

AMERICANS' VIEWS OF POLITICAL BIAS IN THE ACADEMY  
AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

*Working Paper, May 22, 2006*

Neil Gross\*  
Department of Sociology  
Harvard University

Solon Simmons  
Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution  
George Mason University

In recent years, the American professoriate has come under attack from conservative commentators and activists. Critics such as David Horowitz charge that leftists have taken over many academic disciplines and use their college or university posts as platforms for pursuing partisan political goals.<sup>1</sup> Students for Academic Freedom, a group founded by Horowitz, has embarked on a nationwide campaign to promote the cause of “intellectual diversity” in teaching, faculty appointments, and research, where intellectual diversity is taken to include diversity of political viewpoints. As part of this campaign, Horowitz has authored an “Academic Bill of Rights” asserting that students are entitled to an education free of “political, ideological or religious orthodoxy” imposed upon them by professors. This right, he argues, is routinely infringed by liberal academics who

---

\* Author names are listed in alphabetical order. This paper is an equal collaboration. Funding for this research was provided by the Spencer Foundation and Harvard University. For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper and/or the questionnaire, we thank Amy Binder, Robert Blendon, Roger Bowen, Steven Brint, John Curtis, Jeremy Freese, Claudia Goldin, Michael Hout, Gary King, Michèle Lamont, Louis Menand, Mitchell Stevens, and Christopher Winship. Thanks are due as well to Kristen Purcell of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. We also acknowledge the outstanding research assistance provided by Jeff Denis, Ethan Fosse, Jay Gabler, and Patrick Hamm.

<sup>1</sup> David Horowitz, 2006. *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. Washington, DC: Regnery.

voice their politics in the classroom. Legislatures in 20 states have considered making the “Academic Bill of Rights” law.<sup>2</sup>

Horowitz’s campaign was fueled this past year by the controversy surrounding Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers. After members of Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted “lack of confidence” in Summers in March 2005 – in part because of comments he made at a conference suggesting that women might lack aptitude for careers in math and science at the highest levels – a media frenzy ensued. Some commentators who sprang to Summers’s defense repeated Horowitz’s charge that the academy had become a haven for leftists and the politically correct. That Summers had been rebuked for offering a hypothesis at odds with liberal sensibilities was read as a sign that Harvard’s faculty – and the American college and university system more generally – had abdicated its responsibility to pursue objective knowledge and was now beholden to a narrow political agenda.<sup>3</sup>

In light of the extraordinary number of Americans who attend college each year – 16.6 million enrolled in colleges or universities in 2002 – the well-known wage premium associated with having a college degree, the 3.2 million Americans who are directly employed in the college or university sector, and the role of the university as an engine for economic growth in the knowledge society,<sup>4</sup> it is easy to imagine that Horowitz and his movement represent a tempest in a teapot, a fringe group out of touch with how most Americans feel about higher education. This “tempest in a teapot” view comes easily to scholars of higher education familiar with public opinion research conducted by John

---

<sup>2</sup> This figure is provided by the American Association of University Professors.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., John Tierney, 2006. “The Faculty Club.” *New York Times* February 26, A15.

<sup>4</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, 2004. *Digest of Education Statistics*. Washington, DC.

Immerwahr<sup>5</sup> and others, which suggests that Americans have a high degree of confidence in higher education institutions.

In the study whose findings we summarize here, our goal was to assess the extent to which conservative critiques of the professoriate inform American public opinion, as well as to understand how Americans feel about academic freedom and tenure.

Commissioned by the American Association of University Professors, with support from the Spencer Foundation and Harvard University, we designed a questionnaire focused on these and related topics. A nationwide telephone survey was carried out between March 1 and March 26, 2006 by Princeton Survey Research Associates International.<sup>6</sup> A thousand Americans aged 18 and older were chosen at random to participate. The data were then weighted to ensure the representativeness of the sample for the U.S. population as a whole. The findings reported below – which reflect this weighting procedure – have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.4 percent.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> E.g., John Immerwahr, 1999. *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K-12*. San Jose: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

<sup>6</sup> We recognize that public opinion surveys administered by telephone are imperfect means for measuring attitudes and beliefs within a population. Aside from the fact that certain classes of persons may refuse categorically to participate in such surveys, there is no way to be certain that the questions asked and the response scales and categories offered mean the same thing to all respondents. Moreover, when survey questionnaires ask about matters respondents may not have thought about much before, they may feel pressured to give a response rather than say they don't know, which may lead those who analyze the survey to confuse "non-attitudes" for attitudes. Despite the best efforts of questionnaire designers, telephone surveys, like other kinds of surveys, may suffer from acquiescence bias, where respondents – particularly those whose views on a topic are undeveloped – may tend to register agreement with statements posed because of the perceived authority of the researcher. Finally, public opinion surveys, like all quantitative studies of attitudes and beliefs, flatten out the complexity and nuances of people's views. For these reasons, caution is in order in interpreting our results, which we regard as merely the starting point for further investigations designed to flesh out in more detail the findings we report here.

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were contacted using list assisted random digit dialing technology; up to 7 call backs were made. Contact with respondents was achieved at 74.5 percent of working phone numbers, 35.2 percent of people contacted agreed to take part in the survey, and 99 percent of initiated interviews were completed, resulting in an overall response rate of 25.9 percent.

Our preliminary finding? The tempest in a teapot view, though not entirely unsubstantiated, underestimates how upset a sizable minority of Americans are about the perceived politics of professors, and, perhaps at some peril, fails to recognize how soft are Americans' views on academic freedom. It is also oblivious to the fact that the university has become something of a political football, with Americans on different sides of the partisan aisle offering quite different evaluations of it.

### CONFIDENCE IN AMERICA'S COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Our survey, like those conducted by Immerwahr and by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*,<sup>8</sup> includes a measure of perceived confidence in America's colleges and universities. Consistent with previous research, our survey shows that Americans – even on the heels of the Summers controversy, which made headline news – are reasonably confident in U.S. higher education. 41.6 percent of respondents say they have “a lot of confidence” in American colleges and universities, with 48.7 percent reporting “only some confidence,” and only 9.7 percent reporting “hardly any confidence at all.”<sup>9</sup> By contrast, only 20.7 percent of respondents report having a lot of confidence in the White House (39.8 percent say they have hardly any confidence at all in the current administration), 29.9 percent report a lot of confidence in organized religion, and only 10.8 percent say they have a lot of confidence in the press. In our survey, the only institution in American society in which more people report having a lot of confidence is the military.

---

<sup>8</sup> “The Chronicle Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education,” 2004. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 7) vol 50:A12-A14.

<sup>9</sup> Here and throughout the paper our reporting of percentages excludes those who say they don't know or refuse to answer a question.

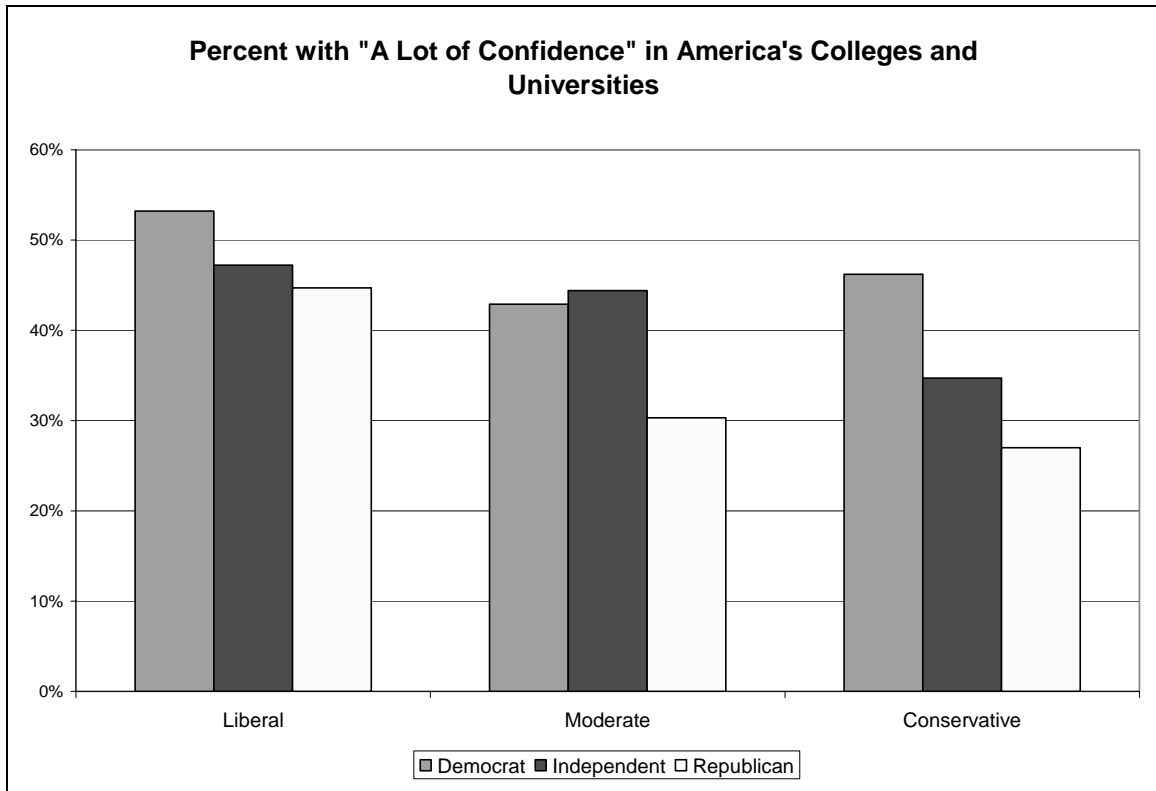
There are, however, significant differences in confidence by age, education, party affiliation, and political ideology. In general, the young have more confidence in higher education than the old. 53.5 percent of those aged 18-24 have a lot of confidence in colleges and universities, as compared to 26.8 percent of those aged 65 and older. On the other side, only about 4.1 percent of those aged 18-24 report hardly any confidence in colleges and universities, as compared to 23.2 percent of those 65 and older.

<b>RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE “A LOT OF CONFIDENCE” IN:</b>		
The military		53.9%
Colleges and universities		41.6%
Organized religion		29.9%
The White House		20.7%
The press		10.8%
<b>RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE A “LOT OF CONFIDENCE” IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, BY:</b>		
Age	18-24	53.5%
	25-34	50.6%
	35-44	41.0%
	45-54	42.2%
	55-64	37.6%
	65+	26.8%
Education	Less than high school	37.6%
	High school degree	39.3%
	Some college	45.9%
	College+	42.4%
Political party	Democratic	48.3%
	Independent	42.2%
	Republican	30.5%
Ideology	Liberal	50.5%
	Moderate	42.2%
	Conservative	30.5%

Ideology and party	Liberal Democrats	53.1%
	Conservative Republicans	26.8%

The more highly educated tend to have greater confidence in colleges and universities than the less educated, although these differences are not as pronounced as for age. 37.6 percent of those without a high school diploma have a lot of confidence in colleges and universities, as compared to 39.3 percent of those with high school diplomas alone, 45.9 percent of those with some college but no degree, and 42.4 percent of those with a college degree or higher. The differences are more striking at the lower end of confidence. 17.6 percent of those lacking a high school diploma have hardly any confidence at all in colleges or universities, as compared to 7.4 percent of those with a college degree or higher.

There are also significant differences by party and political ideology. Democrats and independents have more confidence in American colleges and universities than do Republicans. 48.3 percent of Democrats, 42.2 percent of independents, and 30.5 percent of Republicans have a lot of confidence in such institutions. Just 7.3 percent of Democrats have hardly any confidence at all, whereas this is true for 15.9 percent of Republicans. Similar differences are observed when the breakdown is by political ideology. 50.5 percent of liberals, 42.2 percent of moderates, and 30.5 percent of conservatives have a lot of confidence in colleges and universities. On the other end, 5.6 percent of liberals, 7.2 percent of moderates, and 15.1 percent of conservatives have hardly any confidence at all. Looking at the intersection of ideology and party, we find that 53.1 percent of liberal Democrats have a lot of confidence in higher education, but that this is true of only 26.8 percent of conservative Republicans.



### OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

Just as Americans report relatively high levels of confidence in U.S. colleges and universities, so too do they accord relatively high status to college or university professors. 53.2 percent of respondents in our survey say the job of college or university professor is seen as “very prestigious” in our society. 41.5 percent say the job is “somewhat prestigious,” and only 5.3 percent describe it as “not prestigious at all.”

<b>RESPONDENTS CONSIDERING DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONS “VERY PRESTIGIOUS”:</b>		
Physician		71.9%
College or university professor		53.2%
Elementary school teacher		50.2%
Lawyer		33.6%
Stockbroker		16.7%
<b>RESPONDENTS CONSIDERING JOB OF COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR “VERY PRESTIGIOUS,” BY:</b>		
Age	18-24	70.5%
	25-34	56.2%
	35-44	55.1%
	45-54	51.1%
	55-64	50.0%
	65+	39.5%
Education	Less than high school	50.0%
	High school degree	54.4%
	Some college	56.2%
	College+	51.0%
Political party	Democratic	58.7%
	Independent	53.1%
	Republican	43.5%
Ideology	Liberal	64.7%
	Moderate	54.0%
	Conservative	40.4%
Ideology and party	Liberal Democrats	65.5%
	Conservative Republicans	40.6%

Although professors are viewed as having high prestige, they are given lower prestige ratings than physicians, whom 71.9 percent of Americans describe as having very prestigious jobs. Yet professors fare better in terms of prestige than does another



category of professionals: lawyers. Only 33.6 percent of respondents describe the job of lawyer as very prestigious, and 15.1 percent say it is not prestigious at all.

Our study suggests, but does not demonstrate conclusively, that the prestige gap between different kinds of educators may have narrowed. Earlier studies showed professors scoring significantly higher than school teachers on measures of occupational prestige.<sup>10</sup> Our study indicates that on the whole Americans now think of college or university professors as having only slightly more prestige than elementary school teachers. 50.2 percent of respondents say the job of elementary school teacher is very prestigious – only 3 percentage points lower than for professors – although 9.5 percent say that being an elementary school teacher is not prestigious at all, nearly double the percentage who say this is true of professors.

Men and women rate the occupational prestige of professors somewhat differently at the lower end, with 2.8 percent of women saying that college or university professors have no prestige at all as compared to 8.1 percent of men. As with confidence, educational differences are also significant, as are differences of age. Differences are small between educational groups in terms of believing the job of college professor to be very prestigious, but 11.7 percent of those without a high school diploma say being a professor isn't prestigious at all, as compared to 4.7 percent of those with a high school diploma, 2.2 percent of those with some college, and 6.2 percent of those with college

---

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Robert Hodge, Paul Siegel, and Peter Rossi, 1964. "Occupational Prestige in the United States, 1925-63." *American Journal of Sociology* 70:286-302 and Keiko Nakao and Judith Treas, 1994. "Updating Occupational Prestige and Socioeconomic Scores: How the New Measures Measure Up." *Sociological Methodology* 24:1-72. We used a different question wording than these earlier studies did. We read respondents a list of occupations and asked them to tell us for each "how prestigious [do] you think that job is in our society – very prestigious, somewhat prestigious, or not at all prestigious?" Earlier studies measured the social standing of occupations rather than prestige per se, and included more response categories. However, the Nakao and Treas study already characterized the standing of college professors as on a downward trajectory, and that of school teachers as on an upward trajectory.

degrees or higher. As for age: it is negatively correlated with the perceived prestige of college and university professors. 70.5 percent of those 18-24 rate the job of professor as very prestigious, as compared to 39.5 percent of those 65 and older.

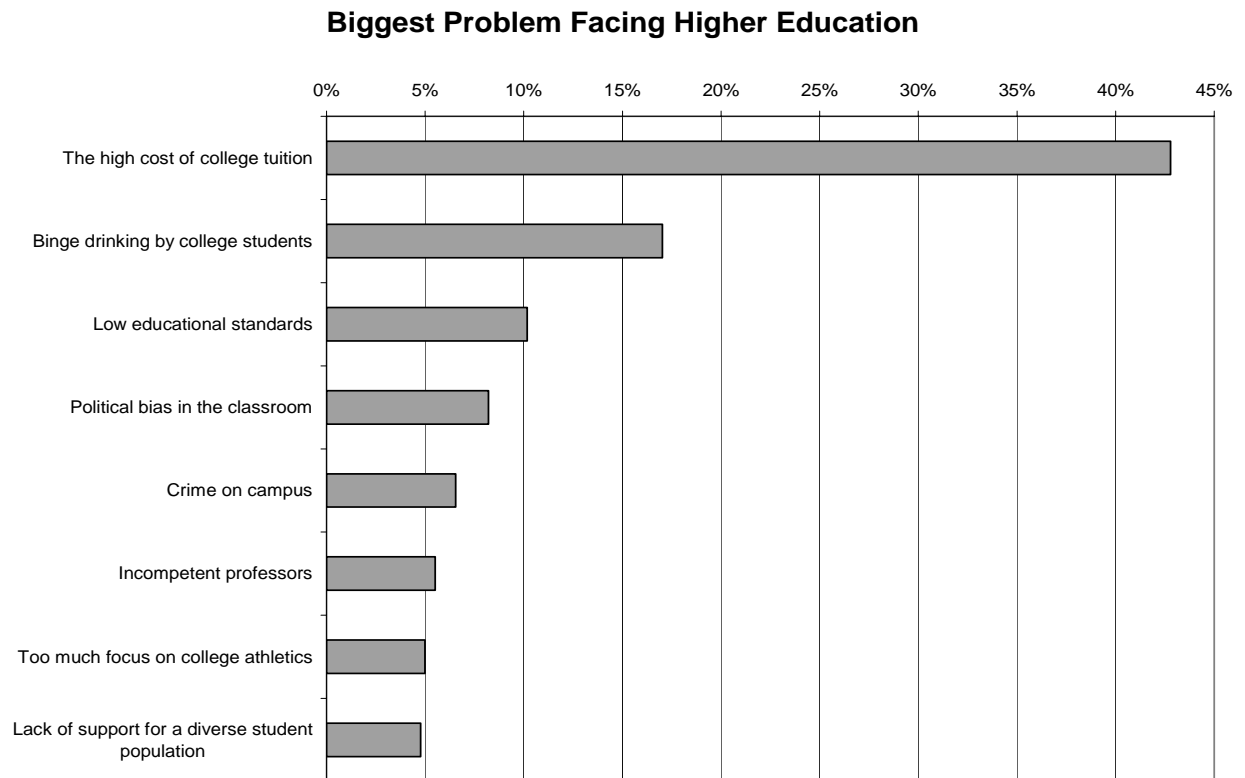
Differences by party affiliation and political ideology are also significant. 58.7 percent of Democrats think being a professor is very prestigious, as compared to 43.5 percent of Republicans and 53.1 percent of independents. With regard to ideology, 64.7 percent of liberals say being a professor is very prestigious, as compared to 54 percent of moderates and 40.4 percent of conservatives, with just 1.3 percent of liberals and 10.7 percent of conservatives saying the job isn't prestigious at all.

Conceptually related to occupational prestige is the question of the adequacy of pay for college professors. Of those who gave an answer to our question on this topic, about 32.3 percent say that college professors are paid too little, while 52.3 percent say they are paid the right amount. Just 15.4 percent say they are paid too much. However, 28 percent of respondents say they don't know the answer to this question – the only question on the survey to garner such a large “don't know” response.

#### POLITICAL BIAS AS A PROBLEM FACING AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION?

When asked to name the biggest problem facing American higher education today, 42.8 percent of respondents – the single biggest category – say “the high cost of college tuition.” Indeed, 80.5 percent of Americans say that the high cost of tuition is a “very serious” problem. 17 percent say “binge drinking by students” is the biggest problem, 10.2 percent say “low educational standards,” 8.2 percent “political bias in the classroom,” 6.5 percent “crime on campus,” and about 5 percent each say the biggest

issue is “incompetent professors,” “too much focus on college athletics,” or “lack of support for a diverse student population.”



That only 8 percent of Americans list political bias in the classroom as the biggest problem facing higher education does not mean it’s an issue that fails to resonate with the public; 37.5 percent of respondents claim that political bias is a very serious problem.

On this item there are few differences by education or age (except that, relative to those who are younger, a slightly higher proportion of the elderly describe bias in the classroom as a very serious problem), but there are significant differences by party affiliation and political ideology. 26.9 percent of Democrats say bias in the classroom is a very serious problem, as compared to 48.5 percent of Republicans and 39 percent of

independents. And 34.4, 31.1, and 45.5 percent of liberals, moderates, and conservatives, respectively, describe bias in those terms.

<b>RESPONDENTS WHO SEE THE FOLLOWING ISSUES TO BE “VERY SERIOUS PROBLEMS” FACING HIGHER EDUCATION:</b>				
	Total	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
The high cost of college tuition	80.5%	84.0%	81.9%	77.0%
Binge drinking by college students	66.2%	69.0%	63.0%	66.1%
Low educational standards	48.9%	45.9%	49.6%	51.1%
Crime on campus	45.5%	50.8%	47.2%	39.0%
Political bias in the classroom	37.5%	34.4%	31.1%	45.5%
Too much focus on college athletics	36.3%	39.1%	35.7%	34.2%
Incompetent professors	34.6%	35.7%	31.8%	35.9%
Lack of support for a diverse student population	30.2%	39.6%	28.4%	22.6%

Our survey gets at perceptions of political bias in multiple ways, as we describe below. But we note in passing that although a significant minority of Americans characterize bias as a very serious problem, 40.4 percent say that the term “professional” describes college and university professors very well, with 54.9 percent saying the term describes professors somewhat well. Only 12.5 percent say the term “radical” describes professors very well, and only 8.9 percent say the same for the term “dangerous.”

**PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO DESCRIBE PROFESSORS AS:**

“Dangerous” and “radical”	3.6%
“Honest” and “professional”	19.4%
“Dangerous” or “radical”	15.4%
“Honest” or “professional”	47.3%

### VIEWS OF TENURE AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Only 55 percent of the respondents in our survey say they’ve heard of tenure for professors before. Those who had not were read a short definition.<sup>11</sup> We find this modest level of public knowledge about tenure striking; it suggests, among other things, that there is considerable room for partisan framing of the issue.

Our survey reveals that Americans are generally supportive of the tenure system. 76.6 percent of respondents agree that tenure is a good way to reward accomplished professors,<sup>12</sup> and 69.7 percent agree that tenure is essential so that professors can teach, research, and write without having to worry about being fired if some people disagree with their conclusions. At the same time, about 80.7 percent think that tenure sometimes protects incompetent faculty, while 57.9 percent believe that giving professors tenure takes away their incentive to work hard. Given these concerns, only about 17.9 percent of respondents say the tenure system should remain as it is, while 68.7 percent say it

---

<sup>11</sup> The definition reads as follows: “Let me give you a definition of tenure. In most American colleges and universities, professors are eligible for permanent or continuous appointments after a probationary period of about seven years. These appointments are called tenure, and once tenure is granted, professors usually can be dismissed only for serious misconduct or incompetence.”

<sup>12</sup> Here and throughout on agree/disagree items we aggregate strongly agree and somewhat agree into a category of agreement, and somewhat disagree and strongly disagree into a category of disagreement.

should be modified but not eliminated. Only 13.3 percent believe that tenure should be phased out altogether.

Although generally supportive of tenure, most Americans believe it should not protect professors who hold extreme views.<sup>13</sup> More than half of respondents – 61.5 percent – say it is acceptable for professors who oppose the war in Iraq to express anti-war views in the classroom, but 62.6 percent say that public universities should be able to dismiss professors who join radical political organizations like the communist party, and 57 percent agree that “there’s no room in the university for professors who defend the actions of Islamic militants.”

<b>VIEWS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM:</b>				
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Professors who oppose the war in Iraq should be allowed to express anti-war views in the classroom	29.0%	32.5%	14.4%	24.1%
Public universities should be able to dismiss professors who join radical political organizations like the communist party	44.9%	17.7%	18.4%	19.0%
There's no room in the university for professors who defend the actions of Islamic militants	39.0%	18.0%	21.8%	22.2%
The best way to ensure academic excellence is to make sure politicians don't interfere with research in colleges and universities	50.1%	30.3%	13.6%	6.0%
The government should control what gets taught in the college classroom	6.7%	13.9%	18.0%	61.4%

<sup>13</sup> For some interesting historical comparisons on these and other items, see Randy Swing, 1998. “Public Opinion and Images of the American Professoriate.” *Innovative Higher Education* 23:85-101.

There is little support, however, for campaigns to legislate what professors should study or teach. 80.4 percent of respondents say the best way to ensure academic excellence is to make sure politicians don't interfere with research in colleges and universities, while 79.4 percent register disagreement with the idea that government should control what gets taught in the college classroom.

To gain leverage on how these views are distributed across the population, we examined how respondents' views on five academic freedom and tenure questions clustered together, using a technique called latent class analysis.<sup>14</sup> This procedure reveals that Americans cluster into three distinct groups on this topic. The largest group, comprising about 70 percent of Americans, we call the "no funny business" group. Respondents in this cluster tend to strongly oppose interference by politicians into research as well as government attempts to legislate what gets taught in the college classroom, and most also favor tenure in part so that professors don't have to worry about getting fired if people disagree with them. But they simultaneously believe that public universities should be able to fire communists and that professors must not defend Islamic militants, and they are lukewarm on the idea of professors voicing anti-war views in the classroom.

Those in the "no funny business" group can be found across the social landscape, but this orientation is somewhat more common among those who have a high school diploma alone or only some college (and is less common among those lacking a high school diploma or having a college degree or higher); is more common among those aged 30 and up than among younger adults; is somewhat more common among men than

---

<sup>14</sup> Latent class analysis is described in our methodological appendix.

women; and is more common among Republicans and conservatives than among Democrats, liberals, or independents.

<b>POSITIONS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM, BY IDEOLOGY</b>				
	Total	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
“No funny business” cluster	70.0%	64.0%	73.6%	75.7%
“No restrictions” cluster	22.8%	29.0%	23.2%	18.6%
Undecided	7.2%	6.9%	3.2%	5.7%

The second cluster of respondents we call the “no restrictions” group. This group comprises about 22.8 percent of the population. These respondents also oppose political interference with research and government control over the content of college education, and are somewhat stronger than the “no funny business” group in their support for tenure on the grounds that professors shouldn’t have to worry about being fired for controversial views. But they are also staunch supporters of the right of professors to speak out against the war, strongly oppose firing professors who are communists, and think there should be room in the university even for those who defend Islamic militants. The “no restrictions” orientation is significantly more common among those who have been to college, among young adults, and among liberals and Democrats. 26.5 percent of Democrats fall into this cluster, as compared to 24.7 percent of independents and 14.8 percent of Republicans. 29 percent of those who describe themselves as liberal fall into this group, as compared to 18.6 percent of conservatives.

A much smaller cluster, comprising only about 7.2 percent of respondents, is basically undecided on these issues.



## WHAT IS HIGHER EDUCATION FOR?

Previous research shows that Americans recognize the importance of higher education. As other studies have also done, our study asked respondents what they see as the primary aim of a college or university education. Consistent with previous research, we find that 67.6 percent say the primary aim is to teach students skills they can use in their careers, while 26.3 percent say it is to teach students to think critically. Only 6 percent say the aim is to teach students about great works of literature, art, music, and philosophy.

We found relatively few differences in answers to this question by age, sex, party affiliation or ideology, or other standard variables, but differences by education are dramatic. 52 percent of those with a college degree or higher say the primary aim of a college education should be to teach students to think critically, whereas this is true for only 11.8 percent of those without a high school diploma, 13.1 percent of those with a high school diploma, and 26.8 percent of those with some college but no degree.

Views of the aim of a college education are tied to views of academic freedom. 41.1 percent of those in the “no restrictions” cluster think students should be taught to think critically, as opposed to 22.6 percent of those in the “no funny business” cluster.

## EXPLANATIONS FOR GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MATH AND SCIENCE FIELDS

As mentioned above, a controversial issue for the professoriate over the past year has been the question of what explains differences in the ratio of women to men in different academic fields. Harvard President Lawrence Summers’s remarks on this topic before a

meeting of the National Bureau of Economic Research in January 2005 set off a chain of events leading to the vote of lack of confidence in him. Given that this is such a hot button issue, we included a question on this topic in our survey. Respondents were told that “In many math, science, and engineering fields there are more male professors than female professors.” We then asked if respondents thought these differences are mainly because of discrimination, mainly because of differences in interest between men and women, or mainly because of differences in ability. The overwhelming majority of respondents – 74.6 percent – believe the underrepresentation of women in math and science fields is best explained by differences in interest. Only 9.9 percent of respondents say that differences in ability between men and women account for the underrepresentation of women in math and science fields, while 15.5 percent point to discrimination as the culprit.

Surprisingly, there are few differences between men and women in their responses to this question. There are differences by education, however. Only 4.7 percent of those with college degrees or higher cite differences in ability as the key explanatory factor, as compared to 16.5 percent of those with less than a high school diploma, 12 percent of those with a high school diploma alone, and 8.2 percent of those with some college. In general, the more educated a respondent, the more likely she or he is to cite differences in interest as explaining the differential representation of men and women in math and science fields. In terms of age, the elderly are the most likely to cite discrimination as the key explanatory factor, probably reflecting different life experiences. Responses to this question also vary by political ideology, with 21.9 percent of liberals citing discrimination, as compared to 9 percent of conservatives.

## PERCEPTIONS OF LIBERAL BIAS REEXAMINED

In addition to asking respondents whether they thought political bias in the classroom was a serious problem, our survey included a number of questions on perceptions of the university environment. The overall finding from this series of questions is that a significant number of Americans look askance on the current culture of academe. On the one hand, the majority of respondents find American colleges and universities to be places where students are accorded respect by their professors, regardless of their politics. 71.5 percent of respondents agree that most professors are respectful when students voice political opinions that differ from their own, 80.8 percent agree that American colleges and universities welcome students of faith – despite the fact that 68.7 percent of respondents describe the typical professor as only somewhat religious, with 27.4 percent describing the typical professor as not religious at all – and 57.1 percent say the political views of college and university professors do not affect how well they do the job. On the other hand, many Americans are of the view that America’s college and university professors are beholden to a liberal political agenda. 68.2 percent agree that colleges and universities tend to favor professors who hold liberal social and political views; 61.8 percent agree that too many professors are distracted by disputes over issues like sexual harassment and the politics of ethnic groups; and 52.4 percent say that too much of the research conducted by professors is irrelevant to the needs of society. Not surprisingly, given the importance Americans place on a college education, they are also of the view that professors should spend more of their time in the classroom. 60 percent say that professors should spend more time teaching and less time doing research.

To get a sense for how these views are distributed across the population, we again conducted a latent class analysis. We did so using five variables that get at perceptions of bias – in particular, liberal bias – in academe: whether political bias is mentioned as a very significant problem facing higher education (the variable analyzed earlier), whether the term “radical” is used to characterize professors, whether respondents feel that professors are disrespectful of students who hold different political views, whether the academy is seen as a place where liberal professors are advantaged, and whether respondents feel that professors are too distracted by disputes over identity politics. We again found there to be three clusters of respondents.

We call the first cluster the “unconcerned.” Respondents in this cluster comprise about 56 percent of the population. Only 2.1 percent of those in the “unconcerned” cluster say the word “radical” describes the typical college professor very well, 89.1 percent believe that professors do show respect toward students with differing political views, and only 14.4 percent say that bias in the classroom is a very serious problem facing higher education. About 54 percent of them believe that professors with liberal social and political views are favored in academe, and about 53 percent of them disagree that professors are too concerned with identity politics. Respondents at the highest end of the education spectrum – those with a college degree or higher – can be found in this cluster about one and a half times as frequently as those with less than a high school diploma, with increasing proportions of the “unconcerned” the higher the level of educational attainment. There is also significant variation by age. 66.9 percent of those aged 18-24 can be classified as unconcerned with the problem of bias in the academy, as compared to 38.5 percent of those 65 and older. Differences between Democrats and

Republicans on this cluster of variables are significant, with 61.5 percent of Democrats falling into the cluster as compared to 48.2 percent of Republicans. Partisan differences parallel those by ideology: 46.3 percent of conservatives, 64.2 percent of moderates, and 66.6 percent of liberals are unconcerned with bias in the academy.

<b>RESPONDENTS "CRITICAL" OF POLITICAL BIAS IN THE ACADEMY</b>			
		Total number in sample	Percent critical of political bias
Republicans	Conservative	160	47.5%
	Moderate	38	47.4%
	Liberal	39	15.4%
Independents	Conservative	100	43.0%
	Moderate	132	18.2%
	Liberal	106	27.4%
Democrats	Conservative	70	37.1%
	Moderate	102	19.6%
	Liberal	163	23.3%

The second cluster we call the “critical.” The “critical” comprise about 30.3 percent of the respondents in our survey. About 91.6 percent of respondents in this cluster agree that professors with liberal views have an advantage in academe, and about 89.3 percent believe that professors are too distracted by identity politics. About 63.9 percent are of the view that professors are not respectful of students who hold differing political views, 78.5 percent believe bias in the academy to be a very serious problem, and about a third say the term “radical” *does* describe the typical professor very well. In general, respondents with lower levels of education are more likely to be critical about liberal bias than are respondents with higher levels of education. For example, 40.6

percent of those without a high school diploma can be classified as critical on the issue, as compared to 29.5 percent of those with a college degree or higher. Age also increases the likelihood a respondent will be concerned with liberal bias. 25.8 percent of those aged 18-24 fall into this cluster, as compared to 36.6 percent of those 65 and older. Party affiliation and political ideology are also important. 42.4 percent of Republicans fall into the “critical” cluster, as compared to 27.1 percent of independents and 25.1 percent of Democrats. As for ideology, 44.5 percent of conservatives can be classified as “critical,” whereas a still high 24.6 percent of self-identified liberals can be as well.

About 13.7 percent of respondents don’t have clearly defined views on this issue, and these respondents are most commonly found at the lower levels of educational attainment. 20.3 percent of respondents with a high school diploma or less don’t have clearly defined views on liberal bias, as compared to just 7.7 percent of those with a college degree or higher.

## CONCLUSIONS

Does concern about liberal bias in the academy represent a tempest in a teapot in the sense that few Americans subscribe to the views of David Horowitz and other conservative critics? Our finding is that there is more support for such views than might otherwise be imagined, and less consensus about U.S. higher education than previous research has suggested. In his 1999 report, *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K-12*, John Immerwahr described America’s colleges and universities as “Teflon-coated.” By this he meant that while criticisms might sometimes be directed at them, their status as a valued social resource is such that

those criticisms tend not to stick as far as American public opinion is concerned. We think some of the Teflon has worn off.<sup>15</sup> To recap:

- Confidence in U.S. higher education is reasonably high, but is lowest among the elderly, those with low levels of educational attainment, conservatives and Republicans.
- The occupational prestige of professors is reasonably high, although there appears to be a narrowing prestige gap between professors and other kinds of educators, perhaps reflecting continuation of a long-term trend. A large percentage of Americans do not know how much college and university professors are paid, but among those who think they do, most believe current pay levels are about right. The occupational prestige of professors is lowest among respondents with low levels of educational attainment, conservatives, and Republicans.
- Most Americans say the biggest problem facing higher education is high tuition costs. Less than 10 percent of Americans say that political bias in the classroom is the biggest problem facing higher education. However, more than a third of Americans say it is a very serious problem. This view is most common among conservatives and Republicans.
- Although many Americans have not heard of tenure, those who have tend to be relatively supportive of it, while those who have not express similar levels

---

<sup>15</sup> While taking the view that higher education remained largely immune to criticism, Immerwahr in fact pointed to certain “signs of erosion of higher education’s relatively stronger position [than K-12] in the public’s eyes” (10), noting that many business leaders were critical of higher education and posing as a question for future research: “If business leaders, who are more knowledgeable, are also more critical of higher education, is this a harbinger of the future? Will other groups also become more critical as they learn more about higher education?” (12).

of support when read a short definition. Most Americans, however, are sensitive to potential abuses of tenure. Nearly 60 percent say that professors who oppose the war in Iraq should be able to speak out in the classroom – probably reflecting anti-war sentiment in the country – but about the same percentage believe tenure should not be used to protect communists or professors who defend the actions of Islamic militants. At the same time, about 80 percent of Americans oppose government efforts to legislate what gets taught in the classroom. Those with lower levels of educational attainment, conservatives, and Republicans are more likely to support restrictions on academic freedom.

- Most Americans think the aim of a college education is to build career skills, not to learn critical thinking or the classics.
- Most Americans believe that differences in interest between men and women – not differences in aptitude or discrimination – explain the underrepresentation of women in math, science, and engineering.
- Finally, while the majority of Americans believe that college and university professors on the whole are respectful of students with differing political views, a significant minority believe that colleges and universities are havens for liberals and “radicals,” that conservative professors do not get a fair shake, and that professors are too distracted by identity politics. This set of views is more common among the elderly, those with low levels of educational attainment, conservatives, and Republicans.



## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX – ON LATENT CLASS ANALYSIS

All estimation of latent classes was performed with the software program LatentGold 4.0. Closely related to traditional factor analysis, latent class analysis is a model-based alternative to ad hoc clustering techniques. The basic idea underlying any type of latent class model is that a set of  $L$  manifest variables – the observed data – represents a mixture of some set  $C$  of underlying and unseen distributions; the probability of obtaining response pattern  $\mathbf{y}$  from all possible patterns  $\mathbf{Y}$ ,  $P(\mathbf{Y} = \mathbf{y})$ , is a weighted average of the  $C$  class-specific probabilities  $P(\mathbf{Y} = \mathbf{y} / X = x)$ . In addition, in most latent class models, the  $L$  manifest variables are assumed to exhibit the property of local independence as in classical factor analysis. The model assumes that there is no association among indicators within class, though it is possible to relax this assumption of local independence where appropriate. Equation 1 brings these ideas together in a formula for the probability that the indicators  $\mathbf{Y}$  conform to a specific response pattern  $\mathbf{y}$  in a particular sample given the model.

### Equation 1

$$P(\mathbf{Y} = \mathbf{y}) = \sum_{x=1}^C P(X = x) \prod_{l=1}^L P(Y_l = y_l | X = x)$$

The goal of the kind of cluster analysis we perform here is to assign individuals to latent classes. This can be done by means of Bayes rule to assign the probability of belonging to latent class  $x$ , which is often referred to as posterior membership probability. In essence, we can assign a probability of membership in the  $C$  clusters based on the information contained in the distribution of the indicator variables.

**Equation 2**

$$P(X = x | \mathbf{Y} = \mathbf{y}) = \frac{P(X = x)P(\mathbf{Y} = \mathbf{y} | X = x)}{P(\mathbf{Y} = \mathbf{y})}$$

Once posterior probabilities of class membership have been assigned, it is typical to assign individuals to classes based on modal posterior probability of group membership. These modal probabilities then can also serve as indexes of measurement quality.

Among the most attractive features of latent class analysis clustering is the use of Maximum Likelihood based estimation methods that allow for tests of the best number of clusters to estimate. This feature removes one of the ad hoc elements of traditional clustering algorithms. There are three basic approaches to assessing the appropriate number of clusters. The first is the model chi-square, a likelihood ratio chi-square statistic that behaves badly when too many cells in the larger table contain no data points. The second is to use information criteria like the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) or Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) that are derived from the maximum likelihood estimates. The third is to use some form of parametric bootstrapping procedure to compare models. We rely primarily on the BIC to determine the number of clusters, but also incorporate information from the model chi-square statistic based on the distributions of the data across cells. The final models in each case represent the model with the lowest BIC and with residual correlations among the indicators in the acceptable range to assume conditional independence. In both cases, three variables fit the data better than other alternatives. In the academic freedom model a residual association was

included for the indicators “tenure is important so professors don’t have to worry about being fired for having controversial views” and “no government interference with colleges and universities.” In the political bias model, a residual association was included for the indicators for “radical” and for “political bias is a very significant problem.” In both cases these residual associations improved model fit without substantially changing the profiles of the groups.

For more information on latent class analysis, see Paul Lazarsfeld and Neil Henry, 1968. *Latent Structure Analysis*. New York: Houghton Mifflin; Clifford Clogg and Leo Goodman, 1985. “Simultaneous Latent Structural Analysis in Several Groups.” Pp. 81-110 in *Sociological Methodology*, Nancy Tuma, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Jeroen Vermunt and Jay Magidson, 2003. “Latent Class Models for Classification.” *Computational Statistics and Data Analysis* 41:531-7.