

Rethinking the Plight of Conservatives in Higher Education

Findings that run against the grain of assumptions.

By Matthew Woessner

Within academia, I'm a rare breed: a conservative Republican who twice voted for George W. Bush. I supported the invasion of Iraq, and I deeply admire Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas for their originalist approach to interpreting the Constitution. Yet I am first and foremost a scientist whose singular devotion is to Truth. Whatever my ideological instincts, I have an obligation to examine social scientific phenomena impartially, striving at all times to form opinions based on empirical evidence rather than ideological articles of faith.

It is against this backdrop that my research into the politics of academia—conducted with my wife, April Kelly-Woessner—has led me to some surprising and, admittedly, somewhat difficult conclusions. Whereas my conservative colleagues tend to portray academia as rife with partisan conflict, my research into the impact of politics in higher education tells a different story. Although the Right faces special challenges in higher education, our research offers little evidence that conservative students or faculty are the victims of widespread ideological persecution. In waging their high-profile crusade against ideological bias in the academy, activists such as David Horowitz may be overstating the extent to which conservatives are mistreated on campuses. In so doing, the movement to promote intellectual diversity in higher education may be inadvertently discouraging conservatives from pursuing academic careers.

My own interest in the plight of conservatives within academia came somewhat late in my still-young academic career. Whereas some academics become fixated on research questions based on personal connection to the issue (something I once heard psychology professor John Ruscio refer to as “me-search”), it never occurred to me to study the politics within academia. Because everyone already knew conservatives were a persecuted minority, what was the point? So, after writing a doctoral dissertation on public reactions to presidential scandal, I spent my first few years as an assistant professor examining abstract questions in the field of public opinion and voting behavior. It wasn't until my wife April (herself a political science professor at Elizabethtown College) came to me with an interesting research question that the focus of my work changed. “What impact,” she asked, “do perceptions of a professor's politics have on student evaluations of the course?” Believing instinctively that all good academic questions have already been taken, I dismissed the idea out of hand: “Not only has that topic probably been done,” I remarked, “I'm guessing it's been done to death.”

I was wrong. We found virtually nothing on the question and comparatively little on the impact of politics in the classroom more generally. Thus began a line of research that would consume all of our energies over the next six years as we adapted our skills as public-opinion specialists to the study of politics in higher education.

Taking our first tentative steps into the study of politics in the academy, we designed a large-scale survey to test how students reacted to perceptions of political bias in the classroom. In our July 2006 *PS: Political Science and Politics* article, "[My Professor Is a Partisan Hack: How Perceptions of a Professor's Political Views Affect Student Course Evaluations](#)," we found that when students perceive a gap between their political views and those of their instructor, students express less interest in the material, are inclined to look less favorably on the course, and tend to offer the instructor a lower course evaluation. The results, while not earth shattering, demonstrated that students do not passively accept disparate political messages but tend to push back against faculty members they perceive as presenting a hostile point of view.

Shortly after completing a follow-up article on perceptions of faculty politics for the *Journal of Political Science Education*, our research in the politics of academia took a new turn. April and I were asked to participate in a research conference on politics in higher education sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute. In an effort to generate original research for the 2009 edited volume *The Politically Correct University*, conference organizers asked scholars to consider how academia's liberalism influences American higher education. April and I were asked to investigate why conservatives tend not to pursue PhDs. Drawing from the familiar narrative that conservatives are an oppressed minority group within academia, I assumed that the shortage of conservatives in doctoral programs was the result of their poor treatment within academia. Either conservative students had an overall less positive collegiate experience, making the thought of graduate school less palatable, or they failed to make personal connections with their leftist or liberal professors. Absent a mentoring relationship with the faculty, conservative students would be less likely to consider a career in higher education. Using survey data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, April and I set about testing these and other possible explanations for the ideological gap in American doctoral programs. The findings defied my expectations.

Quite surprisingly, whatever impact college might have on students' academic ambitions, left-leaning first-year students begin their education with a far greater interest in eventually pursuing a doctoral degree than their conservative counterparts. Whereas liberal and conservative students have very similar grades and nearly identical levels of satisfaction with their overall college experience, right-leaning students are far more likely to select "practical" majors that are less likely to lead to advanced degrees. Their emphasis on vocational fields such as business and criminal justice permits them to move directly into the workforce.

In contrast, left-leaning students are more apt to pursue majors in the liberal arts, such as sociology and philosophy, which, absent additional graduate training, provide fewer career opportunities immediately on graduation. Even within a major like political science, college seniors of different political leanings have different expectations with regard to their forthcoming careers. Whereas students on both the left and the right place a premium on securing a comfortable salary and having the time to raise a family, conservative students consistently rate these priorities as more important than do liberal students. In addition, while neither liberal nor conservative students are particularly drawn to writing original works or making a contribution to science, liberal students tend to rate these priorities as more important to their future career. In every instance where students' career expectations might encourage them to enter a doctoral program, liberal students enjoyed an advantage over conservative students.

In other words, from a purely rational perspective, students' underlying preferences appear to lead more liberals into advanced degrees, thus creating a fairly large ideological gap. Our findings are by no means conclusive, as much of the ideological gap remains unexplained. However, the fact that the data did not support my initial assumptions compelled me to think more carefully about both the cause and the implications of academia's ideological imbalance.

At roughly the same time that April and I were grappling with why conservatives get fewer PhDs, we began work on our second, more comprehensive study of politics within the classroom. Whereas our 2006 study looked only at student perceptions of the professor's politics, our newest survey also permitted us to measure shifts in students' political leanings relative to the professor's political views. While our follow-up study was motivated in part by a genuine academic curiosity, the project itself was designed to settle a bet. As a conservative who has often encountered left-leaning professors, I assumed that the typical student's politics would be influenced by his or her academic mentors. While I was not strongly influenced by my professors' left-wing politics, I assumed most conservative students weren't so resilient. April, whose politics are well to the left of my own, asserted that students would not be meaningfully influenced by their professors' views.

April was fond of reminding me that "students aren't sponges." By the age of eighteen, she argued, most people are already set in their ways.

Sure enough, our research indicated she was right. In our next major article in the April 2009 edition of *PS: Political Science and Politics*, "I Think My Professor Is a Democrat: Considering Whether Students Recognize and React to Faculty Politics," we provided evidence that while student views do shift over the course of a semester, they tend to move somewhat randomly, usually regressing toward the mean. While we observed a slight shift in favor of the Democrats (representing an average 0.06 points on a five-point scale), the change occurred irrespective of the professor's political orientation. Thus, while students' partisan orientations did shift over the course of time, the changes are hardly what one might expect if faculty members were systematically indoctrinating their students.

While our more recent findings ran against the grain of my ideological assumptions, I wasn't yet prepared to rethink fundamentally the plight of conservatives in academia. To that point, our research focused entirely on the experiences of students. While undergraduates might be in a position to steer clear of hostile professors, we surmised, certainly conservative faculty members faced persecution as they sought to secure tenure in a system dominated by the Left.

Conservative—And Content—In Academe

The seismic shift in my view of academic politics came only in the last few years, as April and I embarked on our most ambitious project to date. While attending the aforementioned American Enterprise Institute conference on politics in academia, political science professor Robert Maranto introduced us to Stanley Rothman, a respected scholar and prolific author who had devoted much of his distinguished career to the study of elites. In what was designed as a follow-up study to their landmark research into the opinions of academics, Rothman, Carl Everett Ladd, and Seymour Martin Lipset collaborated to produce the first large-scale survey of students,

faculty, and college administrators. The 1999 North American Academic Study Survey captured the values, views, and experiences of more than four thousand respondents drawn randomly from four-year colleges and universities across the United States. However, with the death of Ladd and Lipset, and Rothman's diagnosis with Parkinson's disease, most of the data had not been thoroughly examined. Hoping to jumpstart the project, Rothman asked April and me to join him in writing a book-length manuscript that might capture the complex and often conflicting views of those within the academy.

The resulting book, *The Still Divided Academy: How Competing Visions of Power, Politics, and Diversity Complicate the Mission of Higher Education*, goes far beyond a look at politics in the academy. Following the outline sketched by Rothman, Lipset, and Ladd some years before, we examined the views within higher education on such issues as academic freedom, faculty-administration relations, campus diversity, and affirmative action. While working on the politics chapter I began to rethink my views about the plight of conservatives.

Looking at survey data from all of higher education's primary constituencies, I began to realize that Republicans and conservatives, while vastly outnumbered in academia, were, for the most part, successful, happy, and prosperous. Fewer than 2 percent of faculty (Republican or Democratic) reported being the victims of unfair treatment based on their politics. Only 7 percent of Republican faculty believed that discrimination against those with "right-wing" views was a serious problem on their campus, compared with 8 percent of Democratic faculty who expressed concerns about discrimination against those with "left-wing" views. Asked to consider what they would do if given the opportunity to "begin your career again," 91 percent of Democratic faculty and 93 percent of Republican faculty answered that they would "definitely" or "probably" want to be a college professor. Similarly, few rightleaning students or administrators claimed to have been the victims of political mistreatment. Like their Democratic counterparts, most were satisfied with their experience in higher education.

Gravitational Pulls

Whereas our results show that Democratic and Republican professors do differ on a number of issues outside of the realm of politics and policy (for example, the purpose of higher education, the importance of tenure, and the prevalence of racial and sex discrimination), the political gap on college campuses is less important than other sources of tension, which arise based on differences between faculty and administrators and differences in academic discipline, age, and gender. While Republicans on campus are members of a distinct minority, their political views are but one of many defining characteristics that permit them to form friendships and alliances with others on campus. These nonideological associations probably act to minimize conservatives' social and political isolation.

From a personal standpoint, the most surprising part of the results outlined in *The Still Divided Academy* is that they correspond entirely with my own experience. Like the vast majority of the Republicans in our study, I've never been the victim of mistreatment as a result of my political views. On my campus, I've never considered discrimination against conservatives to be a problem. Although the work has its unique challenges, I can't imagine any other job that I would love more. While it may sound odd to be surprised when scientific evidence comports with our

personal observations, as a social scientist, I have a natural aversion to drawing generalizations based on my own idiosyncratic life experiences. Because the narrative of the besieged conservative minority appeared consistent with the ideological imbalance in American higher education, I simply assumed that I was the exception. I now realize that my story is not unique.

Yet while the results of our research cast serious doubt on claims that conservatives are besieged, it remains probable that conservatives face unique obstacles within the academic world. For students, these impediments are probably temporary and eminently navigable. For Republican faculty, particularly in the social sciences and the humanities, higher education's profound ideological imbalance creates impediments that likely hamper their professional success.

Although we don't have any reliable data on the percentage of faculty members who promote (directly or indirectly) an ideological agenda in the curriculum, since most undergraduates enjoy a remarkable degree of academic flexibility in their course selection, conservative students will tailor their education to avoid needless political conflict. Looking back at my own experience, I remember how, as a young conservative, I tailored my own course selection to the subjects and professors I found most agreeable. I recall that as a naive sophomore I enrolled in an introductory sociology course and was surprised that the professor was an avowed Marxist. Concerned that our ideological perspectives might ultimately affect my course grade, I tried unsuccessfully to lay low. However, noting that I cringed as she denounced Reagan's economic policies, the professor asked if I had a different take on the issue. Somewhat reluctantly, I offered a defense of Reaganomics. To her credit, she listened attentively and, as far as I could tell, took my novel ideas seriously. In light of the fact that, by her own admission, she had never heard a spirited defense of conservative economic policies, it became clear to me that sociology was an ideological minefield. I never enrolled in another sociology course for the rest of my academic career.

While at UCLA I discovered a number of politically moderate professors, including political scientists like Leo Snowiss and John Petrocik, whose approach to the subject matter seemed largely nonideological. Feeling that political science was a discipline that was relatively tolerant of diverse political views, I elected to pursue a graduate degree and join the professoriate.

While the experience in one or two introductory courses may be a poor proxy for the ideological tenor of a major, it seems probable that conservative students use this type of snap judgment in charting their academic course. Indeed, our findings in *The Politically Correct University* that conservatives gravitate toward minimally ideological majors are consistent with this explanation. Whereas liberal and conservative students express similar levels of satisfaction with their college education, right-leaning students show greater dissatisfaction with their social science and humanities courses. Predictably, they gravitate away from majors in these fields and toward the more professionally oriented disciplines. While the underlying preferences of conservative students for "practical" fields contribute to their selection of majors, the extent to which the politics of the professoriate also influence these decisions is a question worthy of serious scholarly attention.

Whereas students can avoid conflict and select majors that suit their personal dispositions, right-leaning professors, particularly outside of the hard sciences, are forced to seek the approval of

faculty whose ideological worldview may be at odds with their own. By this I'm not referring to overt political discrimination, whereby a left-leaning professor will actively undermine the promotion of a colleague because of a difference of opinion. Indeed, based on our own findings, conservatives have few complaints about unfair treatment based on their political views.

The more pernicious problem occurs when right-leaning scholars submit their work for blind review with prestigious publishers or in peer-reviewed journals. Even if we presume that most journal referees are sincerely trying to judge a work based on its scholarly merits rather than its social or political implications, a jury pool dominated by left-leaning scholars will almost certainly subject right-leaning papers to greater scrutiny, highlighting their methodological shortcomings and challenging their overall conclusions. If the academic universe were evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, the unconscious tendency to challenge dissenting viewpoints would hamper the publication of conservative and liberal work at roughly the same rate. However, with a vast majority of academics falling on the left side of the political spectrum, this is an issue that, in all probability, tends to hamper the publication of conservative-leaning ideas. Thus, professors whose political instincts are right of center must either focus on non-ideological scholarly questions or endure a special degree of scrutiny as they seek to secure publication of their ideas.

Again, while I remain reluctant to consider my own academic career in an effort to understand the plight of conservatives, I must confess that the ease with which my own work moves into print appears inversely proportional to its potential support for conservative policy positions. A journal referee's propensity to fixate on seemingly trivial methodological flaws seems to increase dramatically if my conclusions undermine a leftist policy position. This observation is not a criticism of liberals in academia. An institution dominated by conservatives would be just as likely to scrutinize unfriendly findings more closely than sympathetic ones. In a field where the number and prestige of academic publications are key factors in tenure and promotion, this potential bias has important real-world consequences. The accusation of bias in the publication process was recently raised in *Econ Journal Watch* by David Gordon and Per Nilsson. Focusing on the 494 books with an ideological thesis, the researchers found that only 2 percent of Harvard University Press publications had conservative or classically liberal perspectives. While we don't know the proportion of conservative manuscripts submitted for Harvard University Press's consideration, it seems improbable that 98 percent of the requests had a left-leaning thesis.

The Drawbacks of a Left-Leaning Academy

We consider the special plight of conservative scholars in *The Still Divided Academy*. Replicating the earlier work of Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, we find evidence that within the professoriate, social conservatives tend to teach at slightly less prestigious institutions than social liberals. Thankfully, we find that scholarly productivity is by far the most important predictor of the prestige of a professor's institution. However, for women, black, and social conservative scholars, a modest gap exists between objective measures of performance and the reputation of the institution. Since there are potentially innocent explanations for the underperformance of these groups, this finding is hardly cause for alarm. Given the theoretical reasons that ideological minorities may have special burdens in navigating the publication process, it is quite possible that conservative scholars are in some fields at a real disadvantage.

Even if those on the right face special obstacles in the publication process, it is obvious from our results in *The Still Divided Academy* that many Republicans do work and thrive in higher education. To the extent that academia's ideological imbalance is harmful either to higher education or to society as a whole, it is not at all clear how to improve the situation. Certainly, some of the imbalance is a matter of personal choice. Absent any external pressures, it is highly improbable that conservatives would ever be represented in higher education in numbers anywhere approaching their standing in society as a whole. Still, the mere perception that higher education is hostile to conservative values probably contributes to the Left's dominance within higher education. Since it would be perfectly absurd (although beautifully ironic) to reengineer the politics of academia through quotas or special admission policies, there is no easy solution on the horizon. Nevertheless, one potentially important way of improving the Right's representation in academia is to stop overstating the challenges conservatives face on campus. By promoting their peculiar brand of right-wing victimization, activists run the risk of exacerbating academia's political imbalance by needlessly discouraging conservatives from considering careers in higher education. As much as I enjoy being one of academia's token conservatives, I would prefer to see a bit more ideological balance within the professoriate. Whereas conservative students benefit from hearing the Left's alternative worldview, too many liberal undergraduates complete their four-year degree unaware that educated and thoughtful people sometimes vote for political leaders like George W. Bush.

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