

The Nature and Consequences of Ideological Hegemony in American Political Science

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That American academics lean decidedly to the left, preferring Democratic candidates and identifying as liberals at much higher rates than the nation as a whole, is beyond reasonable dispute. For decades, scholars have documented the leftward tilt of university faculties in terms of party identification, candidate preference, and policy positions (Gross and Simmons 2014; Ladd and Lipset 1975). This general tendency exists within the field of political science as well; although political scientists are not so monolithically leftist as sociologists or anthropologists (where Republicans register as mere statistical noise), Democrats in the field outnumber Republicans at least six to one (Cardiff and Klein 2005; Klein and Stern 2006). Despite clear variations by type of institution and by region (Abrams 2016), the overall story is unambiguous: American academics, and political scientists specifically, are predominantly liberal Democrats—and becoming more so (Ingraham 2016).¹

The purpose of this article, however, is neither to belabor the point about partisan imbalances nor to claim that conservative political scientists face pervasive hostility and ostracism. Conservative scholars generally enter the profession with their eyes open about the ideological inclinations of their prospective colleagues, and have consciously chosen to work in a field where their worldview runs counter to the predominant ethos. Indeed, having made peace with this reality, conservative academics actually report greater job satisfaction and contentment with their career choice than their liberal colleagues (Abrams 2017). Moreover, it would be profoundly ironic for conservatives to see numerical imbalances as *prima facie* evidence of discrimination or to call for heavy-handed remedies.

Instead, the goal here is twofold: (1) to shed light on certain dimensions of the discipline's ideological skew that are not captured by simple data on party identification; and (2) to trace negative implications of the imbalance for teaching and research. There are no easy remedies; indeed, ideological imbalance within our discipline—and within academia more broadly—may be less a problem to be solved than simply a reality to be acknowledged, with attempts at mitigation and self-correction when practical and appropriate. It is with a firm belief, then, in the value

of disciplinary self-awareness that I offer the following observations.

THINGS ARE WORSE THAN THEY APPEAR: THE NATURE OF "CONSERVATISM" IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

As stark as the underrepresentation of self-identified Republicans and conservatives in American political science may be, it does not fully capture the ideological disconnect between the discipline and the society that we seek to understand and to serve. To the extent that right-leaning faculty are present in political science departments, they tend to be Republicans of the "old school," focused primarily on fiscal restraint and strong national defense. They frequently invoke the "fiscally conservative, socially liberal" mantra to the extent that it has become almost cliché.²

This distaste for cultural conservatism among right-leaning social scientists is not merely impressionistic but also confirmed by such (limited) data as are available. Regrettably, there are no data on the stances of political scientists with regard to many "hot-button" social issues. However, in a survey of social scientists, Klein and Stern (2005, 267) found that the modal position among *Republican* academics is "strong support" for "laws restricting gun ownership," and found no significant differences between Democratic and Republican academics on "public policies that regulate personal conduct" (Klein and Stern 2005, 283).³ Overall, they concluded that, whereas they are clearly differentiable from the truly radical members of their departments, "the tiny contingent of conservatives differs only moderately from the establishment left" (Klein and Stern 2005, 297).

As many have noted, it is not establishment, fiscal conservatives who are ascendant on the right in America today. For at least the past two decades, the real energy and electoral power in the Republican Party has come from the cultural right, first among religious traditionalists (Corbett, Corbett-Hemeyer, and Wilson 2013) and then from the more secular populist nationalism that fueled Donald Trump's rise (Ekins 2018). A full discussion of these electoral dynamics is obviously beyond the scope of this article. What is relevant, however, is that these culturally conservative perspectives are virtually absent from the academy, even in its small right-leaning enclaves. With regard to religious views, this dearth is quantifiable. According to a survey of religion in the professoriate

by Gross and Simmons (2009), only 21% of political scientists reported certain belief in God, making political science—by this measure—the third-least religious of 20 disciplines surveyed. Moreover, even among those who *are* believers, religious self-description as “progressive” or “moderate” is 11 times as likely as “traditionalist” identification—far from the pattern found among religiously observant Americans generally. There are fewer data on professors’ embrace (or lack thereof) of more secular cultural conservatism; however, the reported attitudes on gun control are instructive, and it is safe to say that faculty lounges typically do not echo with cries to “Make America Great Again!”

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Of course, some might argue that there are good reasons for the underrepresentation of certain views in the discipline, and that we would not want a significant contingent of young-earth creationists or mass-deportation enthusiasts on university faculties. This may well be true; I take no position here on the normative merit of any particular political or religious stance. The point is simply that the disconnect in values and worldview between our departments and the larger society is even greater than the reported numbers on partisanship suggest. Not all conservatives are created equal when it comes to understanding and empathizing with the students and communities that we serve and the political movements that we seek to understand.

CONSEQUENCES FOR TEACHING AND RESEARCH

We might well concede that conservatives are underrepresented in political science, and that this disparity is especially dramatic when it comes to religious and cultural conservatism, without being particularly alarmed. There are, after all, many professions—and many academic disciplines—in which the overall distribution of political opinion does not reflect the broader society especially well. Political biases and blind spots, however, ought to be especially concerning to political scientists because the core of our enterprise is teaching and research *about politics*. Whereas lack of diversity is a concern generally, it is particularly problematic when it bears directly on the subject matter at hand. We would rightly question the comprehensiveness of our understanding if those studying gender were overwhelmingly male (or female) or if those studying religion were overwhelmingly Catholic (or atheist). Similarly, we should be concerned when the systematic study of political phenomena is dominated by those on the left (or the right).

The potential impacts of ideological homogeneity and bias on teaching are fairly obvious and require little comment. Students expect and deserve a fair presentation of competing political theories and paradigms and of the various parties, movements, and interest groups seeking to gain power and

influence policy. Whereas this fair, even-handed presentation would ideally happen within each individual class (and many instructors sincerely strive to achieve such a balance), it is more likely to occur—at least in the aggregate—if faculties are politically diverse. As Kelly-Woessner and Woessner (2006, 499) demonstrate, students are generally quite accurate in their assessment of professors’ political views, and “political differences between students and professors appear to reduce students’ interest in the subject matter.” Thus, as ideological distance increases between political science faculties and the students that we teach, the discipline runs a significant risk of alienating many from the academic study of politics.

More complex and far-reaching concerns about ideological homogeneity and bias arise with regard to research. The phenomenon of confirmation bias, in which people more readily accept arguments supporting their existing worldviews (Nickerson 1998), is well documented in social and political psychology—indeed, political scientists routinely invoke it to explain various aspects of public opinion. There is no reason to suspect that academic researchers are immune to its effects. In fact, as Zaller (1992) argues, highly informed individuals are *especially* likely to apply disproportionate scrutiny to and counterargue against claims that conflict with their predispositions. When those producing and reviewing research overwhelmingly share the same political assumptions, they tend to ask the same types of questions, make the same interpretations of ambiguous data, and apply the same excessive skepticism to the few research efforts that defy the discipline’s ideological consensus.

Scholars have begun to document the potentially pernicious effects of ideological homogeneity on research in the related disciplines of psychology (Duarte et al. 2015) and sociology (al Gharbi 2018). Those highly recommended articles treat the nature and dimensions of the problem in much greater depth than space permits here. For the present purpose, I briefly highlight just a few examples of prominent social science research streams—relied on and contributed to heavily by political scientists and political psychologists—that have suffered from a tendency to “pathologize” conservatism (Bailey 2004) and to use potentially ambiguous data to paint conservative voters and ideas in the most negative possible light.⁴

Dating back decades, research on the “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al. 1950) and on sociopolitical “dogmatism” (Rokeach 1960) has cast conservatives as intolerant, dominance-oriented, and prone to suppress views and behavior with which they disagree. One characteristic formulation (Jost et al. 2003, 339) contends that conservatism “stresses resistance to change and justification of inequality and is motivated by needs that vary situationally and dispositionally to

manage uncertainty and threat.” Moreover, Robert Altemeyer—a prominent contributor to this literature—goes so far as to explicitly reject the existence of parallel left-wing intolerance, arguing that those on the left are “fair-minded, even-handed, tolerant, nonaggressive persons” who are “not self-righteous; they do not feel superior to persons with opposing opinions” (quoted in Bailey 2004). One might forgive conservatives who are not entirely reassured. Not until recently (e.g., Brandt et al. 2014) has scholarship emerged exploring tolerance more even-handedly and documenting that the desire to suppress opposing views is unfortunately ubiquitous across the ideological spectrum.

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Similarly, there has long been a desire in social science research to ferret out “hidden” or “subtle” racial animosity underlying conservative policy preferences and political allegiances. The widely employed concept of “symbolic racism” (Kinder and Sears 1981) often has interpreted opposition to affirmative action and other race-conscious policies, as well as individualistic attributions for poverty and social disadvantage, as evidence of hidden racial animus—despite plausible and often simpler alternative explanations such as principled conservatism (Sniderman and Carmines 1997) or more general patterns of individual-level attribution (Gomez and Wilson 2006). This tendency shifted into overdrive in the wake of Trump’s election (al Gharbi 2018), as social scientists vented their considerable antipathy for the president and his supporters, employing often tendentious readings of qualitative and quantitative data to cast them as bigots when more nuanced, nonracial interpretations would be at least as defensible.

A final, related line of inquiry is the never-ending quest to discover why certain (always conservative) groups vote “against their own interests.” This somewhat patronizing effort was epitomized and popularized when Frank (2004) famously asked, “What’s the matter with Kansas?”⁵ It is noteworthy that no one ever asks what is wrong with Connecticut; when voters downplay economic self-interest to support leftist parties because of cultural and lifestyle concerns, it is noted approvingly as evidence of “postmaterialism” (Inglehart 1977). A more ideologically diverse discipline would be more balanced in its assessment of the transition from economic to cultural politics and less inclined to asymmetrically pathologize it on one side of the political spectrum.

A CONCLUDING CAUTION

The significant and increasing ideological homogeneity within academia generally and political science specifically has not gone unnoticed by the larger society and by political

decision makers. Most readers are likely familiar with the reductions and restrictions imposed in recent years on funding of political science through the National Science Foundation (Noah 2013). The primary legislative sponsor of these efforts, former Oklahoma Senator Tom Coburn, specifically referenced multiple apparently left-leaning funded projects—including a study of the “puzzling behavior” of white working-class Republicans—in his push to cut federal funds for political science research. We need not regard these efforts as fair, reasonable, or wise to see that the discipline’s perceived ideological skew has fueled hostility from some who control the federal purse strings. Similarly, the perceived left-wing

hegemony in the academy has spawned legislative proposals in at least two states to regulate the political balance of faculty hires at state institutions (Schmidt 2017). However misguided and unenforceable such efforts may be, they point to a growing frustration that we as a profession ignore at our peril.

With or without external pressure to be more ideologically balanced and even-handed, however, political science as a discipline has good reasons to do so. As researchers, our goal should be genuine understanding of the political world in all of its complexity, not work that consistently flatters our own worldview and denigrates other political “tribes.” As teachers, we should seek to engage, inspire, and challenge students across the political spectrum, not to “preach to the choir” of those already inclined to agree with us while alienating the others. I am convinced that for the great majority of political science scholars and teachers, those *are* the goals. To be sure, there are no quick fixes for these issues. Partisan or ideological hiring quotas of the kind envisioned by some state legislators are both undesirable and unworkable. Moreover, there may be tradeoffs between ideological and demographic diversification within the field because female and minority scholars are even less likely to be right-of-center than their white male counterparts. Even without hiring changes, however, there is value in being conscious of, and thoughtful about, how our discipline’s ideological homogeneity may shape the teaching and research that we do and our standing in the larger society. That, at least, is a place to start. ■

NOTES

1. When possible, I draw on data regarding political scientists specifically. However, because discipline-specific data are limited, I sometimes refer to studies of social scientists generally. Because political scientists appear to fall near the middle of the partisan and ideological distribution within the social sciences, this seems a relatively safe substitution. It also is important to note that all of these studies measure the attitudes of social and political scientists in the United States. I am not aware of surveys measuring the partisan or ideological orientations of political scientists in other nations. Although my sense is that they also tend to be well to

the left of their countries' median voters, this perception is admittedly anecdotal and impressionistic.

2. Interestingly, recent work by Drutman (2017) suggests that although popular among elites, this socially liberal, economically conservative pairing has relatively little appeal in the American electorate. Thus, even to the extent that "conservatism" of some type exists in political science departments, it is unlikely to be of a variety that resonates with much of the public at large.
3. Approximately 25% of respondents to the Klein and Stern (2005) survey represented political science or "political-legal philosophy." The remainder came from anthropology, economics, history, and sociology.
4. The examples presented here are all from the related subfields of public opinion, political behavior, and political psychology. This is the area in which I work and thus the one with which I am most familiar. I am certain that colleagues working in political theory, international relations, and political institutions could identify examples of research streams in their respective areas that are shaped by skewed ideological presuppositions.
5. Frank's thesis did get pushback from at least one prominent political scientist (Bartels 2006). Tellingly, however, Bartels' focus is on the empirical accuracy of Frank's claim that working-class voters were trending decisively Republican because of cultural issues. He does not challenge the underlying premise of the work: that values-based voting by downscale whites would be problematic and normatively undesirable.

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