for CSE to be taught in high schools, there still begs the question of what could be a stronger explanation for this. My research will still take this explanation into account. Additionally, editorials also point to the social context surrounding sex education in that there is the belief that there is a desire for CSE to be mandated in NY and AL but for some reason, this desire has not been translated to action. This literature mentions the idea that a mandated CSE is wanted socially but leaves room to investigate why politically it does not seem to be favored as it has not been implemented. This gap is what my research seeks to fulfill through the use of four likely explanations.

Previous literature has alluded to some explanations for the divide between CSE and AOUM and why both the federal government and states have appeared to largely support an AOUM curriculum. However, Williams’ article offers a different explanation that has not been analyzed as much for its connection to sex education; an explanation that I find to best explain NY and AL’s situation which I discuss further in my analysis. This article touches on the strength of religion's influence in pushing for an AOUM curriculum in that AOUM has become aligned with the ideology of the Christian Right. While the literature explains the abstinence movement and its relationship with religion, it also lacks in providing information about the intersection of religion in politics and sex education and why AOUM has heavy political support which is where my discussion seeks to come in to explain why this reason proves to be the best when looking at the specific case of NY and AL.
Case Study: New York, Alabama, and California

Among the broader implications of CSE and AOUM curriculum, I chose to specifically look at New York and Alabama to analyze the nuance of sex education. New York and Alabama represent two states at odds in their political ideologies, especially in their representation of their legislatures, geographical locations, and histories. Alabama’s legislature is currently ruled by a Republican supermajority while New York’s legislature is currently ruled by a Democratic supermajority. Yet, for both of their current political party differences, neither state has a mandated comprehensive sex education curriculum in their public high schools. It is important to analyze possible explanations for why these two states could share this one aspect between each other despite other marketable differences.

The decision to analyze these two states comes from seeing the success of California in implementing a mandated CSE curriculum, which is perceived to have more political commonality with New York. California and New York are viewed as similar states in social and political contexts that happened to be separated geographically on the map. Yet, for many of these perceived similarities, California is the only state out of the three whose legislature has passed a mandate for a CSE curriculum in its public high schools. Thus, it is important to analyze possible explanations for why California could differ from New York despite other marketable similarities while also accounting for other similarities that may arise between New York and Alabama but not between them and California, that may also account for this. Throughout my research about sex education, many advocates and researchers regard California as the model example of a state that teaches CSE. California serves as the best case to use as a point of reference in this study. The focus of my research question relies on analyzing the political setting of two states and how that impacts whether CSE has been passed in the
legislature. When taking that into account, the most obvious difference between states that are more liberal in politics and states that are more conservative in politics. Therefore, it made sense to choose NY as the state to analyze when looking at liberal states as NY is typically regarded as the model state for this case. Similarly, when looking at states with more conservative politics, Alabama is regarded as the model state for this case. I believe that both of these states are a balanced representation to consider explanations and thus make a broader generalization for why CSE is not mandated in other politically conservative and politically liberal states.

This study is an in-depth comparative case study between New York and Alabama across five lines of explanations using: scholarly articles, journal articles, brief excerpts from books, editorials, and newspaper articles. I mostly stuck to resources that were scholarly and government websites/organizations affiliated with the federal/state government for broader information on sex education. I used brief editorials to take into account the perspectives of advocacy/interest groups as well as to add social context to aid in my research and analysis. To find which sources would be relevant and useful, I also had keywords that I used in Boolean search: Sex education, Comprehensive sex education, Alabama, New York, California, Abstinence, Abstinence only until marriage, Public school(s), Political parties, political ideology, religion, secular. I chose articles that primarily had the keywords “sex education” because they would be the most relevant to the research question. Articles that had mention of the states but did not primarily discuss them were also used in addition to articles that primarily had the states as their keyword. Articles that mentioned the states sometimes would include insights into other relevant social and historical contexts that were helpful. An excel spreadsheet organizing the explanations and whether they match up with explaining why CSE was/was not mandated in the three states is used in the analysis. The ‘y’ axis contains the list of explanations, and the ‘x’ axis
contains the list of states. In each column, the list of explanations is evaluated on a scale from 0-
1 0 being the explanation does not apply for the state, 0.5 being the explanation somewhat
applies for the state and 1 being the explanation best applies for this state. This table as well as
further discussion is included, and further explanation will follow.

Table 1: Analysis of Explanations between Alabama, California & New York

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reason 1: Political Party Affiliation

A previous thesis analyzed the case of sex education between California and New York
similarly questioning how California managed to pass a bill mandating comprehensive sex
education while New York did not. Jones’ thesis uses a most similar systems method of analysis
to conduct an in-depth comparative study of New York’s failure to pass legislation that mandates
a CSE curriculum and places it in the broader context of its meaning for the United States and its
place in global public health. When looking at the party breakdown of New York and
California’s legislatures (see below Table 2),
Table 2: NY State Legislature Party Composition 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Composition of The New York State Legislature 2018</th>
<th>Number of Democrats</th>
<th>Number of Republicans</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

she found the following:

“I would have excepted a shift in New York to signal the passage of the sex education bill since the Democratic party had a two-house majority and the ability to bring any bill to the floor. However, a shift in majority party in NY but not in California could be a potential explanation for the failing of NYS to pass CSE. It is possible that since the Democrats had just become the majority party in both Houses that other bills were at the top of their policy agenda. In the 2018-2019 legislative session New York State Democrats successfully passed gun control legislation which expanded the SAFE Act passed in 2013, expanded abortion protections, approved licenses for undocumented immigrants, reformed and eliminated cash bail, ended religious exemptions of vaccination, decriminalized marijuana, voting reforms, the Child Victims Act and reforme

After the 2020 election, the composition of the NY legislature has not changed as the Democratic party still holds a supermajority. Yet, Jones concluded that CSE may have only failed to pass in NY since the Democratic party was still new as a majority to the legislature and that political party affiliation can still be used as a reason to explain it. However, with it being over four years since their majority, NY still has failed to pass legislation that mandated CSE in schools. Thus, although Jones may have been hopeful that NY Democrats’ record of passing other progressive legislation might apply to sex education, seeing the present picture, I conclude that political party does not explain why NY does not have a mandated CSE curriculum in schools.
Table 3: NY State Legislature Party Composition 2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Composition of The New York Legislature 2022</th>
<th>Number of Democrats</th>
<th>Number of Republicans</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly</td>
<td>105 (1 vacancy)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When comparing Alabama's legislatures for the same time period, much of the same conclusion can be drawn. Alabama’s Republican majority gained control in 2010, also disproving Jones’ idea that a party’s recent control of the majority in a legislature, does not provide a viable reason for why CSE has not been mandated in school curriculums.

Table 4: Alabama State Legislature Party Composition 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Composition of The Alabama Legislature 2018</th>
<th>Number of Democrats</th>
<th>Number of Republicans</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27 (previously 26 with 1 independent)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Alabama State Legislature Party Composition 2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Composition of The Alabama Legislature 2022</th>
<th>Number of Democrats</th>
<th>Number of Republicans</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>74 (3 vacancies)</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both New York and Alabama have had a supermajority of their legislature since 2018, albeit a supermajority of two different parties. Yet, neither state still does not have any mandate for CSE to be taught in school curriculums. Even using the case of California which is similar to New York in terms of legislature and party composition over time, California differs as it is the only one out of the three that has a mandated CSE curriculum. Political party affiliation fails to be a reason that can explain why Alabama and New York despite their political differences, both fail to mandate a CSE curriculum.

Reason 2: Health Outcomes

Jones also analyzed health outcomes in New York and California and whether high rates of HIV, STIs or AIDS could have been an indicator for either state to mandate CSE. She found upon analyzing data from 2018 on New York’s rates of syphilis, gonorrhea, and AIDS, that despite these high rates, New York did not pass any legislation to mandate CSE be taught while California’s experience with similarly high rates, seemingly prompted them in their decision to pass legislation that mandates CSE. This remains the same when looking at STI and AIDS data from Alabama in 2019. Alabama’s chlamydia morbidity rate is ranked the eighth highest in the nation with the number of chlamydia cases reported was highest among persons ages 15-19 and age 20-24. Alabama’s gonorrhea morbidity rate is also ranked third highest in the nation. And yet Alabama too, does not have a mandated CSE curriculum. The federal government allowed for the formal teaching of sexual and reproductive health in schools in response to the spike in rates of AIDS in the 1990s. But it appears that the type of sex education being taught in New York and Alabama is not fulfilling this purpose.

This outcome in which a program is implemented in response to high rates of sexual health diseases but has failed in serving its purpose is not new to New York. In a 1993 court case
Alfonso v. Fernandez, the NY Appellate Court held that a condom availability program implemented in public high schools was unconstitutional because it did not give parents the chance to opt their children out of it despite the program being voluntary. This condom availability program was implemented in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis that was sweeping through the country in the 90s and required extensive classroom instruction regarding HIV and AIDS, including discussion of behavior leading to infection and preventative methods. Having access to condoms in public high schools was supposed to be a step towards addressing this crisis especially since it was significantly impacting teenagers. Here again, we see an effort that was taken in order to educate young adults about sexual and reproductive health in response to high rates, being removed (NYS Department of Health, 2010). New York schools are not required to teach sex education however, HIV/AIDS instruction is required. In Alabama, the instruction of sex education, HIV and STI prevention is permitted, not required and the teaching must emphasize that abstinence is the only completely effective way to protect against unwanted pregnancy, STIs and AIDs (SIECUS, 2021). The question still remains as to what reason is sufficient to explain why neither New York nor Alabama mandate CSE (and for New York’s case, in addition to its mandate for teaching on HIV/STI prevention) despite high rates of STIs in both states.

Reason 3: Interest/Advocacy Groups

I also consider interest/advocacy groups and their influence in each state as a possible reason for why AOUM is more prevalent as the choice for a sex education curriculum and not CSE. As both New York and Alabama follow an AOUM curriculum, this should mean that there is a strong presence of interest/advocacy groups that support this. Yet, that is not the case for any of the three states. Nationally, “there are more organizations that support CSE such as Advocacy for
Youth and Future of Sex Education; however, the Religious Right is notorious for its success in not only funding research centers and think tanks (in contrast to progressives who tend fund advocacy and social service programs) but also for its ability to galvanize community members to seek local public office, especially on school boards” (SIECUS, 2022). This alludes to the idea that advocates for CSE are more directly influential through organizations while advocates for AOUM education are more indirectly influential through as they utilize research centers and think tanks to feed the information to policymakers (New York City Bar, 2020).

While the indirect advocacy of AOUM education supporters might seem to be the best reason for why both New York and Alabama continue to hold AOUM sex education, the pervasiveness of organizations that support and advocate for CSE in schools in both New York and Alabama, tells another story. Some organizations that support CSE legislation in New York include New York State Bipartisan Pro-Choice Legislative Caucus, Planned Parenthood of Greater New York, Stop the Shaming, National Institute for Reproductive Health and New York Civil Liberties Union (Jones, 2021). One of the most influential groups may be The National Institute for Reproductive Health (NIRH) who was successful during the 2019 legislative session for the passage of the Reproductive Health Act. In Alabama, much of the same can be seen as there are many advocates of CSE that work to improve Alabama’s teachings on sex education. Due to their influence, Alabama’s laws have recently been updated so that they no longer criminalize LGBTQ+ individuals within the state’s schools’ sex education curriculum” (Townsend, 2021). Some of these groups include: the Campaign for Adolescent Sexual Health, Advocates for Youth Sex Education, Magic City Acceptance Center, Birmingham AIDS Outreach, and Planned Parenthood Southeast.
As previously mentioned, AOUM education advocates indirectly funnel their support as opposed to directly forming organizations to oppose CSE. In New York, the greatest opposition to CSE, which Jones mentions in her thesis, is the Catholic Conference. The Catholic Conference supports increasing funding for abstinence only education and is opposed to sexuality education that would encourage promiscuous behaviors and affirm certain beliefs pertaining to sexuality (Webster & Leib, 2002). The First Bible Baptist Church is also in opposition to CSE because they believe that it is the right of parents to educate their children on sex education (Ardery, 2006). Alabama does not have particular groups that are in opposition to CSE, but they do lack transparent tools and education that is related to sexual and reproductive health. “Human Rights Watch found the following issues to be catalysts for these poor outcomes (high rates of cervical cancer) in Alabama: “shortage of gynecologists in rural areas, prohibitive transportation costs often required to travel to see a doctor for follow-up testing and treatment, and Alabama’s failure to expand Medicaid to increase healthcare coverage for poor and low-income individuals in the state” (Townsend, 2021). Although these might not be direct avenues of support for AOUM education, these might still contribute to the support that exists. However, I do not conclude that they serve as the best explanation for why AOUM education is prevalent in either state.

Reason 4: Federal Funding

As previously stated, states are left to their own discretion to decide what type of sex education policy they would like to implement for their schools to teach. However, the federal government can incentivize states’ education policy and sex education in particular has been funded differently depending on the federal administration. The U.S. government adopted AOUM sex education as their singular approach to adolescent sexual and reproductive health during the 1990s with 49 of the 50 states accepting federal funds to promote AOUM in the
classroom (Ott & Santelli, 2008). In 2006, research showed that the federal government was spending over $170 million annually to “subsidize states and community organizations that provide abstinence-only sex education” where the material being taught was limited to teaching that a monogamous, marital, heterosexual relationship is the expected standard of human activity and that sex outside such a relationship will be physically and psychologically harmful” (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). In 2008, much of the federal funding for abstinence-only initiatives went toward the Community-Based Abstinence Education program, which stipulated that recipients of these funds cannot also provide more comprehensive information on contraception or safer sex practices to prevent STDs, even if nonfederal funds are used for that purpose (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011).

Federal funding for a country-wide sex education curriculum has been an issue as it has been pushing states to take the stance of promoting an AOUM sex education curriculum. Because states were choosing to accept federal funding through the Community-Based Abstinence Education program, the federal government was able to stipulate what could be included in the sex education curriculum, which limited recipients to only teaching about AOUM. If states want the funding and support from the federal government, some might be making the decision to take this stance in order to continue receiving its funding. Receiving federal funding is important to states which is why it is important to analyze how federal funding for sex education has influenced New York and Alabama as both continue to teach an AOUM sex education curriculum today. Can the federal funding which is specifically targeted towards an AOUM sex education curriculum, explain why California was successful in mandating CSE in schools while Alabama and New York were not? If that is the case, California should not be
accepting federal funding for sex education while New York and Alabama would; however, as my research found, that is not the case.

Since 1998, New York has received roughly $3.5 million a year from the federal government for abstinence-only education, being the state only second to Texas in the amount of money it received from the federal government for abstinence education (Medina, 2007). New York’s acceptance of this vast amount of federal funding suggests that the relationship between the state and the federal government in regard to sex education, is not out of necessity. If New York truly did not want to promote AOUM, then there would be a point in which they would reject federal funding for this type of curriculum. And this point did arrive in 2007 as the state health commissioner announced that New York is rejecting millions of dollars in federal grants for AOUM sex education. Yet, this was not seen as a move towards accepting CSE as the sex education curriculum in schools since in 2010, New York established a Title V State Abstinence Education Grant Program (AEGP) where the Department of Health stated that intend to use funding from AEGP “to support community-based programs that will provide mentoring, counseling, and adult supervision activities targeted toward 9 to 12-year-olds living in high-need communities in the state, including youth residing in foster care” with the goal of reducing teen pregnancies and promote sexual health (NYS Department of Health, 2010). While New York may have declined to continue receiving federal funding for an AOUM sex education, they created their own avenue through state funds to continue doing so. Federal funding may have had an influence before this was created however, ten years later New York continues to teach an AOUM sex education which surpasses the influence of the federal government.

However, Alabama is unlike New York as it has received funding from the federal government since 1998 and continues to accept funding today. While Alabama received funding
from 1998-2007 under the federal government’s Title V program, a study found that these programs led to a decline in teen birth rates, but an increase in STD and abortion rates” (Moss, 2021). Currently, Alabama accepts federal funds through the State Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) and as of April 2020, has been awarded $719,919 under this program. “The program implements the Making Proud Choices, Sexual Health and Adolescent Risk Prevention (SHARP) and Seventeen Days curricula in eight counties at youth detention centers, foster and group homes, alternative schools, and youth organizations” (Moss, 2021).

Federal funding seems to be an explanation for why Alabama continues to teach an AOUM sex education curriculum. However, I believe that there is more that contributes to the reason why Alabama does so that also overlaps with New York which I come to further find in my research. California, the model case for CSE, has never accepted federal funding which promotes AOUM since 2004 which can point to the idea of federal funding not being an explanation for why California mandated a CSE sex education curriculum. Thus, I reach the conclusion that federal funding is not a sufficient explanation as to why neither New York nor Alabama mandate CSE in their curriculums. New York accepted federal funding to a certain extent and then continued with their own state funding while Alabama continued to accept federal funding. Yet, both of these states continue to teach an AOUM curriculum which alludes to the idea that federal funding is not sufficient to explain this situation in both states. Ultimately, I find that the religious setting in both states serves as the best explanation for why neither has mandated CSE in their schools (U.S Department of Health & Human Services, 2022).

Reason 5: Religion

The final explanation that I analyze and find to be the best explanation for why Alabama and New York fail to mandate CSE while California was successful in doing so, is religion.
Through analyzing the religious context in which sex education has been framed in the United States in addition to the religious setting in each of these three states, I was able to devise a new explanation that works in all three cases. Religion has played a far greater part in sex education throughout history starting in the beginning when it branched off between CSE and AOUM. Although advocates for CSE are viewed to be far removed from religion and reliant on science, the organization that is the strongest advocate for CSE, the Sexual Education and Information Council of the United States (SIECUS, 2021) was cofounded in part by religious sex educators in 1964. Religion is unable to be removed from any discussion about sex education as liberal Protestants created many of the terms used in the sex education debate today (Williams, 2011). However, the wide influence of supporters of AOUM education is attributed to the Christian Right who have capitalized on the fear of adolescent sexuality by framing “the issue as one between good and evil,” especially appealing to the parents of these adolescents (Williams, 2011). The Christian Right was able to organize and acquire more national advocacy organizations and financial resources to support AOUM. “For example, in 2002 there were 12 large national organizations opposed to CSE, as opposed to one single-issue pro-CSE national organization, SIECUS” (Williams, 2011). The Christian Right’s ability to mobilize in more organizations that had the money to spend, allowed for their reach to become more widespread with its influence especially being found in the federal government.

The Christian Right used their influence over AOUM to influence other types of policies such as welfare policy, which was a main concern of the Reagan administration. This success in calling for abstinence-only education “strengthens the political agenda and power of US Christian conservatives in relatively far-reaching ways, by increasing their visibility and potentially their numbers at the grassroots level, and also by lending support to their anti-gay and
traditional marriage planks” (Williams, 2011). By tying their concerns for abstinence to broader social concerns, the Christian Right framed their support for AOUM education into an agenda focused on family values since the 1970s which can explain much of their success and longevity in the federal government. “As a social movement, the Christian Right has defined itself as a cultural minority, oppressed by the majority culture in the USA and subject to the majority culture’s impact on both public policy and social institutions, particularly public schools” (Ardery, 2008). Thus, their advocacy for AOUM education is the method to instill Christian values back into a society that has been working to ‘get rid of this influence’. Yet, they began to lose some of their financial and organizational influence in 2009 when Obama took office and began to cut funding to AOUM programs to place emphasis on evidence-based sex education programs but began to be reversed when Trump took office in 2016. The Christian Right’s deep influence in the political and social sphere can explain much of their ability to remain the policy chosen by the federal government and state governments amid what appears to be unpopular with the public.

The religious setting across the three states can be connected to the Christian Right’s influence on AOUM education. Alabama is unique between the three states as it is located in the South which is known to have a deep-rooted religious influence that is part of ‘Southern culture’. Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant denominations such as the Baptists came to dominate in the early settlement of the South which created the ‘Southern culture’ that intertwines fundamentalist theology and traditionalistic political culture (Webster & Leib, 2002). “Thus, where traditionalist political culture is resistant to social or political change which would negatively impact elite leaders, fundamentalist theology oftentimes views the same change "as creeping 'liberalism' which taints that which is 'normal,' traditional and thus 'Godly'" (Webster &
Leib, 2002, p. 153). According to a 2000 and 2006 Census poll, Alabama is the state with the most church-going people in the nation with the majority of Alabamians being raised Southern Baptist, the largest Protestant denomination in the nation (Ardery, 2008). In Elba, a town in Alabama with a high Southern Baptist population, the longtime publisher of the town’s newspaper described their church as being older than their politics, a testament to how much religion means to them. Their high participation in religion combined with their ‘purity culture’, makes for a setting in which AOUM education would be the popular choice especially as it is framed to be a focus on family values to promote good and fight evil.

New York and California are similar in their religious settings with both states containing over 60% of adults that identify as Christian (Lipka & Wormald, 2022). Both states are also home to a myriad of different religions, New York primarily home to those who identify as Catholics, Jews and Christians, and California primarily home to those who identify as Buddhists and Pentecostalists. While New York’s religious composition changed since its Catholic population had begun to decrease in 2007 and its religiously unaffiliated population had risen, the Catholic population in New York has risen 2015 (Jones, 2016). On the other hand, California has the largest number of religious “nones,” those unaffiliated with a religious institution, in the United States” (CRCC). Yet, for both similarities, only California has succeeded in mandating CSE in public schools. New York is also ranked 43rd out of 50 for how religious it is while California is ranked 35th (Pew Research Center, 2022). This may appear as though California is more religious than New York and still mandated CSE in public schools. Then, why does New York, which is less religious than California, still push for AOUM education? The Catholic Right maintains a strong presence in New York as the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York is the second largest diocese in the United States by population. With the Catholic Right’s
ties to organizations for support of AOUM education, their large presence in New York may suggest why New York continues to be a proponent for AOUM education.

Thus, Alabama’s Southern purity culture, New York’s strong Catholic church presence and California’s high religious unaffiliated population can be traced to explain why despite more political similarities between New York and California, New York continues to teach AOUM education just as Alabama does.

Further Discussion

Religion serves as the best explanation for why despite their differences in political and social settings, Alabama, and New York both do not mandate CSE in public schools. There is more to be analyzed about the pervasiveness of religion in both states and how that is connected to sex education beyond my discussion and analysis. Although we may try to maintain a separation between church and state, the politics of sex education exemplifies how this separation cannot be maintained. Sex education is only one of the issues in politics that shows how blurred this line is and points to a larger issue for the future if we want to be a democracy that is fair and balanced.

This study also offers another broad lesson which is to show how issues that aren’t of political concern or involvement in the beginning, often eventually end up being politicized. This study is not solely a case study of three states as it hints to another issue with the democracy of our country which is the way issues are framed. It hints at the idea that when looking at other issues just like sex education, the issue gets lost in the politics of it. Sex education, which started out as an issue out of concern for public health and the answer to the crisis of increasing HIV and STI rates, became an issue of whether children should be ‘forced’ to learn about this and required parental consent. Just as when looking at other issues like mask and vaccine mandates,
or critical race theory, the central issue that these were looking to solve no longer became the center anymore as politics absorbed it. There is more to be analyzed for why issues that specifically deal with health often end up centered in politics.

**Conclusion**

Thus, through this in-depth case study between Alabama, New York and California analyzing why among the three only California mandates CSE, I found that the religious setting in all three states is the best explanation. Alabama’s Southern purity culture, New York’s strong Catholic church presence and California’s high religious unaffiliated population are examples of three different settings that lead to Alabama and New York sharing the same stance on sex education. This case study does not ignore the criticisms against AOUM for its tendency to teach medically inaccurate information and failure for inclusiveness. However, I also acknowledge that there is work to be done on CSE to be concretely defined as ‘comprehensive’ and inclusive to all identities to ensure that the information it teaches lives up to its title. Future research can look into this scholarship to discuss the issues with CSE despite its support to ensure that there is a whole picture on sex education. Through this study, I believe that my evidence and findings point to the fact that the federal government should instead consider using its influence in funding to push for states to gain more information to promote a comprehensive sex education curriculum in public high schools.
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