

Liberals, Conservatives and Education

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There has been a long standing concern that college faculty lean toward liberal political views and tend to be Democrats. The Kentucky Kernel (student newspaper) covered this for UK last spring. A number of recent studies have brought this issue to the forefront yet again. I think that this is an important issue, and one that faculty should not shy from, nor do we have “circle the wagons” as some seem to be doing. Here are my thoughts.

First, these studies are quite poor. In a study reported by the Center for Study of Popular Culture, we can actually see the data. An interesting thing to note: they found 1397 Democrats and 134 Republicans. What the newspapers haven't reported (conservative bias?) is that they couldn't determine affiliation on 2687 others. That is, they don't know the answer for more than half their data.

Another point that has always bothered me: What does it mean to be a Democrat or a Republican? This is often equated with “liberal” and “conservative.” Indeed, in the study linked above, they state “We selected party registration for our study because other indices of bias would be highly subjective. The meanings of “liberal” and “conservative” are notoriously indeterminate.” And yet, the press has immediately jumped to “liberal” bias. What exactly does it mean?

Paul Krugman (and no, I don't think he's the expert on everything) makes a few interesting points in his recent NY Times editorial. The only one I really want to point out is that the Military is primarily Republican. If we are going to assume that because academe is primarily “Democrat” that something is “going on.” We need to make the same assumption about the military.

Let's first think about why the military is primarily Republican. It's most likely that two forces are at work here. First, more conservative leaning individuals tend to favor the military as a career. I'm fine with that. Second, people in the Military find that their interests are more closely aligned with the Republicans: often simply as a matter of who is most likely to provide more funds for the military. Again, nothing wrong with that, it's a part of our political process.

Let's examine the same arguments for academe: liberals are well known to support and value education and particularly higher education. So, they are drawn into academe, and, like the military, find that the Democratic Party tends to push for support of higher education. So like the military, their interests are aligned more closely with Democrats.

But of course, there is still concern. Colleges are educating our youth. We wouldn't want them to indoctrinate them with a certain ideology. Is there any evidence of that possibility? I used the July 2004 NY Times opinion poll. At that point in the election, Kerry was carrying a slight lead – at least according to this poll. The survey as a whole had Kerry with 51.7% and Bush with 48.3%. A dead heat if there ever was one.

I first examined voting by college educated respondents: 52.3% for Bush, 47.7% for Kerry. I also examined voters under 29, 54.5% favored Kerry while 45.5% favored Bush. Finally, I looked at young (under 29) college educated voters: 54% Bush, 45% Kerry. If anything, college educated voters (at least in this survey) tended to favor Bush over Kerry.

What other concerns might we have? The articles appear to have two other concerns: students are graded based on politics and faculty are hired and promoted based on

politics. It is quite possible that there are examples of faculty who abuse their power in these ways. But we only need reform if we can find evidence of widespread abuse. The simple fact that many are Democrats doesn't prove abuse.

I think this warrants further study. I don't want to see faculty abusing students or other faculty. We need to find and fund studies that actually examine the issue, not ones that examine some vague related issue.