Tenured radicals pdf

In their recent essay “Is Academe Awash in Liberal Bias?,” Naomi Oreskes and Charlie Tyson seek to dispute the increasingly common perception of the American university system as a hostile environment for viewpoints that stray from a left-leaning orthodoxy. Though their analysis acknowledges that the professoriate falls somewhat to the left of the general public, they nonetheless argue that academe is still firmly anchored at the middle of the political spectrum. Conservative talking points about “liberal bias” in the university system, it follows, are overblown and reveal their own unacknowledged biases under the guise of a corrective.This political culture-wars debate is unlikely to be resolved by editorial analysis, yet one dimension of Oreskes and Tyson’s argument warrants scrutiny: its empirical claims. To bolster their analysis, these authors draw upon a 2006 study of faculty political beliefs by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, and a similar survey of faculty political self-identification from UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute. While both studies provide a measurable means of detecting faculty political skews, Oreskes and Tyson badly misinterpret their results and especially the long-term trends of the HERI survey.Let’s review the empirical evidence.Gross and Simmons’s 2006 survey found that about 44 percent of faculty members classified themselves to the left of center, compared to 46 percent who rated themselves as centrists. At the time, the first number was roughly consistent with the 2004-5 HERI survey, which showed 51.3 percent of the faculty identifying as liberal or far-left. Though unmentioned, the HERI survey revealed a much smaller moderate contingent of just 29.2 percent. Oreskes and Tyson nonetheless place great weight on these numbers to depict American college faculty near the political center or moderate center-left. These figures, now a decade and a half out of date, obscure another dimension of faculty ideology that coincides with growing allegations of a leftward skew. Rather than relying on a single mid-2000s snapshot of faculty self-identification, it is important to consider how these patterns have changed over time.Fortunately, we now possess 50 years of survey data on faculty political opinions, stretching back to a 1969 study conducted under the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. When coupled with successor Carnegie surveys and the HERI survey (administered every 3 years since 1989), we may obtain a long-term picture of how faculty political opinions have evolved over the last several decades. These surveys all use a similar five-point scale (far-left, liberal, moderate/middle-of-the-road, conservative, and far-right), which can be analyzed separately or further condensed into liberal, moderate, and conservative groupings.The results show two distinct stages. From 1969 until the early 2000s, professors who identified as “liberal” or “far-left” maintained a small but stable plurality in the faculty ranks. Although the percentages fluctuated slightly over three decades, the total number of faculty members on the political left was essentially unchanged between the 1969 Carnegie survey (44.7 percent) and the 1998 HERI survey (44.8 percent).Scholars have studied and debated whether this liberal plurality signified a leftward political bias since Seymour Martin Lipset and Everett Ladd first raised the issue in a 1971 analysis of the first survey results. While Lipset and Ladd drew attention to the political imbalance in the classroom that might arise from a liberal-leaning plurality, subsequent studies disputed the severity of the skew and suggested its stability offset the potential for instructional bias. As long as moderate and conservative faculty members had sizable minority stakes among the faculty ranks, campuses would continue to reflect a diversity of viewpoints. Indeed, one 1993 study by Richard Hamilton and Lowell Hargens even suggested that faculty politics had shifted slightly rightward during the 1980s despite liberals retaining a plurality. That plurality consistently hovered around 40 percent to 45 percent during that period.The debate over Lipset and Ladd’s argument played out over almost 30 years with no clear resolution, but it also reflected a different era in survey findings than the present day. Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the once-stable liberal plurality in American faculty ranks gave way to a rapid leftward shift.Liberal and far-left faculty numbers swelled from 44.8 percent in 1998 to a clear majority of 59.8 percent in 2016-17, the most recently available HERI survey (in a remarkable understatement, Oreskes and Tyson elsewhere refer to this 15-percentage-point surge as only a “slight rise”). The shift came at the expense of both moderates, who dropped from 37.2 percent to 28.1 percent over the same period, and conservatives, who dropped from 18 percent to a minuscule 12.1 percent.Digging deeper into the surveys, we find that one of the primary drivers of the leftward shift is the rapid growth of faculty members who identify on the far left. Oreskes and Tyson characterize that group as a small minority faction. Yet this group is also the fastest-growing segment. Between 1992 and the most recent HERI survey, far-left faculty grew from 4.2 percent to 11.5 percent of the professoriate. In addition to nearly tripling in size, this means that far-left faculty numbers alone now sit at virtual parity with all conservative faculty, whether center-right, far-right, or anywhere in between.When compared to the stability of the three decades that preceded it, the post-2000 leftward shift of the professoriate is both difficult to deny and historically unprecedented. Notably, this shift in faculty opinion does not map onto any other ideological pattern in American politics during the same time. Rhetoric about political polarization notwithstanding, both survey data from the Gallup organization and academic literature on the left/right political divide show only modest long-term shifts when questions about ideological affiliation are presented to the general American public.HERI and its predecessor surveys have also presented the same questions about ideological self-identification to incoming first-year college students since 1970. These data show that, despite some fluctuation over time, political moderates still remain a clear plurality among the entering student body. Students who identify on the left dropped from 36.6 percent in the Vietnam era to a trough of 20 percent in 1981 before rebounding to 36.2 percent in 2017. Yet right-leaning students have actually grown from 18.1 percent in 1970 to 22.4 percent in the most recent study.Clearly, the political self-identification patterns among the faculty reflect neither the public at large nor universities’ own student bodies.One other empirical dimension of Oreskes and Tyson’s argument warrants closer examination. According to National Center for Education Statistics data, business and health sciences are currently the two most popular undergraduate majors in the United States. Citing Gross and Simmons again, Oreskes and Tyson note that these fields also have “the highest concentrations of conservative faculty members,” whereas liberal faculty members tend to concentrate more heavily in humanities and social sciences. These students, they strongly imply, therefore spend disproportionately more time in the classroom with conservative-leaning professors.The statistical inferences that Oreskes and Tyson make, however, are highly misleading. While Gross and Simmons did find conservative-faculty concentrations in business (24.5 percent) and health sciences (20.5 percent), these numbers actually reflect two of the only areas of the academy where some semblance of ideological parity existed, at least as of 2006. For comparison, 21.3 percent of business faculty members and 20.5 percent of health-science faculty members identified as liberal in the same survey, with the remainder consisting of moderates.Most other disciplines skewed heavily in a liberal direction. Tellingly, liberal views also comprise a clear and sizable majority within the social sciences (58.2 percent) and humanities (52.2 percent), with moderates trailing far behind and conservatives failing to even break out of the single digits. Gross and Simmons’s findings also revealed a sizable subset of far-left ideologies in these same fields. Twenty-four percent of social scientists identified themselves as political radicals, and 17.6 percent identified with the Marxist label, even though far-left identifications had much smaller representations in business and the STEM disciplines.Noting again that these findings reflect a snapshot in 2006, more recent data from HERI reveal that Gross and Simmons only captured the early stages of the leftward shift. In a 2017 article, Samuel Abrams analyzed HERI survey responses over time across an assortment of disciplines. He found that every discipline that could be measured moved to the left between 1989 and 2014. In education and even the physical sciences, liberal faculty shifted from plurality status to an outright majority. In history, political science, and the fine arts, liberal faculty currently approach 70 percent. In English, self-identified liberals comprise an astounding 80 percent of faculty ranks.Oreskes and Tyson decry what they see as a “selective focus on humanities and social-science departments” in studies of faculty ideological skew. Conservative political commentators routinely associate the “tenured radical” professor archetype with these disciplines, as do studies that employ partisan voter-registration records as a proxy for faculty political leanings. Yet the skew in these disciplines leaves a larger mark on campus politics than Oreskes and Tyson let on.Unlike business and health sciences, many of the humanities and social sciences also experienced rapid declines in majors over the last decade. It would be a mistake however to conclude that this portends a diminished influence of their ideological perspectives compared to more balanced fields of study. Although they are shedding majors, the humanities and social sciences have a disproportionately large presence on the mandatory general-education curriculum at most colleges.Gen-ed classes typically make up a third or more of the undergraduate experience, and place a heavy emphasis on disciplines whose faculty members are largely left-leaning, such as English, history, and foreign languages. Indeed, over 90 percent of American colleges and universities have at least one mandatory “writing composition” class in their gen-ed curriculum, and often more than one semester of composition is required. These classes are overwhelmingly situated in the English department, which, as aforementioned survey data reveal, has the highest leftward ideological imbalance of all the core disciplines.Stated another way, most humanities and social-science majors will not be required to pass through a business or health-science classroom, even though these are among the only places on campus where some semblance of faculty ideological balance is attained. Nearly all business and health-science majors must take gen-ed classes in the humanities and social sciences, however, where they will almost certainly encounter faculty ranks that skew much further to the left than either the general public or the student body.In noting these dimensions of the survey literature, I make no claim to knowing the “appropriate” political balance of the professoriate. Ideology alone does not determine classroom experience, and an ideologically skewed faculty may be entirely capable of delivering high-quality instruction.On the other hand, the post-2000 leftward shift suggests a break from the comparatively stable balance of the past, with potentially harmful consequences that are only starting to emerge. A recent survey of undergraduates suggested that conservatives and other nonliberal college students perceive greater pressure to conceal their true political beliefs in the classroom, usually citing fear of getting a lower grade. My own research also found a strong correlation between the decline of certain majors over the last decade and the intensity of faculty political skew in those same majors, whereas more ideologically balanced fields (and less-politicized subjects in general) exhibited growth. These findings suggest that ideological considerations are shaping student perceptions of classroom instruction in ways that cannot be easily discounted.As the faculty survey findings reveal, the long-term empirical patterns in political opinion are unmistakable. Academics should continue to discuss the meaning of these data, including whether the growing ideological imbalance on campus represents a problem for instructional content and the ability of faculty members to serve a diverse array of student perspectives. But such discussions need to be honest about the data trends. And that includes acknowledging the fact of a sharp and historically unprecedented leftward shift of the faculty over the last two decades.

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