The American University, the Politics of Professors and the Narrative of “Liberal Bias”

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It is often claimed that political conservatives and even moderates are an endangered species in contemporary academic life. The overabundance of liberals in the academy has allegedly led to three interrelated problems.

First, monolithic leftism creates a hostile environment for conservative faculty and students, which damages the academy’s commitment to meritocratic professional advancement.¹ (Some articulations offer a stronger claim: that conservative students and faculty in universities are bullied by orthodox leftists.²)

Second, political homogeneity impedes the academy’s pursuit of truth: left-wing values become embedded into theory and method, especially in the humanities and social sciences, and both potential research topics and politically inconvenient findings are rejected on political rather than epistemic grounds.³

Third, this state of affairs leads to public distrust in academia and in science. “As the academy has become increasingly liberal,” the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have written, “non-liberals have become increasingly distrustful” of it.⁴

Ordinary Americans, seeing leftist professors committed to high-octane elaborations of ideas that liberals already agree with, respond with distrust in the academy, in scientists, and in scientific claims that emerge from the academy.⁵

This image of the embattled conservative professor housed in an institution that slants heavily to the left is familiar enough. But is it true? Observers of higher education have demanded a range of remedies to the problem of left-wing political bias on campus. Some conservatives (and liberals) have contemplated, however gingerly, affirmative action for

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¹ See e.g. Sam Abrams, “Professors Moved Left Since the 1990s, Rest of Country Did Not,” Heterodox Academy, 9 Jan. 2016, https://heterodoxacademy.org/professors-moved-left-but-country-did-not/.
² This narrative has inspired countless blog posts on conservative websites; for a paradigmatic example, see Anna Swick, “Student Exposes Bullying Professor,” Leadership Institute News, 23 Oct. 2013, www.leadershipinstitute.org/news/?NR=10102.
⁵ In popular discourse, the category of “ordinary Americans” of course excludes liberals. See Haidt, “Why So Many Americans Don’t Want Social Justice and Don’t Trust Scientists,” 2013 Boyarsky Lecture, Duke University (available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=b86dzTF[b]k[c]).
conservative scholars. Others have called for stricter trustee review of faculty hiring to make sure “radical activists can be kept off of (public) university faculties.” Some conservatives think faculty leftism warrants a legislative or executive response. A bill introduced into the Iowa Senate in 2017 attempted to “require partisan balance” based on party affiliation for faculty hiring at state institutions. As recently as July 2020, President Donald Trump complained on Twitter that universities were about “Radical Left Indoctrination, not Education”—and threatened to revoke tax exemptions for higher education.

A problem requires a solution only to the extent that it actually exists. So let us begin with a few relevant observations.

First: The best survey data we have on the political attitudes of professors suggest a seed of truth in conservative complaints about the liberal faculty lounge—but just a seed. The American academy is more liberal than the general public, and it contains a larger proportion of liberals than other major professions. But critics of academic leftism routinely overstate their claims, in some cases grossly so. By and large, most professors self-identify as moderates of one kind or another. The mundane sociological truth is that academics are broadly representative of the demographic from which they are selected: highly educated people.

Second: The impression that professors are far more liberal than Americans at large comes from commentary that focuses disproportionately on certain academic disciplines (typically high-visibility fields in the humanities and social sciences) and / or certain institution types (typically elite northeastern research universities), and cherry-picks available data.

Third: That conservative critics cherry-pick the data suggests that their claims about academic leftism are often not good-faith arguments. Indeed, a certain strand of American conservativism has been making this argument for more than half a century. Conservative critiques of professorial leftism go back at least to Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942), one of the most-cited social-science texts of the century. When Schumpeter was writing in the 1940s, the professoriate was dominated by mostly conservative and Protestant white men. The same was true a decade later, when William F.
Buckley warned that “individualism [was] dying” at Yale. Indeed, if anyone was being driven out of academia for political reasons during the McCarthy era, it was leftists, not conservatives. Even in the early 1960s, when the conservative journalist M. Stanton Evans declared a conservative “revolt” on the campus—decrying Keynesianism and liberal conformity within the academy—favorite targets of conservative critics, such as women’s studies and African-American studies, had not yet been invented.

Fourth: Historical evidence shows that the trope of the embattled conservative professor has been part of an organized right-wing effort, beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, to discredit mainstream knowledge-producing institutions—chief among them the press and universities—by contending that such institutions are not neutral but instead guilty of “liberal bias.” Our present discourse about the politics of universities has never broken out of this frame of reference.

Fifth: If it is the case that professors at elite northeastern universities are somewhat (or even a great deal) more liberal than Americans at large, is this a problem? We argue that it is not, as long as those professors articulate their positions in an open-minded and evidence-based manner, and so long as norms of open, reasoned, and evidence-based debate are protected. Indeed, in some cases, it is far from clear that the charge of anti-conservative bias is primarily a cognitive matter at all—that is, a matter on which “evidence” could be brought to bear—rather than a cry of frustration at the opening of the academy to previously excluded populations and perspectives.

Let’s begin with what social scientists have discovered in recent years about professors and their politics.

13 The same may hold today. A study of faculty terminations published by the left-libertarian Niskanen Center found that, between 2015 and 2017, left-wing professors were more frequently dismissed for political speech than were conservatives. Jeffrey Adam Sachs, “There Is No Campus Free Speech Crisis: A Close Look at the Evidence,” Niskanen Center, 27 Apr. 2018, https://niskanencenter.org/blog/there-is-no-campus-free-speech-crisis-a-close-look-at-the-evidence/.
The sociologists Neil Gross and Solon Simmons have conducted the most comprehensive study of political attitudes within the American professoriate: a nationally representative survey of 1,416 professors. Their study is distinctive for its incorporation of community colleges within its sample, its inclusive range of institutions and academic disciplines, and its sensitive wording of questions. The questionnaire items aimed at assessing respondents’ political beliefs were taken from well-established surveys such as the General Social Survey, which are thoughtfully designed to elicit reliable responses and to approach questions from a variety of vantage points. The study’s age (2006) is a disadvantage (below, we address how the political leanings of American professors may have shifted over time), but its breadth and rigor make it a necessary starting point.

Gross and Simmons found a much more centrist professoriate than is alleged in conservative discourse. Some 44 percent of professors described themselves as “extremely liberal” or “liberal” (9 percent and 35 percent, respectively); 46 percent described themselves in centrist terms (18 percent as “slightly liberal,” 17 percent as “middle of the road,” and 11 percent as “slightly conservative”); and 9 percent described themselves as “conservative” or “extremely conservative” (8 percent and 1 percent respectively). In other words, liberals do outnumber conservatives, but the largest cohort of faculty—46 percent—are moderates, spanning the terrain between center-left and center-right.

Gross and Simmons note that American professors are disproportionately liberal—though probably less left-leaning on a number of issues than their counterparts in a number of other countries, including Denmark, Norway, Spain, and New Zealand. From our vantage point, what is most striking about their data is how much more moderate the American professoriate appears, in contrast with what conservative critics—and probably most liberals—believe of this population.

Self-reporting is not always reliable, and it may be that many of the academics surveyed report themselves as moderate because in American culture moderation is considered reasonable and therefore laudatory. But if this is the case, this effect would likely apply to both liberals and conservatives. Moreover, the study likely understates the percentage of conservatives among the professoriate, because conservatives, Gross and Simmons determined through phone calls with non-respondents, were slightly less likely than liberals to participate.
Political views vary by discipline. The highest proportion of liberals are in the social sciences and humanities (58 and 52 percent respectively), while the highest concentrations of conservatives are in business and health sciences (25 percent and 21 percent). In the middle are computer science and engineering, with a high proportion of moderates and a symmetrical split of liberals and conservatives: 78 percent of professors in these disciplines are moderate, 11 percent are liberal, and 11 percent are conservative.

These disciplinary differences matter, because students are not uniformly distributed across the disciplines. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the five most popular majors nationally are, in order: business; health professions and related programs; social sciences and history; psychology; and biological and biomedical sciences.\(^{23}\) Note that the most popular majors—business and health sciences—are also the fields with the highest concentrations of conservative faculty. As far as we can tell from available data, a majority of students are most likely being educated mostly by moderates.

Gross and Simmons also examined differences by institution type, and found that moderates outnumber liberals in every institution type except private liberal arts colleges and elite Ph.D.-granting institutions.\(^{24}\) According to NCES data, just over 20 percent of students in fall 2015 were enrolled in private nonprofit colleges and universities of any kind, including sectarian institutions.\(^{25}\) Well under 1 percent of undergraduates attend one of the Ivy League schools.\(^{26}\) So again we find that a majority of students are being educated by a professoriate that is mostly moderate.

How do the political views of professors compare with the attitudes of the general public and of the college students that these faculty are teaching? A Pew Research Center survey of American political attitudes in 2014 described 34 percent of respondents as liberal (12 percent “consistently” liberal, 22 percent “mostly” liberal), 27 percent as conservative (9 percent “consistently” conservative, 18 percent “mostly” conservative), and 39 percent as “mixed.”\(^{27}\) In the latest American Freshman survey of incoming college freshmen, 35.5 percent of students characterized themselves as liberal or far left, a 22 percent as

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conservative or far right.\textsuperscript{28} Political views mutate constantly, and the political environment in the U.S. has been particularly volatile in recent years and not easily reducible to a left-right axis. Nonetheless, if the Pew data are roughly correct, we can conclude that academic faculty are more liberal than both the general public and the national population of college students, but only modestly so, and that a majority of professors in a majority of institutions are mostly moderate.

Emerging strands of centrist and conservative criticism have blamed overzealous parents, ideological campus administrators, or students themselves for “leftist monoculture” on campus.\textsuperscript{29} Even so, the figure of the professor-as-indoctrinator has remained remarkably stable, despite the absence of evidence for indoctrination claims.\textsuperscript{30} The key point, however, is that these statistics refute the allegation that conservatives are grossly underrepresented in academic life relative to the students they teach. Rather, the findings suggest that conservative critics overstate how left-leaning the ranks of academia are.\textsuperscript{31}

How has the Gross and Simmons study aged? One pertinent finding of the study is that the youngest professorial cohort (aged 26-35) in the sample contained the highest percentage of moderates (60 percent) and the lowest percentage of liberals (33 percent). Professors aged 50-64 at the time of the study—the baby boom generation who came of age during the turbulent 1960s—were more likely to describe themselves as liberals (50 percent) than moderates (42 percent). A decade later, at least some of those faculty have retired.\textsuperscript{32} If the younger cohort has remained moderate or become more conservative with age—as is typically the case—then the academy would likely be more centrist now than it was in 2006.

That, however, does not appear to be the case. While we lack an update of the Gross and Simmons study that would allow us to make definitive conclusions, we have some reason to believe that the academy, though more moderate than is widely alleged, is somewhat more liberal today than it was just over a decade ago.\textsuperscript{33} Two imperfect data sources—the

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\item \textsuperscript{28} Kevin Eagan, Ellen Bara Stolzenberg, Hilary B. Zimmerman, Melissa C. Aragon, Hannah Whang Sayson, and Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, \textit{The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016} (Los Angeles, 2017).
\item \textsuperscript{30} One study, which drew on data from 38 colleges and universities to analyze changes in student political attitudes between their freshman and senior years, found that the somewhat leftward shifts experienced by students were in line with shifts experienced by most Americans between the ages of 18 and 24. See Mack D. Mariani and Gordon J. Hewitt, “Indoctrination U.? Faculty Ideology and Changes in Student Political Orientation,” \textit{P.S.: Political Science & Politics} 41, no. 4 (October 2008): 773-783.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Even so, as recently as 2017 a pair of Republican political scientists found that college faculty were more centrist—with a solid share identifying as independents—than right-wing critics of academia allege. They note the presence of a “cottage industry on the right that spotlights the ideological tilt of colleges and accuses
General Social Survey, which includes some number of professorial respondents, and the Higher Education Research Institute faculty survey—chart a slight rise in professorial liberalism. There is no evidence, however, for a dramatic leftward shift in the American professoriate as a population.

Social scientists have advanced a number of explanations for why professors, as a group, lean somewhat to the left. The least satisfying of these explanations are claims about intrinsic cognitive or personality differences between liberals and conservatives. Political psychologists, for instance, have argued that greater cognitive ability, and especially greater verbal intelligence, is associated with religious skepticism and with more tolerant views on matters such as homosexuality and political dissent. This account, when applied to the demographics of the professoriate, risks flattening into self-applause: professors are liberal because liberals are smarter. Moreover, the argument that liberals value a sense of purpose in work, while conservatives value moneymaking, is not borne out in survey data of undergraduates.

We point to a more mundane explanation for academia’s leftward tilt: the fact that highly educated people with advanced degrees tend to be liberal. Sociologists have long argued that higher education has a liberalizing effect on social and political views, especially on openness to racial and cultural diversity. The “educational differences between professors and other Americans,” Neil Gross observes, “go a fair way toward accounting statistically for the political gap between the two groups.” This is supported by the observation that the political leanings of professors are not markedly different from those of many other highly educated occupational groups, such as journalists, social workers, or attorneys.

A recent large-scale study of the political leanings of American lawyers brings this point into focus. Using data from Stanford University’s Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME), Adam Bonica, Adam S. Chilton, and Maya Sen created a unidimensional scale that infers political ideology from contributions data. (The scale factors in both recipients and amounts—a $2,000 donation to Barack Obama suggests, by this measure, a stronger connection to Obama’s ideological positioning than a $5 donation.) Helpfully for our purposes, the political-contributions study contrasts the political views of lawyers with those of other well-educated occupational groups, including academics. If we accept political contributions as a proxy for political belief and intensity of political involvement, we find that academics are not indisputably the most liberal of the “liberal” professions. Judging from contributions data, technology workers and journalists are both to the left of

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academics.39 Today, the well-educated professions, on the whole, tend to skew somewhat left.

Professors, in other words, reflect the population from which they are drawn: highly educated people. People with PhDs tend to be more liberal than people without them. The general liberalizing effect of higher education, Gross suggests, is probably supplemented by a self-selection effect: because academia has a reputation for liberal politics, smart young liberals are more likely to consider a career in academia than are smart young conservatives.40 Institutional factors matter as well, of course. In some quarters, conservative organizational efforts have been able to combat liberal self-selection effects, most notably in one influential area of graduate education: law school. Since the early 1980s, organizations such as the Federalist Society have succeeded in motivating young conservatives to attend law school by creating strong professional networks of conservative and libertarian legal professionals (“counter-networking,” to borrow Steven Teles’s term).41 More recently, institutions attached to the conservative Christian legal movement, such as the Blackstone Legal Fellowship, have immersed law students from around the country in “the Christian foundations of the law”—and then helped to get them internships.42

Whatever the reason for the link between liberal attitudes and advanced education, the professoriate is representative both of the pool of PhD-holders from which it draws and from the population of highly educated Americans. For matters to be otherwise, universities would have to engage in affirmative action for conservatives.

Why We Have an Exaggerated Impression of Professorial Leftism

Available data do not support the claim that university professors are excessively and disproportionately liberal, much less that a majority of students are being educated by left-wing professors. So why do so many people have the impression that they are? Part of the answer is cultural stereotype fed by political rhetoric and commentary in the popular press (a factor we address in the next section). However, the body of academic research on faculty politics has also contributed to this distortion of the facts on the ground (or, rather, on the campus).

We suggest that influential conservative analysts, particularly researchers associated with think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and dedicated conservative academic centers like the Mercatus Center, have created a false impression of faculty political composition by committing one or more of the following methodological errors:

- Ignoring or eliding the preponderance of faculty who describe themselves as moderates by relying on the binary metric of party registration;

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40 Gross, Why Are Professors Liberal, p. 105.
• Focusing only on elite, mostly private and northeastern institutions which may be more liberal overall, rather than institutions in the South, West, Midwest, or Great Plains;43

• Focusing on humanities and social sciences departments within those institutions, and ignoring the natural sciences and engineering departments;44

• Focusing disproportionately on particular subjects in the humanities and social sciences which conservatives find conspicuously liberal in orientation, such as English, or in which a (progressive) political critique is part of the discipline, such as women’s studies, and ignoring disciplines like economics or engineering which are often aligned with conservative principles such as laissez-faire economics;45

• Omitting community colleges, theological institutions and seminaries, religiously affiliated or evangelical colleges (e.g. Wheaton, Brigham Young), and military institutions—institution types that together educate millions of students—from their analysis.46

These errors sometimes accompany basic sampling and methodological issues, including small sample size or biased sampling frame, poor response rate, response bias, and nonstandard question wordings.47

When we examine studies (such as that performed by Gross and Simmons) that

a) Ask a series of standardly worded questions rather than relying on the crude metric of party registration;

43 See e.g. Daniel Klein and Andrew Western, “Voter Registration of Berkeley and Stanford Faculty,” *Academic Questions* 18 (2004-5): 53-65. Klein and Western counted the number of registered Democrats and Republicans at Stanford and Berkeley, two elite institutions not representative of national higher education.


45 See Karl Zinsmeister, “The Shame of America’s One-Party Campuses,” *American Enterprise* (September 2002): 18-28. This American Enterprise Institute survey, which compiled voter-registration data for 1,843 college teachers at 21 institutions, apparently showed that liberals outnumber conservatives on college faculties by an eleven-to-one ratio. The survey’s methodology assured a skewed outcome: in its University of Texas sample, 28 of the 94 teachers came from women’s studies; Harvard’s faculty of more than 2,000 is represented by a total of 52 faculty members from political science, sociology, and economics. These faults did not stop George Will and other pundits from hailing the study as evidence of partisan imbalance on campus. See Michael Bérubé, *What’s Liberal About the Liberal Arts* (New York, 2006), pp. 41-42; Martin Plissner, “Flunking Statistics,” *The American Prospect*, 5 Dec. 2002, http://prospect.org/article/flunking-statistics.

46 See e.g. Stanley Rothman, S. Robert Lichter, and Neil Nevitte, “Politics and Professional Advancement among College Faculty,” *The Forum* 3 (2005): art 2. Their analysis, as Gross and Simmons point out, trumpets a sharp lefward turn in the American professoriate since 1984 but fails to take into account that the 1984 study included community college professors, who are typically more conservative. Gross and Simmons, “Social and Political Views,” p. 21.

b) Include faculty from a wide range of disciplines and institutional types; and

c) Have a large sample size, we find that they yield different results than the studies that claim to unmask professorial leftism.

Methodologically robust studies do not reveal the excessive leftism that less robust studies claim to do. The fact that these methodological errors are so widespread raises serious doubt as to whether these studies have been undertaken in good faith.

Many studies of faculty politics start and end by looking at voter-registration records. (Similarly, the 2017 Iowa Senate bill cited above sought to mandate a certain Democratic-to-Republican ratio for faculty.) This routine technique is not entirely useless, but the focus on party affiliation is shallow and misguided. Political parties in the United States are institutionally weak, locally variable (a Democrat in West Virginia will have different views on, say, coal than will a Democrat in California), and cover limited ideological terrain. Party registration is a crude metric.

One significant consequence of studies that look to party registration alone as a (typically binary) measure of a person’s political orientation has been the erasure of faculty moderates from the literature on professorial politics. A book-length qualitative study examining the present situation of conservative scholars makes this point clear.48 The political scientists Jon Shields and Joshua Dunn observe that conservative professors tend to be “small-c conservatives” who support limited government and free-market principles and “look askance at the populism that has shaken up the Republican Party in recent years.”49 “[M]any conservative academics,” they write, “feel more at home in the progressive academy than in the Republican Party.”50 One reason why the academy today seems so distant from the Republican Party—but not from “small-c” conservatism, libertarianism, and classical liberalism—is that increasing numbers of conservative and moderate faculty have grown estranged from what the Republican Party has become. There is a poignant irony in the probability that these studies have left some conservative and moderate professors (the latter group, again, making up the largest faculty cohort) feeling alienated without due cause.

What about the focus on elite private institutions and on humanities and social science disciplines? A critic might object that the political leanings of professors at elite institutions matter more than the politics of professors at mainstream institutions, because elite institutions shape public discourse and other colleges and universities often take their cues from them. That critic might also hold that a focus on humanities and social science disciplines is warranted, because those fields contain overt political content in a way that other disciplines do not.

50 Shields and Dunn, Passing, p. 4.
Elite institutions may well exert disproportionate influence on academic and public debates: faculty at top-ranked institutions may find it easier to get quoted in the press and win visibility for their research; they may also find it easier to obtain jobs at a wide range of institutions. But an account of faculty politics cannot focus on a handful of institutions (and a tiny percentage of students educated) and claim to offer a fair picture of the academic landscape, nor to have identified a problem in American academic life at large. Although top-ranked institutions perform some pace-setting for higher education as a whole, elite institutions are by definition unusual; taking these institutions as representative of all academia is misleading.

Moreover, law schools, business schools, medical schools, engineering and computer science programs, and even the natural sciences also address political and ethical dilemmas. The fact that the normative questions in these fields are often implicit rather than overt may lead students to be less critical of their instructors’ views rather than more. In the humanities and social sciences, there is no good evidence that political science professors (to give one example) exert influence on their students’ party loyalties. In fact, explicit discussion may make it easier for students to challenge their professors’ views than implicit assumptions do.

Meanwhile, a closer inspection of some of the humanities disciplines that seem puritanically leftist might arguably reveal certain forms of political quietism, especially in fields that have become insular or inward-facing. Consider the notoriously “leftist” discipline of English literature. In the conflict over campus politics, English departments have historically been ground zero. The drive to include more women writers and writers of color in the literary canon became a flash point in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. But while debates about multiculturalism raged on and off campus, few people noticed that another battle within literary studies had quietly come to a close. That was the battle between the “scholars” and the “critics.” For most of the twentieth century, Joseph North argues, literary studies was split between a “scholarly” wing, which saw literature as a means for analyzing culture, and a “critical” wing, which saw literature as an opportunity for intervening in culture by shaping readers’ aesthetic sensibilities. Since the late 1970s and 1980s, one party has ruled the field: historicist and contextualist approaches that “treat literary texts chiefly as opportunities for producing knowledge about the cultural contexts in which they were written and read.” The task of molding readers’ sensibilities anew, in the vein of critics such as F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling, or I. A. Richards, has been largely forsaken. The result, North argues, has been an inward turn. In a reversal of Marx’s motto, literary scholars once tried to change the culture; now they merely interpret it.

In economics—the field in the humanities and social sciences that presently enjoys probably the greatest public prominence and by far the greatest representation among the ranks of policymakers—problems related to pricing, taxation, competition, government planning, and other domains are frequently discussed in ways that embed conservative, free-market value assumptions. Early economic theorists—notably including Adam Smith—explicitly linked

51 Matthew Woessner and April Kelly-Woessner, “I Think My Professor is a Democrat: Considering Whether Students Recognize and React to Faculty Politics,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 2 (April 2009): 343-352.
their economic analysis to moral-philosophical arguments about the well-being of society’s worst-off and the responsibility of government to temper the excesses of unbridled markets. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, the globally influential and Nobel Prize-studded “Chicago school” of economics traded Smithian liberalism for neoliberalsm, a move that has had lingering effects on the field more broadly. Chicago economists and their descendants have promoted anti-government, anti-tax policies that have aligned strongly with Republican policies and against Democratic policies. Whether this is right or wrong, it is a type of bias, and a conservative one. When it comes to environmental questions such as climate change, economists, we have found, will readily discuss market mechanisms such as carbon pricing, but will less often entertain proposals such as energy rationing or price setting or even conservation.

We do not deny that professors are more liberal than the general public, and that academia is among the most liberal of the major professions. And why would we? The mere concentration of liberals in academia is insufficient evidence for claims of bias or groupthink. What we object to are mischaracterizations of professorial political views that appear designed to discredit the work of the university. The deeply flawed scholarship on faculty politics, however, is only one part of the attempt by conservatives to brand the university as a stronghold of liberal bias. In fact, claims of liberal bias can be traced back to the 1950s and the pages of the National Review.

The Making of “Liberal Bias”

“I happen to know the sort of academic bigot,” wrote the political theorist Russell Kirk in a 1960 issue of the National Review, “who would expel from the Academy every conservatively-inclined or religiously-influenced scholar. Commonly this bigot is hot against ‘McCarthyism’ and mightily alarmed at alleged threats to freedom in America; he wails against ‘pressures toward conformity.’ What he seeks, of course, is not liberality of opinion, but an abject conformity, enforced by faculty committees, to his own ‘secular’ and ideological orthodoxy. He is a fool or a hypocrite—or, commonly, both.” Less than a decade removed from sustained calls for universities to oust Communists and “crypto-Communists” from their faculties, the image of the embattled conservative professor was born.

The claim that intellectuals, as a class, tend to be hostile to the capitalist order—because their education makes them “psychically unemployable” and therefore resentful, or because the intellectual’s “main chance of asserting himself” lies in his “nuisance value” and his ability to deliver criticism and stings—dates back at least to Joseph Schumpeter. In the 1950s and 1960s, Schumpeterian claims about the fecklessness of intellectuals and their isolation from the “real” economy were intensified by a new generation of right-wing activists.

The historian Nicole Hemmer notes that in the mid-20th century, a group of conservative media activists—among them the radio broadcaster Clarence Manion, the magazine publisher William Rusher, and the book publisher Henry Regnery—were able to persuade a plurality of the American public of a then-radical idea: Mainstream institutions were not neutral but displayed “liberal bias.” Their two key targets were the press and the universities.

In 1962, Manion announced that his program, the Manion Forum, was going to “invade” campuses in order to advance “American, anti-Communist principles in the minds of our young people.” The postwar conservative media activist leadership had some familiarity with the campus: they were mostly well-heeled Ivy League graduates who found themselves shut out of the political elite, not because of their conservatism, but because of the extremity of their views. (Regnery went to MIT and Harvard; Rusher went to Princeton and Harvard Law; and Manion served as the dean of the law school at Notre Dame.) Manion and others—most influentially William F. Buckley, in his famous God and Man at Yale (1951)—saw universities as corrosively secularizing and slyly socialist. (It is revealing that the book that “marked the birth of the modern American conservative movement,” in the words of one conservative pundit, was an attack on leftism in elite higher education.59) The institutional bias of universities, coupled with the rising number of Americans enrolled in college in the 1950s and 1960s (thanks to the GI Bill and postwar affluence), left an entire generation at risk of indoctrination by liberal professors, these men argued. Midcentury conservative media activists thus focused their organizational efforts on what they called the “revolt on campus.”60

In 1956 the National Review sponsored a campus contest offering students $100 for the two best documented pieces of evidence of “classroom indoctrination” by their professors.61 In the early 1960s the fastest-growing campus organizations were conservative groups like Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), an organization backed by the National Review that had more than 350 chapters and 30,000 members by 1964.62 One telling measure of conservative campus organizing in the 1960s is the frequency with which right-wing speakers gained campus speaking invitations. In 1962 the three most popular speakers on college campuses were, in order, Barry Goldwater, William F. Buckley, and Martin Luther King Jr.63 YAF became extremely active in mid-1960s, countering antiwar protests with marches in support of Vietnam War.64 Starting in 1968, YAF chapters “battled the New Left on campus, seeking to stem the radical tide” on campuses politicized by the Vietnam War and by the

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58 Quoted in Hemmer, Messengers, p. 86.
60 See Evans, Revolt on the Campus.
61 “Campus Contests Stirs Controversy,” The Washington Post and Times Herald, 18 March 1956. We thank Osita Nwanevu for this reference.
62 Hemmer, Messengers, p. 82.
63 Hemmer, Messengers, p. 82.
civil rights movement. Conservative campus activism was galvanized around complaints about classroom indoctrination, the dominance of the liberal intelligentsia, and (allegedly) beleaguered conservative professors.

Key to the conservative critique of “liberal bias” on campus was the idea that the guise of “objectivity” or “impartiality” donned by universities was a cheap costume. Universities claimed to be in the business of purveying truth, but in fact they were liberal-indoctrination mills. Conservatives like Manion, Regnery, and Rusher were not arguing, however, for the elimination of bias on campus. They were arguing “for the proper kind of bias.”

By distributing free or subsidized copies of the National Review and Human Events on campuses, by placing Regnery-published books in college libraries, and by publicizing conservative student organizations on the Manion Forum and in the pages of the National Review and Human Events, conservative media activists sought to counter endemic liberal campus bias with bias of a more wholesome, right-wing variety. In this regard, their efforts paralleled those of private-sector organizations in the 1920s and 1930s, who actively promoted the virtues of private enterprise and laissez-faire economics in American university economics, civics, and business school curricula.

The conservative attack on “liberal bias” was not a defense of impartiality. Quite the contrary. The mission statement of Human Events captures the broader movement’s attitude toward objectivity and truth: “Human Events is objective; it aims for accurate representation of the facts. But it is not impartial. It looks at events through the eyes that are biased in favor of limited constitutional government, local self-government, private enterprise, and individual freedom.” These media activists introduced “bias” as an appropriate and ineliminable value, so long as the bias was of an appropriate kind. Impartiality, they believed, had favored liberal points of view (as in national media coverage of the civil rights movement). They sought to remedy this by introducing their own preferred form of partiality—a type of bias that took conservative principles of small government and private enterprise as foundational.

In the years since Manion, Regnery, and Rusher staged their campus revolt, conservatives have not limited themselves to remarking on the “liberal bias” of universities. They have worked to change it. In recent decades, right-wing philanthropists, most notably John Olin and Charles Koch, have donated hundreds of millions of dollars to promote the values of free-market economics, limited government, and de-regulation on campus. According to former Treasury Secretary William Simon, who served as the president of the John Olin

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65 Schneider, Cadres for Conservatism, p. 110.
68 Quoted in Hemmer, Messengers, p. 32. Emphasis added.
69 For the argument that the “liberal media” critique is linked to television coverage of the civil rights movement, see David Greenberg, “The Idea of ‘the Liberal Media’ and Its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement,” The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture 1 no. 2 (2008): 167-186.
Foundation from 1977 until his death in 2000, the Foundation sought to support a “counter-
intelligentsia” dedicated to supporting conservative ideas. Simon made no bones about his
bias: “Capitalism,” he wrote, “has no duty to subsidize its enemies.” The Olin Foundation
has funded conservative scholars such as John Yoo (author of the Bush administration’s
infamous “torture memo”). It has also spent $68 million underwriting Law and Economics
programs in American law schools, a school of thought that stresses the need to analyze
laws, including government regulation, not just on grounds of justice and fairness but also
for their economic impact, and which sees law as a tool to enhance economic efficiency. Such
views may be defensible, but they are not unbiased.

Today, the drumbeat continues for donations to combat “the campus left — or more
specifically, the problem of radical activists’ gaining control of America’s colleges and
universities,” in the words of a 2003 pamphlet published by the Philanthropy Roundtable, an
organization run for conservative philanthropists. The Charles Koch Foundation continues
to give tens of millions each year to colleges and universities, with the bulk of that money
going to fund economics programs, sometimes with provisions attached demanding that
teachings align with libertarian principles (as in the case of gifts made to Florida State
University). None of this is to say that such efforts are necessarily wrong—wealthy liberals give grants to
universities, too—but it is to say that conservative voices are strong and well-funded on
many college campuses, and many right-wing donors give funds with the explicit aim of
advocating particular conservative approaches in teaching and research. What’s more:
philanthropy is a game for winners. Industrialists who give millions to universities are not
likely to be radical critics of capitalism; the system has worked for them, so they see it as
good. A university whose curricula is shaped by big-money donations is far more disposed
to entrench pro-market views—or, more baldly, the interests of big-money donors. People
for whom capitalism has failed do not, in general, have the money to fund institutes or to
endow chairs.

Manion, Rusher, and Regnery, the fathers of conservative media in America, were once
considered extreme by many of their fellow conservatives. Today, the media environment
they helped to create exerts pressure on party elites and does much to shape the views of the
population at large. What was once a militant provocation—that universities and the media
are biased toward liberalism—has become conventional wisdom.

70 Jane Mayer, Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right (New York,
71 Quoted in Mayer, Dark Money, p. 124.
72 Mayer, Dark Money, p. 131.
73 Mayer, Dark Money, p. 94.
74 Dave Levenshal, “Spreading the Free-Market Gospel,” The Atlantic, 30 Oct. 2015,
www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/spreading-the-free-market-gospel/413239/; Melissa Korn,
“Charles Koch Foundation Boosts Donations to Colleges and Universities,” Wall Street Journal, 16 Nov. 2017,
A Regulated Marketplace of Ideas

To be sure, homogeneity—whether political, intellectual, or demographic—carries risks. Even in explicitly deliberative bodies such as juries, Cass Sunstein and others have found, a lack of internal dissent or disagreement can lead to individuals conforming with erroneous positions held by other group members; self-silencing by members who suspect they are in the minority; and a flight to extreme versions of positions on which group members are thought to agree. Groupthink is a real thing. In this regard, we are in full agreement with conservative commentators that intellectual diversity—along with economic, cultural, religious, gender and racial diversity—is important on campus.

But to move from the claim that the university is somewhat more liberal than America at large to the claim that the university is a place of leftist groupthink where conservative professors face a hostile environment or even discrimination requires additional argument and substantive evidence. The problem is greatly confounded by the fact that some conservative ideas, while perhaps sincerely held, are not supported by the standards of evidence that the academy rightly demands.

There are people in the United States who believe in the genetic inferiority of African Americans; there are likely some Americans who believe this also of southern Europeans, or eastern Europeans, or the Irish, or Jews. Some scientists once propounded such views, but no longer (at least in public). If one were to suggest that a person holding such views should be hired on the grounds of diversity, our scientific colleagues would surely—and rightly—object. If refusing to hire such a person is criticized as a form of bias, then that is a form of bias that we must be willing to defend. Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have argued that academia needs a measure of “political diversity” in order to minimize its blind spots. That might be so, but we would need a rubric for what that “diversity” might consist of. We cannot simply index the academy to trends in American politics and insist that the internal composition of the academy reflect the larger political culture.

In order for claims to survive in academia, they need to be attached to evidence. (When claims persist in scholarly discourse without sufficient evidence, we consider that an academic failure.) Americans of all political persuasions are committed to positions that evidence does not support. No reasonable scholar would claim that we should import empirically inadequate positions (much less empirically refuted ones) into academic discourse for the sake of some arbitrary standard of representativeness.

The Problem of Oppositional Epistemology

Scholarship demands that the views that are allowed to enter into academic conversation meet evidential requirements that are not present in everyday speech. Valid requirements are epistemic, rather than political or sectarian, in nature. But sometimes it is hard to know the

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77 Scientific deliberative bodies, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, acknowledge this explicitly in their policies requiring demographic diversity in author groups. See Oppenheimer et al., Discerning Experts: The Practice of Scientific Assessment for Environmental Policy (Chicago, 2019.)
difference. It is hard to know the difference because the conservative wing in America has
developed not just an oppositional politics, but an oppositional epistemology.

Some conservatives, including conservatives in academia, have developed a sense of
themselves as an oppressed or marginalized group, akin to gays and lesbians or black
people. In their otherwise sober study of conservative professors, Jon Shields and Joshua
Dunn explicitly adopt what they call a “gay model.” They use the metaphor of “the closet”
to describe the daily experiences of conservative scholars who hide their political beliefs
from their colleagues. One “prominent” tenured professor who “has achieved great stature
in his discipline” declares: “I am the equivalent of someone who was gay in Mississippi in
1950.” Such brazen comparisons may be, in some cases, attempts to mock the liberal
commitment to helping the socially disadvantaged. But for many conservatives these views
appear to be genuinely held.

Much of today’s discourse about conservatives in academia self-consciously adopts liberal
rhetoric about diversity and inclusion in portraying conservatives as a distinct and
disadvantaged group oppressed by the liberal majority. Occasionally a further claim follows:
that conservatives are epistemically privileged, able to grasp truths about the world that
liberals cannot. Examples suggested by Shield and Dunn include the “discomforting facts”
about sex differences (allegedly ignored by feminist social scientists) and the “potential
costs” of affirmative action for black law-school applicants.

This notion of conservatives as marginalized and therefore epistemically privileged borrows
from feminist and Marxist standpoint theory while diluting it to mere perspectivalism.
Marxist standpoint theory as developed by Georg Lukács held that workers, because of their
social location, can correctly see whose interests are served by the capitalist system; feminist
standpoint epistemology similarly claims that women’s social situations can help them see
through sexist fantasies about women, or identify how patriarchy fails to meet everyone’s
needs. Conservative standpoint theory follows a different pattern. As the examples from
Dunn and Shields suggest, conservative standpoint theory claims that conservatives, because
of their situatedness, are able to see the truth about other groups: women, or black people, or
homosexuals.

Moreover, in recent decades there has been an increasing problem with conservative
positions with respect to scientific evidence, so much so that some authors have talked of a

79 See e.g. Dennis Prager, “Conservatives: The New Marranos,” National Review, 5 Sept. 2017,
80 Shields and Dunn, Passing on the Right, pp. 85-87.
81 Shields and Dunn, Passing on the Right, p. 86. The same professor later says of concealing his political
affiliation: “I started feeling like a whore, which is what you feel like when you’re lying to people all the time.”
82 Shields and Dunn, Passing on the Right, pp. 181-183.
83 Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in History and Class Consciousness: Studies in
Marxist Dialectics, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). For an exceptionally clear overview of
standpoint epistemology, see Elizabeth Anderson, “Feminist Epistemology and the Philosophy of Science,”
“Republican war on science.”\textsuperscript{84} It is well established, for example, that self-identified conservatives are much more skeptical of the scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate change than self-identified liberals. For this reason, some conservatives suggest we should give equal time, or at least take seriously, the conservative position that global warming is being driven by natural causes, not human activity—and that we are biased if we don’t offer these skeptical arguments to our students and present them with the same respect as we present the conclusions of the climate-science community.\textsuperscript{85}

The problem is that the conservative position is refuted by an overwhelming body of scientific evidence, and has been so now for more than two decades. To give credence to the view that anthropogenic climate change is uncertain, unproven, or otherwise still open to debate—and that we are therefore justified in holding onto skeptical views or have an obligation to present them in our classes—is, at this point in history, little different from arguing that the harms of smoking are still unproven or that higher education threatens women’s reproductive capacity.\textsuperscript{86} The latter are positions that have been demonstrated to be without empirical foundation. In the language of the philosopher Karl Popper, these positions have been falsified. So far as our evidence enables us to say, these positions are false, and so scientists reject them and move on. We do not give them equal time, or even serious consideration. Thomas Kuhn famously argued that the reason why science can be said to progress, in a way that philosophy or art history does not, is because scientists achieve closure on issues, and move on.\textsuperscript{87} Yet we know that many American conservatives refuse to accept this closure—not just on climate change, but on evolutionary theory as well.

Certain social-scientific claims made by conservatives similarly display a blatant disregard for evidence. Consider the conservative argument against gay marriage—made not long ago in the U.S. Supreme Court—that same-sex parenting is bad for children, and therefore gay marriage should not be legalized. The American Academy of Pediatrics has concluded that available evidence refutes this claim: “children's well-being is affected much more by their relationships with their parents, their parents' sense of competence and security, and the presence of social and economic support for the family than by the gender or the sexual orientation of their parents.”\textsuperscript{88} Of course, people may oppose homosexuality for other reasons, and some of those reasons might be ones that are reasonably debated in a classroom. But the claim made in court by the late Justice Antonin Scalia—that “[t]here’s considerable disagreement among sociologists as to what the consequences are of raising a child in a…single-sex family, whether that is harmful to the child or not”—is false. More troublingly, it is consistent with the well-documented conservative pattern of attempting to cast doubt on scientific claims that clash with conservative values.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{84} Chris Mooney, \textit{The Republican War on Science} (New York, 2005).

\textsuperscript{86} Naomi Oreskes, \textit{Why Trust Science?} (Princeton, 2019).

\textsuperscript{87} Thomas Kuhn, \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions}, 4\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Chicago, 2012), pp. 159-172.

\textsuperscript{88} Ellen C. Perrin, Benjamin S. Siegel, and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, \textit{Pediatrics} 131 no. 4 (2013): e1374-e1383, \url{http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2013/03/18/peds.2013-0377}.

\textsuperscript{89} Oral arguments in \textit{Hollingsworth v. Perry} (2013), transcript available online here: \url{www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/2012/12-144_5if6.pdf}. See Naomi Oreskes
We might, of course, wish to consider with our students why erroneous views about smoking, women’s education, and climate change may appear credible, why people can hold fast to false views even in the face of overwhelming evidence, and how these patterns may link to cognitive limitations, as well as to ideological, political, and religious worldviews and to financial interests. We might also take to heart the ways in which scientific claims sometimes turn out to be wrong and incomplete—as indeed all historians of science do—and how we can acknowledge this without succumbing to nihilism, quietism, or other forms of moral and intellectual abdication. But we should not teach falsehoods as if they were equivalent to truths. We should not succumb to meretricious demands for equal time for falsehood, simply because someone is who wishes that falsehood were true is making a fuss.

Conclusion

The anthropologist Ashley Montagu famously said that reality has a well-known liberal bias. We cannot know if that is really true, but we do know that in recent decades, scientific research has demonstrated a number of things that have been hard for some conservatives to accept.

Claims for the intellectual or moral superiority of white men have largely failed the test of empirical evidence; acid rain, the ozone hole and climate change have been shown to be real and costly threats; research shows that strict gun laws reduce mortality and morbidity from gunshot wounds. It is also the case, as we mentioned earlier, that survey evidence suggests that higher education makes people more liberal. So perhaps it is this liberalizing effect of education—particularly elite education—that troubles our conservative friends.

As academics, it behooves us to be receptive to ideas, open to evidence, and willing to listen. But we should not succumb to stereotype threat and rush to “remedy” a problem of liberal bias that exists primarily in the anxieties of some conservative commentators. And it certainly does not behoove us, as William F. Buckley famously exhorted, to stand astride history—or, for that matter, science—yelling, “Stop!”

As Schumpeter wrote: “Political criticism cannot be met effectively by rational argument.”

and Erik M. Conway, Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming (New York, 2010).
90 See Oreskes, Why Trust Science?, esp. chapter 2.
92 Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, p. 144.