

**Evaluating Claims of Bias In Academia**

**A Comment on Klein and Western's "How Many Democrats per Republican at UC-Berkeley and Stanford?"**

Ethan B. Cohen-Cole

Steven N. Durlauf

University of Wisconsin at Madison

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**Abstract**

In a recent paper, Klein and Western (2004) provide evidence on the political affiliations of faculty at UC Berkeley and Stanford, finding that Democrats far outnumber Republicans. This is an important contribution to debates about political beliefs in academia due to the effort to systematically these authors make to quantify these beliefs via party registration. In this comment, we make two arguments. First, we argue that the evidence presented by Klein and Western is less suggestive of ideological lopsidedness than they claim. This is so both because party affiliation is not informative about the intensity or degree of moderation or extremism of beliefs and because the incompleteness of the party identification strategy they employ is compatible with many faculty being independent or apathetic. Further, we argue that there are good a priori reasons to regard whatever degree of lopsidedness is present as due to self-selection, not hostility towards conservatives.

Ethan B. Cohen-Cole  
Department of Economics  
University of Wisconsin  
1180 Observatory Drive  
Madison, WI  
53706-1393  
ebcohencole@wisc.edu

Steven N. Durlauf  
Department of Economics  
University of Wisconsin  
1180 Observatory Drive  
Madison, WI  
53706-1393  
sdurlauf@ssc.wisc.edu

## 1. Introduction

In their 2004 article “*How Many Democrats per Republican at UC-Berkeley and Stanford? Voter Registration Data Across 23 Academic Departments*”, Daniel Klein and Andrew Western develop evidence and analysis of political affiliations in academia. Specifically, they compare professor names in 23 departments at Berkeley and Stanford with compiled political registration information in seven surrounding counties. With their matching methodology,<sup>1</sup> they find information on 1005 professors out of 1497 investigated. For these professors, party affiliation is overwhelmingly Democratic. Based on this evidence, Klein and Western make a number of general claims concerning academia. First, they argue that this evidence support general claims of “ideological lopsidedness in academia”. Second, they argue that this lopsidedness has a significant effect on students since academia is a “major part of political culture and it has a deep influence on students understanding of the world and of themselves.” Third, they suggest that the observed disparities in political affiliation affect hiring practices and harm conservative academics, so much so that they express support for changes in hiring practices.

Klein and Western provide a valuable service by collecting and making publicly available data on political affiliations of faculty; as they recognize, such work is critical in conducting scientific analyses of politics and academia. In the spirit of their exercise, our comment is designed to further the scholarly evaluation of political issues in academia. We question two aspects of their analysis. First, we argue that the degree of academic lopsidedness at UC Berkeley and Stanford is not as large as they suggest. Second, we argue that their findings do not suggest that either campus is hostile to conservative faculty. Of course, our arguments do not resolve the complex issues that have been raised. Our goal is simply to take another step in understanding a complicated set of questions.

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<sup>1</sup>Klein and Western place the surrounding countries into a hierarchy based on geographical distance. Then, proceeding county by county, they look for a name match with the given professor’s name, stopping when they find a match or continuing in the case of ambiguity.

Section 2 of this comment questions the extent to which Klein and Western's data in fact demonstrate ideological lopsidedness in academia. Section 3 discusses whether, even if this lopsidedness exists, it is evidence of a hostile environment for conservative academics. Section 4 compares claims about discrimination against conservatives to claims of discrimination against African Americans. Section 5 draws conclusions.

## **2. How lopsided is the professoriate?**

While one can quibble with aspects of their measurement of faculty party affiliations, e.g. the failure to account for academics at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, in describing the lack of intellectual diversity there, our goal is to evaluate the interpretations that the authors make given their findings. Hence, we take the findings of Klein and Western study as reported. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that the findings are not that informative about the distribution of political beliefs on campuses either for the two schools studied or more generally.

That being said, Klein and Western may be criticized for how they map their data into more general conclusions about the political views of the professorate. A first problem is that the use of the Democrat/Republican dichotomy is quite inadequate as a characterization of their political affiliation findings. For example, binary party affiliation comparisons ignore nontrivial numbers of faculty who have rejected both affiliations. For UC Berkeley 10.3% of the faculty are categorized as either nonpartisan or declined to state; for Stanford, 12.6% have this designation. Such faculty obviously matter for student experiences. Further, for 21.6% of the UC Berkeley faculty and 24% of the Stanford faculty party affiliations could not be identified. It is important to note that based on the procedure by which Klein and Western allocated faculty to parties, less than 50% of the faculty whose affiliations they attempt to uncover are in fact identified as Democrats. Hence, the extent to which one concludes that student exposure is greatly lopsided depends on how one allocates those faculty members whose affiliations could not be ascertained; in other words, this depends on a researcher's prior beliefs.

Klein and Western might argue that there is no good reason to believe that the party affiliations of those faculty members for whom they could not make a determination are different from those affiliations they could determine. But we see little reason why this is so; one can easily conceive of reasons that link the political views of faculty to the fact that identification of their affiliations failed. One reason, of course, is that the affiliations of many of the faculty could not be identified is that the faculty fail to register out of political apathy. Another reason is presumably that many of unregistered faculty are not citizens; and we see no sensible way to infer how these professors would register were they citizens. From the partial identification perspective (cf. Manski (2003)), all one can say is that the percentage of Democrats at UC Berkeley lies between 49.0% and 82.3%, the percentage of Republicans lies between 5.0% and 37.3% and the percentage of nonpartisan/declined to state lies between 10.5% and 42.8%; for Stanford the percentage of Democrats lies between 46.8% and 79.1%, the percentage of Republicans lie between 6.1% and 38.4% and the percentage of nonpartisan/decline to state lies between 12.6% and 45.9%. Any stronger claims require prior information that Klein and Western do not explicitly articulate and which would need to be scrutinized before accepting.

A second problem with Klein and Western's numbers is that they contain limited information about the actual political beliefs of faculty, since party affiliation reflects neither degrees of liberalism or conservatism, nor intensity of belief. This is an intrinsic problem with binary data of the type that they collect. The fact that someone is registered as a Democrat does not reveal how close to the center he is. Similarly, party affiliation tells us nothing about how important politics is to a person. The use of binary affiliation also suffers from the fact that it reduces political beliefs to a single dimension. Are academics who register Republican generally closer to social conservatives or libertarians? Are scientists who register Democratic doing so because of their views on redistribution or because of the relative strength of Democratic opposition to the teaching of creationism? These types of concerns are magnified when one recognizes that party affiliations are somewhat "sticky" in the sense that individuals do not continuously update them in response to changes in their political views, the phenomenon of Reagan Democrats being a classic example of this.

Third, it is far from clear that one can generalize from two schools to conclude that there is lopsidedness in party affiliations through academia. At one level, it is easy to see that choice of which campuses to study matters. If the authors had, for example, made George Mason their choice we suspect the answers would have been quite different. Hence, an argument needs to be made that these campuses are representative.

What rationale is given that the UC Berkeley and Stanford cases may be extrapolated to the rest of the country? Klein and Western argue (pg. 24) that

“we doubt geography has very much to do with the intellectual character of academics and researchers. By sorting, training, and professional immersion they identify intellectually primarily with their *discipline*, not their institution or their locale...”

But this argument has little bearing on the generalizability question. The issue is not whether there is a causal relationship between geography and political views, but rather whether there is self-selection of democrats to these campuses, as opposed to others. If liberals prefer more liberal communities and conservatives prefer more conservative communities, then one cannot extrapolate from the two campuses.

While it is possible that additional research will show that lopsidedness does indeed exist in academia, we conclude that Klein and Western have failed to make the case that there is extreme ideological lopsidedness among college professors.

### **3. Causality**

In this section, we move from an evaluation of the Klein and Western facts to an evaluation of how one may interpret them. Specifically, we consider the question of whether findings of political lopsidedness may be used to infer that conservatives are somehow mistreated in academia. Our view is that there is little basis for concluding from Klein and Western that poor treatment of conservatives occurs in academia, specifically with regards to hiring. The major difficulty that exists in drawing any inferences from the preponderance of liberals in academia is that a preponderance of one type of beliefs says nothing about its causes.

The obvious problem with drawing causal inferences is the possibility of self-selection of liberals into academia. Intuitively, it is possible that liberals are more likely to choose academic careers than conservatives (compared to their overall presence in the population) for reasons that have nothing to do with the discriminatory treatment of liberals versus conservatives in academia. If this in fact happens, then Klein and Western's party affiliation findings may be nothing more than an epiphenomenon. Are there reasons why academia would tend to attract liberals that are independent of any mistreatment of conservatives? One can imagine any number of arguments why this might be so. For example, academics may have a tendency to enjoy theory at the expense of the real world. Or there may be a reflection of demographics; for example, Jews are disproportionately found among professors and Jews tend to be liberal.

Klein and Western address this issue to some extent with the suggestion that the disproportionate number of liberal graduate students is the consequence of a liberal professoriate; Robert George, a Professor of Political Science at Princeton University is quoted claiming that hostility towards conservatives affects graduate school enrollments. George's assertion is, in our judgment, implausible as a general explanation of the political beliefs of graduate students. In essence the claim is that conservative students are discouraged from entering academia because of their likely treatment. But what treatment could this refer to? If the question is finding an advisor, the claim presupposes a set of faculty preferences that, for research oriented departments, we believe do not exist. Research economists, in our experience, have little interest in the political views of graduate students, but overwhelming interest in their ability. Whether this is due to the need for talented research assistants, a desire to train successful scholars, etc. we cannot say.

Similarly, we do not believe that the systematic lopsidedness in political affiliations that Klein and Western find across departments can be attributed to discrimination or other forms of mistreatment of conservative academics by their peers. The implausibility of the general claim of mistreatment of conservatives is most persuasive, we believe, in the natural sciences. To make a serious claim that Berkeley and Stanford's biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics departments are all guilty of discrimination in the treatment of conservatives assumes that these faculties, ranked

among the best in the world, are able to perpetuate this status at the same time that they are engaged in discrimination. Further, it assumes that preferences over politics will dominate the desire for prestige.

Is there a way to disassociate self-selection effects from discrimination? Some indication can be developed if one accepts our argument that there are certain fields where the discrimination claim is a priori implausible. In our judgment, the claim is particularly implausible for physics. It is difficult to see how a physics department could discriminate in admissions, since information on the political views of applicants is not discernable from applications. And the subject matter of the discipline hardly lends itself to political debates. Hence, it is useful to see how the departments in the Klein sample differ with respect to the physics departments at the two universities (for which Klein and Western find Democrat/Republican affiliations of 28 to 2 and 14 to 3 for UC Berkeley and Stanford respectively).

We present such a calculation in Figures 1 and 2.<sup>2</sup> As the Figures indicate, there is relatively little difference between the percentages of democrats in the physics departments at Berkeley and Stanford and the remainder of the departments. If one accepts our view that discrimination by physics departments, either towards graduate students or professors, is implausible, this illustrates the fragility of claims about systematic bias in academia. To be clear, this finding could be consistent with discrimination occurring in some departments, but would necessarily rely on differences of 10% or so between departments which amount to two or so faculty members in a typical department. Using a benchmark such as the physics department, our belief is that the liberal propensity of academia in general swamps differences across fields. And if we are correct that the liberal propensity in physics has little to do with discrimination and hostility, then our analysis provides a prima facie case against these claims.

#### **4. Discussion**

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<sup>2</sup>If we had chosen mathematics or chemistry, the figures would be qualitatively similar.

To see the difficulties of extrapolating the findings of Klein and Western to substantive claims about the causes and consequences of lopsided party affiliations, consider how analogous evidence might be interpreted for racial disparities. Suppose (as we believe is in fact true) that the percentages of African Americans are far below their corresponding population percentages in the same departments these authors have surveyed. The substantive claims made about Republicans in academia can all be applied to the case of African Americans. If one explains the absence of African Americans in UC Berkeley and Stanford departments, one would most plausibly (in our view) attribute this to underrepresentation in the graduate student pool. Does this underrepresentation derive from discrimination, or from other factors? We believe it is the latter. We would conjecture that inequalities in human capital acquisition comparing African Americans to others before college have persistent consequences for educational attainment in college and graduate school; this sort of explanation is suggested by Neal and Johnson (1996) who find that this matters in understanding labor market inequality.

One possible answer to our analogy is that, supposing African American students are underrepresented among graduate students due to educational deficiencies, no such claim can be made to explain the absence of conservatives. But it is hardly inconceivable that if one stratifies undergraduates by educational attainment, that there is a correlation between academic success and liberal views. Of course, this says nothing about causality. Most likely, it means nothing more than that those preferences or other personality traits that are conducive to interest in academics tend to be associated with liberal political views, which is the same issue we have raised with respect to self-selection of liberals into academia. Arguments like this are easy to identify in other contexts. To give one example, Sulloway (1996) associates the ability to make scientific leaps with one's place in the birth order. Sulloway also argues that later born children tend to be more liberal than first born children. Putting these together, one has a correlation between academic attainment and political views that has nothing to do with discrimination.

As our admittedly fanciful example makes clear, a correlation between academic success or talent and liberal political views hardly validates the liberal view. Our argument is that the correlation is most likely generated by a common latent factor. We

suspect that the professoriate was much more sympathetic to Marxism in the postwar period than the population at large, which shows that academic attainment can be associated with profound political mistakes. Regardless of why a correlation exists, what matters is that one cannot conclude from the Klein and Western data that conservatives are discriminated against in academia any more than one can conclude from the dearth of blacks in academia that racial discrimination exists.

It is important to note that one similarly could not prove the absence of discrimination in academia from this data, and we make no such claim. Our emphasis is that the evidence presented is inadequate to make substantive claims about bias. And we would go so far as to argue that the burden of proof should be on those who assert discrimination exists against conservatives, given the self-selection evidence embedded in the comparison with physics.

## **5. Conclusions**

Klein and Western deserve congratulations for their hard work in accumulating data on the political beliefs of academics. The construction of data sets is an underappreciated public service to scholars. However, we believe that these data do not speak to issues of discrimination, lack of intellectual diversity on campus, etc. In the language of econometrics, substantive claims about hostility to conservatives are not identified by the data that Klein and Western have accumulated.

To be clear, we have no doubt that there are numerous cases of professors mixing politics with teaching. We regard this as deplorable (although we can imagine exceptional cases, such as an advocate for civil rights in a Southern university in the 1960's which would lead us to back off from an absolute condemnation.) But nothing in Klein and Western allows one to conclude that academia is generally hostile to conservatives.

## References

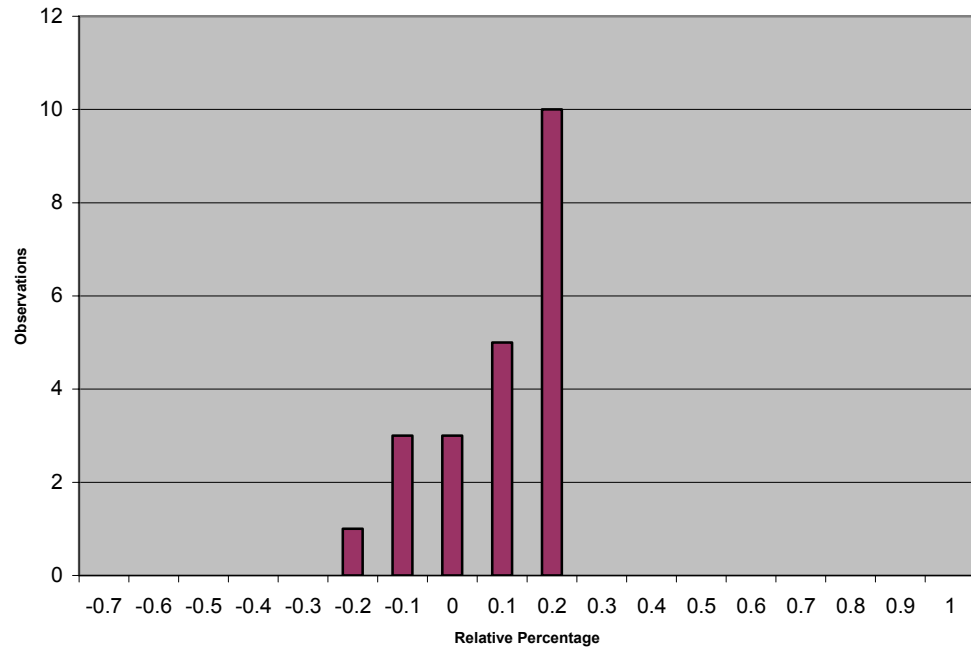
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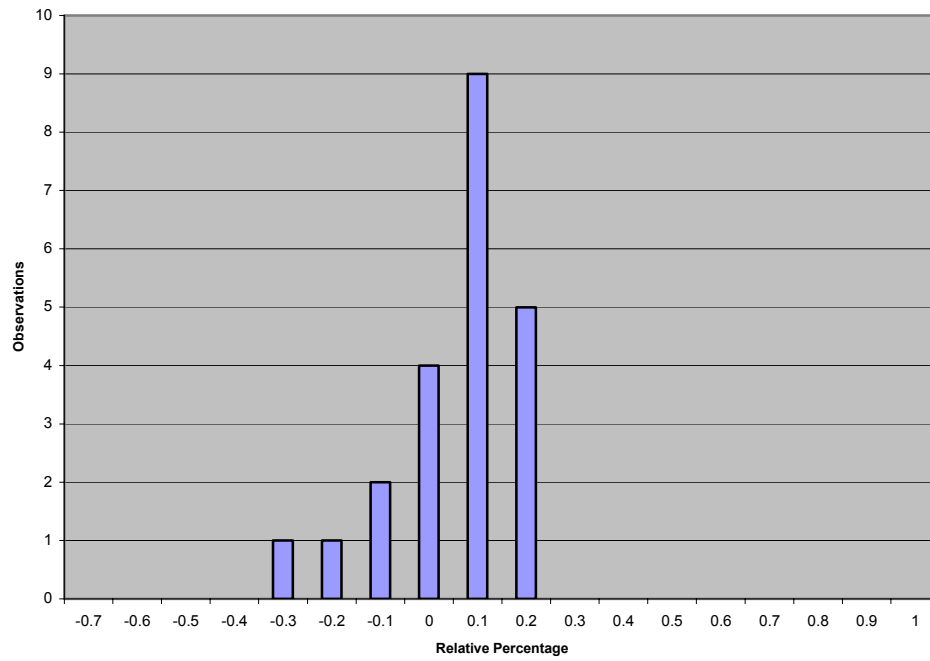
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**Figure 1: % of Democrats in Each Department (relative to Physics) (Stanford)**



We calculate the relative percentage of democrats as the percentage in a given department minus the percentage in the mathematics department at the same school. The histogram has 10 bins of 20% points each. All data from Klein and Western (2004)

**Figure 2: % of Democrats in Each Department (relative to Physics) (Berkeley)**



We calculate the relative percentage of democrats as the percentage in a given department minus the percentage in the mathematics department at the same school. The histogram has 10 bins of 20% points each. All data from Klein and Western (2004)