Liberal Bias in the College Classroom: A Review of the Evidence (or Lack Thereof)

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For now, political science courses in higher education are still taught by human beings. As such, there is potential for individual human biases and beliefs to creep into the classroom. Faculty, after all, are not emotionless robots. Political science is a field in which the discussion of controversial political issues and historical events is common. This makes the discipline an unavoidable magnet for accusations of political bias.

Part of the problem is that political science is poorly understood outside of the discipline. Consider this revealing quote from Senator Tom Coburn in 2009, arguing in favor of removing political science from the list of research areas funded by the National Science Foundation:

> Americans who have an interest in electoral politics can turn to CNN, FOX News, MSNBC, the print media, and a seemingly endless number of political commentators on the internet who pour [sic] over this data and provide a myriad of viewpoints to answer the same questions.... There is no shortage of data or analysis in this field that would require the government to provide funding for additional analysis (US Congress 2009–2010).

In short, political science and politics are not readily differentiated in the nonacademic world. Political science courses are presumed to be discussions of partisan politics in which the personal beliefs of the instructor are the standard against which correctness and incorrectness are measured.

This fundamental misunderstanding has fueled the strident claims from outside academia that political science is a laboratory for political indoctrination. In this view, professors use their own ideological biases to bend students' worldview toward, variously, cultural Marxism, elitist liberalism, Islamo-Fascism, social justice warrior code, or worse.

Although accusations of liberal bias in the Ivory Tower are not new, it seems that they have increased in volume, quantity, tenor, and urgency in recent years. What is absent from this argument, however, is systematic evidence. Absent anecdotes, data demonstrating that more professors are generally Democrats are the beginning and end of the empirical evidence underlying these arguments.

This article reviews the scant literature on the role of ideology in teaching political science and among college faculty more broadly. It examines the following three distinct components of the liberal-bias narrative:

1. Are faculty liberal as a group? Yes. Peer-reviewed studies and polling data show that *Democrats outnumber Republicans among faculty in political science and most other fields.* This fact often and incorrectly is stated in a way that conflates party identification with ideology.
2. Does the predominance of Democratic-identifying faculty result in a liberal bias in teaching or student assessment, including grading? Currently, *there is no peer-reviewed research supporting the existence of a liberal bias in teaching or grading.*
3. Do students change their beliefs, attitudes, or ideological preferences based on exposure to faculty (and course materials) in the classroom? Available research suggests that *students' political beliefs and ideology change relatively little throughout their university education.* If faculty are trying to brainwash students, it is not working.

Political science faculty—as in many but not all other fields—are more likely to identify as Democrats than as Republicans. The only demonstrable effect of this imbalance is on faculty themselves, with conservative, libertarian, and Republican faculty potentially being treated differently by the profession in terms of publications, job placement, and socialization. Even this finding, however, is contradicted by other research on faculty success and satisfaction. Overall, a review of the literature indicates that those who allege massive liberal bias have devoted energy and attention to a crisis that cannot be proven to exist.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LIBERAL-BIAS NARRATIVE

The roots of the liberal academe narrative in American political discourse arguably begin with William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom"* (1951). Its blueprint has been followed by many conservative authors ever since, updating only the anecdotal data for the contemporary audience.[1] The American far right had long characterized certain institutions as liberal (and, therefore, hostile), particularly the media and the Ivory Tower. This belief penetrated mainstream conservatism during the political rise of Spiro Agnew (Lehmann 2001) and Richard Nixon (Perlstein 2010). Today, the hostile liberal academe is a core belief of the right: in 2017, a nationwide survey found that 58% of Republican identifiers think higher education has a

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negative effect on the country, an increase from 32% in 2010 (Turnage 2017).

The growth of this belief is concurrent to the rise of a cottage industry of speakers, authors, and media personalities making a career of accusing academia and the media of liberal bias. Generally, their output is heavy on anecdotes and unsupported claims, light on evidence, and hugely popular within conservative circles. Because of the visibility and volume of these accusations, some academic research attempted to consider the question with more rigor. It also has sparked considerable debate within the profession: a search of the phrase "liberal bias" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* archives returned 835 results.[2]

ARE FACULTY DISPROPORTIONATELY LIBERAL?

The easiest but unfortunately often the only component of this issue to resolve is the basic question of faculty self-identification. There is ample evidence in peer-reviewed research and in polling data to show that faculty in political science identify *as Democrats* more often than as Republicans or libertarians. Given the comparatively moderate ideology of the modern American Democratic Party, this is similar but not identical to demonstrating that faculty are *liberal*. At the least, Democratic identification does not support assertions that faculty are wild-eyed Marxist hardliners.[3]

Whereas social science and humanities faculty are Democrats by a lopsided margin, other fields including economics, agriculture, and the STEM hard sciences do not show the same disparity (Hamilton and Hargens 1993; Jacoby 2016). Individuals self-select not only into academia but also into disciplines of varying appeal, depending on personal preferences (Gross and Cheng 2011; Gross and Fosse 2012).

In political science, studies show high levels of Democratic identification among faculty without conflating partisanship and ideology (Mariani and Hewitt 2008; Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009; Zipp and Fenwick 2006).[4] Research by non-political scientists tends to treat the two as interchangeable. Klein, Stern, and Western (2005) compared six academic fields using voter registration; Langbert (2018) and Langbert, Quain, and Klein (2016) did the same across a broad range of disciplines. All three studies found that Democrats significantly outnumber Republicans based on publicly available voter-registration data. Even as a measure of *partisanship*, voter-registration data are a lagging indicator of seriously limited use; it is a most imperfect measure of *ideology*. Thus, these findings are qualified at best.

The underlying point, however, is supported in more robust data: Higher Education Research Institute data show that 60% of California university faculty across all institutions self-identified as liberal or left in 2014 (Eagan et al. 2014; see also Hamilton and Hargens 1993). Carnegie Foundation survey data reached an identical figure (60%) in similar nationwide studies (Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005).

DOES FACULTY LIBERALISM MATTER IN THE CLASSROOM?

As professional teachers, faculty have a responsibility to present course material, assign textbooks, write exams, issue assignments, and evaluate students based on scholarly criteria rather than their own beliefs. Therefore, evidence that a majority of faculty are Democrats and liberals is not evidence that this leads to a bias affecting teaching (Yancey 2012).

Political science courses are presumed to be discussions of partisan politics in which the personal beliefs of the instructor are the standard against which correctness and incorrectness are measured.

Some studies suggest that students can discern the political preferences of faculty who teach their courses (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009). It is unclear from those results, however, if students correctly identify their professors' preferences from experience in the classroom or if they simply have a high likelihood of being correct when responding according to the conventional wisdom that "professors are liberals." Student identification of faculty partisanship decreased as the strength of actual faculty partisanship increased (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009, 350). Further research on this point could clarify whether faculty make their views obvious to students or if students merely are guessing on a question for which their odds of guessing correctly are very high.

Direct perceptions of bias by students often are used by proponents of the liberal-bias narrative. Yet, this offers little useful evidence because such perceptions are impossible to disentangle from students' own biases and preferences. In political science, surveys provide evidence that students project their own ideological beliefs onto a professor based on how much they like that professor (Braidwood and Ausderan 2017). Across academic fields, Linvill and Grant (2017) found that student-rated faculty bias is predicted by measures of student entitlement and grade orientation. Student communication characteristics—namely, verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness—also are predictive of perceptions of instructor bias (Linvill and Mazer 2013). Innovative research that studies student use of Twitter further demonstrates that student "venting" about instructor ideology is driven by shared anecdotes and predicted by students' own identification (Linvill, Boatwright, and Grant 2018). Collectively, then, this limited body of research suggests that faculty bias most likely is to be perceived by students who believe they deserve but are not getting high grades and among students with a higher level of disagreeableness.

Perhaps most important, no evidence for liberal bias in grading has been found (Musgrave and Rom 2015; Rom and

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Musgrave 2014). In contrast, evidence for grading bias based on other characteristics, including prior student performance and student attractiveness, is readily available (Archer and McCarthy 1988; Malouff 2008). Instructor biases can be easily mitigated using basic techniques such as anonymized grading, formal rubrics, and detailed grading criteria included with assigned work (Malouff, Emmerton, and Schutte 2013; Malouff et al. 2014). These are good practices irrespective of the issue of political bias.

CAN FACULTY CHANGE STUDENT BELIEFS?

A common claim of the liberal-bias narrative is that faculty indoctrinate students with their own beliefs. Faculty, who often find it difficult to convince students to read the syllabus, know intuitively that this is a false charge. Research in this area shows that even if faculty were trying to change students' beliefs, attitudes, and preferences, they are failing. The conservative *National Review* concurs that, "Liberal indoctrination on campus isn't working" and that perceived campus liberalism "makes a compelling case for conservatism" (Polumbo 2018).

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Short-term changes in student party identification (sPID) pre- and post-semester in one study were unrelated to either faculty partisanship or student perceptions thereof (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009). Moreover, sPID changes are not statistically different from changes in party identification among members of the 18-to-25 age cohort who do not attend college; neither were changes in sPID greater at institutions in which faculty were more liberal (Mariani and Hewitt 2008).[5] Four-year changes in sPID also are shown (across academic majors) to correlate most strongly with student family background, including parental ideology (Campbell and Horowitz 2016). Evidence for the role of liberal arts education on student liberalism is weak (Hanson et al. 2012). This does not mean that scholarly theories are irrelevant; the study of economics is shown to correlate strongly with stronger student economic conservatism (i.e., pro–free-market beliefs) among undergraduates (Fischer et al. 2017).

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey project is a recent national survey conducted by an interfaith religious nonprofit organization, with more than 7,000 respondents from 120 colleges and universities in the United States.[6] Several questions assessed student favorability toward political groups and ideologies after one year in college. Results showed that 48% of students indicated a "better attitude toward" liberals; however, 49% indicated the same toward conservatives. Negative responses also were nearly identical (i.e., 30% worse view of liberals, 31% worse view of conservatives).

A core purpose of college education is to expose a generally sheltered, young, inexperienced group of young adults to a broader world of ideas and perspectives. Efforts to find evidence of liberal bias instead show that, overall, higher education has the desired effect of widening students' views of people whose views differ from their own. To the extent that students become more liberal in college, the changes mirror increased liberalism among non-college people in the same age group.

DISCUSSION: DOES IT MATTER WHAT WE THINK?

It is interesting that the clearest evidence for liberal bias is found in research on a question rarely mentioned in the broader narrative: Is academia hostile to conservative faculty? This research is scattered across disciplines but collectively suggests that Republican, libertarian, and conservative professors face more difficulties than liberal faculty in publishing work, attaining promotion, finding jobs, and professional networking (Honeycutt and Freberg 2017; Phillips 2018; Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005; Shields and Dunn, Sr., 2016; Vitiello 2007). Abrams (2016; 2018) found, conversely, that conservative faculty rate their experience and career satisfaction as highly as other faculty.

The research on liberal bias in the classroom and in other aspects of teaching does little to support the narrative among some groups that can border on hysterical in mischaracterizing universities and faculty (see, e.g., Turning Point USA 2020). Anecdotal evidence is not difficult to find, especially when proponents focus on extreme outliers in higher education (e.g., Oberlin College and Evergreen State College are popular choices) that are unrepresentative of students, professors, classrooms, and campus experiences across the 2,500 bachelors-granting institutions in the United States. Those who believe that universities are hotbeds of liberal indoctrination could easily find sufficient resources to fund serious research to learn whether this indeed is the case. That such studies have not been attempted—as far as we know—suggests that talking points, not systematic evidence, is the goal.

Do faculty affect students' political beliefs or ideology? No. Research on this question conclusively shows that if faculty are trying to brainwash students, it is not working.

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The question is, with the "liberal professors" belief widely shared, what should we do about it as individuals and as a discipline? I propose the following three answers, which are not exhaustive:

1. Encourage more rigorous, peer-reviewed research on the effects of faculty ideology on the student experience. A key takeaway from this article is that what little research has been done does not support the liberal-bias narrative. This does not preclude more research being done and providing new, potentially conflicting evidence. Does faculty ideology affect how likely students are to learn well in the classroom? To receive high grades? To interact one-on-one with their professors? To be satisfied with their experience in courses? More work must be done, ideally by research teams that include diverse ideological representation.
2. Do nothing. Continue to teach with the same high level of professionalism that (hopefully!) we already bring to the job. Faculty are susceptible to the natural tendency of people accused of something unpleasant—that is, bias—to overreact in response. Remember that we teach political science, not politics. Remember that it is not the end of the world if our students figure out our partisan affiliation. Charlie Kirk (2018) is not going to come crashing through the window to arrest us if we make a joke about Donald Trump; neither will our students be too overcome with grief to learn. It is useful to self-evaluate and reflect on our own biases, but overreacting and removing everything from a course that might upset David Horowitz (2007) will not improve anything. Ending up on the "Professor Watchlist," ultimately, is both beyond our control and irrelevant. Some students will accuse us of being leftist hacks no matter what we do.

   Remember that in addition to respecting students' personal beliefs, we have a concurrent responsibility to ensure that the classroom is not hostile to women, to people of color, to LGBTQ+ students, and to other groups subject to discrimination.
3. Any potential bias, including ideological, can be mitigated with strategies including formal rubrics, anonymized grading of student work, and the basics of good pedagogy—treating all students with respect and professionalism. When students express their personal beliefs, we should challenge them to support and defend their position with evidence regardless of the content.

CONCLUSION

Although firmly entrenched in the wider American political discourse today, the belief that academia is dominated by liberal bias is not well supported by research. The following three key questions mix demonstrable facts with unsupported claims and negative findings:

1. Are faculty—particularly faculty in the social sciences including political science—more likely to be Democrats than Republicans and to be liberals than conservatives? Yes. Research and survey data both confirm this.
2. Does the fact that faculty are largely liberal result in measurable, demonstrable bias in student experience and education, including grading? No. Available research does not support this claim. Merely showing that faculty are liberal does not prove, on its own, the existence of liberal bias in the classroom, in student evaluation, or in student experience.
3. Do faculty affect students' political beliefs or ideology? No. Research on this question conclusively shows that if faculty are trying to brainwash students, it is not working.

American conservatives have long believed that academia, like the media, is a hostile, liberal institution. As an article of faith, that belief is widely held. As a testable hypothesis, however, it has failed to provide supporting evidence so far. As a profession, faculty and political scientists in particular should treat the accusation of liberal bias for what it is: a useful partisan talking point, not a statement of fact. ■

NOTES

1. Prominent examples include but are not limited to Bloom (1987), D'Souza (1991), Horowitz (2007), Kimball (1990), and Kirk (2018).
2. Search results from January 15, 2019 at chronicle.com.
3. Abrams (2018) suggested that faculty, irrespective of ideology, are no more "activist" or politically engaged than comparable people outside of academia.
4. Duarte et al. (2015) similarly found a majority of Democratic identifiers among psychologists but incorrectly used party identification as ideology. Other work directly measures liberal ideology, however, and confirms that liberal beliefs are held disproportionately among psychologists (Inbar and Lammers 2012).
5. However, see also Hunt and Davignon (2016) for evidence that among a subgroup of college students—Evangelicals attending Evangelical colleges—exposure to more liberal faculty may increase student liberalism. Wills, Brewster, and Nowak III (2018) also showed that within sociology, student religiosity predicts perceptions of instructor bias.
6. For full survey methodology and data, see www.ifyc.org/ideals/firstyear (accessed January 20, 2019).

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