

# How Politically Diverse Are the Social Sciences and Humanities?

## Survey Evidence from Six Fields

by

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*Abstract:* In Spring 2003, a large-scale survey of American academics was conducted using academic association membership lists from six fields: Anthropology, Economics, History, Philosophy (political and legal), Political Science, and Sociology. This paper focuses on one question: *To which political party have the candidates you've voted for in the past ten years mostly belonged?* The question was answered by 96.4 percent of academic respondents. The results show that the faculty is heavily skewed towards voting Democratic. The most lopsided fields surveyed are Anthropology with a D to R ratio of 30.2 to 1, and Sociology with 28.0 to 1. The least lopsided is Economics with 3.0 to 1. After Economics, the least lopsided is Political Science with 6.7 to 1. The average of the six ratios by field is about 15 to 1. Our analysis and related research suggest that for the the social sciences and humanities overall, a “one-big-pool” ratio of 7 to 1 is a safe lower-bound estimate, and 8 to 1 or 9 to 1 are reasonable point estimate. Thus, the social sciences and humanities are dominated by Democrats. There is little ideological diversity. We discuss Stephen Balch’s “property rights” proposal to help remedy the situation.

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Survey Homepage: <http://lsb.scu.edu/~dklein/survey/survey.htm>

## **How Politically Diverse are the Social Sciences and Humanities? Survey Evidence from Six Fields**

In a Fall 2003 *New York Times* column entitled “Lonely Campus Voices,” David Brooks (2003) wrote about isolated conservatives at major universities such as Harvey Mansfield at Harvard, Alan Kors at Pennsylvania, and Robert George at Princeton. Brooks focused on their problem in advising students seeking an academic career. Kors is quoted: “One is desperate to see people of independent mind willing to enter the academic world. On the other hand, it is simply the case they will be entering hostile and discriminatory territory.”

During the past 35 years, Seymour Martin Lipset and his collaborators have generated a series of studies and reports on the political alignment in academia (Lipset 1972; Ladd and Lipset 1975; Lipset 1982; Lipset 1994). They have all found the social sciences and humanities to be preponderantly Democratic. In the past decade there has been little scholarly inquiry into the political orientation of faculty. A survey commissioned by the Brookings Institution and conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates surveyed members of professional associations in economics, history, political science, and sociology. They selected “2,004 academics who specialize in either modern American history, American government, social policy, or public policy” (Light 2001: 3). Across the four fields, a total of 550 responded. The D to R ratios were as follows: Economics 3.7 to 1; History 4.1 to 1; Political Science 4.8 to 1; Sociology 47.0 to 1 (Brookings 2001: 54). A smaller scale study found specialized ratios for Labor Economists 4.0 to 1 and for Public Economists 3.2 to 1 (Fuchs et al 1998: 1400).

There has been a growing complaint about “liberal bias” in cultural institutions generally. However, any compilation of personal testimony will be dismissed as the exaggerations of people with an axe to grind. To resolve the matter, the evidence must advance from personal testimony to actual measurement.

One recent measurement is a voter registration study done by the Center for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPC) and *The American Enterprise* magazine (Zinsmeister 2002). David Horowitz and Eli Lehrer (2002) describe the investigation of 32 leading colleges and universities: “We compiled lists of tenured or tenure-track professors of the Economics, English, History, Philosophy, Political Science, and Sociology departments . . . We compared these lists to the voter registration lists of the counties or states in which the colleges were located, and attempted to match individual names.” Overall, they found 1397 Democrats and 134 Republicans, a ratio of about 10 to 1.<sup>1</sup> They conclude: “While recognizing the limitations imposed on our study, we believe the figures recorded in this report make a *prima facie* case that there is . . . a grossly unbalanced, politically shaped selection process in the hiring of college faculty.”

CSPC and *The American Enterprise* are forwardly conservative organizations, and there was no independent control or certification of the data collection process. Thus there are concerns about the accuracy of CSPC’s research. However, CSPC’s basic findings receive an important verification by Daniel Klein and Andrew Western, who conducted a scholarly research study of voter registration of University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University (Klein and Western 2004). The Klein & Western study may be regarded as a careful “spot check” of CSPC’s work, and the finding is that, although not up to scholarly standards in thoroughness, documentation,

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<sup>1</sup> A graphic presentation of the CSPC results and related studies appears in Zinsmeister 2002.

and reporting, CSPC research appears to be perfectly fair and honest. CSPC's basic D to R ratios for Berkeley and Stanford were not biased.

However, even with full confidence in the data's integrity, there is a serious problem of incompleteness: CSPC's comprehensive faculty list contained 4255 names, so the 1397 identified as Democrats make only 33 percent. Only 36 percent of the comprehensive list could be identified as Democratic or Republican, the other 64 percent being absent from the voter rolls, unaffiliated, indeterminate because of multiple records, or registered to minor parties. In their study of UC-Berkeley and Stanford, Klein and Western identified 54 percent of the Berkeley and 53 percent of the Stanford faculty names to be either Democratic or Republican. One could well imagine, therefore, more faculty members voting Republican than is suggested by CSPC's finding of a 10 to 1 ratio.

Thus, voter registration data is certainly sufficient to establish extreme lopsidedness between Democrats and Republicans, but it is too incomplete to arrive with much confidence at estimates of the actual proportions.

The data presented here is based on an objective, large-scale survey of self-reported voting behavior. It puts the matter of political lopsidedness among faculty on a much more secure foundation.

## **Description of Our Data**

In Spring 2003 we surveyed U.S. members in six nation-wide social science and humanities associations:

American Anthropology Association

American Economics Association

American Historical Association  
American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy<sup>2</sup>  
American Political Science Association  
American Sociological Association

All six associations are non-partisan; the main benefits of membership are reduced fees to academic conferences and journal subscriptions. Although members are not a random sub-sample of the population of academics, we see no reason to believe that membership is particularly common among one political group rather than another.

An independent survey controller mailed out 5486 surveys, and 1678 were filled out and returned. Adjusting the denominator for PO returns, etc. the overall response rate was 30.9 percent. The response rate is low enough to warrant some caution in drawing conclusions from the survey results, but we are very much inclined to doubt that there is a significant response bias based on one's politics. At the Survey Homepage one may view a sample survey and documents explaining the methods, independent control, and certification of the survey results.<sup>3</sup>

The survey posed an unambiguous question about voting behavior:

To which political party have the candidates you've voted for in the past ten years mostly belonged?

Democratic       Green       Libertarian       Republican      \_\_\_\_\_  
other

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<sup>2</sup> The American Philosophical Association declined to sell us an address list, based on a general policy of not giving out addresses except for matters of special interest to philosophers.

<sup>3</sup> The Survey Homepage URL is <http://lsb.scu.edu/~dklein/survey/survey.htm>.

The response to this question does not depend on the respondent's party registration, where she is registered, or whether she is registered at present. These virtues are not shared by the voter registration methodology.

The present article is concerned with the current faculty at colleges and universities. We accordingly narrow the set of responses in two ways: by employment and by age. One question asked:

Pleased check your primary employment (if retired, kindly answer retrospectively):

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/>
academic	public sector	private sector	independent research	other

The percentages reporting<sup>4</sup> academic were Anthropology 73.1 percent, Economics 48.5 percent, History 71.4 percent, Philosophy 76.6 percent, Political Science 86.4 percent, and Sociology 74.9 percent. Our analysis is confined to the academics. As for age, we exclude respondents who by the end of 2003 (the year of the survey) were 71 years old or older; that is, we exclude those born 1932 or earlier. Association members of 71 have quite likely withdrawn from the classroom. After applying these two conditions, the number of respondents is 1029.

The voting-question results for this pool of academic respondents are shown in Table 1.

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<sup>4</sup> 42 respondents marked either public sector, private sector, or independent research, but we included them as academic based on their comments and answers to the two immediately ensuing questions, which are predicated on academic employment.

TABLE 1

*To which political party have the candidates you've voted for in the past ten years mostly belonged?*

	Frequency	Percent
Democratic	828	80.47
Republican	81	7.87
Green	16	1.55
Libertarian	12	1.17
Respondents checking more than one option		
Libertarian/Republican	1	0.10
Libertarian/Democratic	0	0.00
Green/Democratic	11	1.07
Green/Republican	0	0.00
Democratic/Republican	7	0.68
Other (w/o comment)	4	0.39
Diffuse (checked 3 or more)	14	1.36
Non-response	37	3.60
Do not/cannot vote	18	1.75
Total	1029	100

Scientifically, the most important aspect of these results is that 96.4 percent answered the question. Mindful of the usual caveats—possible non-randomness in membership and response—at least we know that almost all who filled out the survey answered the voting question.

The question asked for the party most voted for. 19 respondents spontaneously checked two parties (and 14 checked three or more parties). Of the 19 who checked two, only 7 checked Democratic and Republican. This strongly suggests that individuals who vote for the major parties align themselves with one or the other.

## Focusing on Democratic to Republican: Some Issues

Table 1 shows that our sample includes 16 Green voters (and 11 Green/Democratic voters) and 12 Libertarian voters (and 1 Libertarian/Republican voter). In this paper we focus on “the ratio” in academia, but one may well ask, “Ratio of what to what?” In particular, one way to go with our data would be to group Democratic and Green voters together as “Left” and Libertarian and Republican voters together as “Right.” We opt to *not* do that, instead focusing simply on Democratic to Republican, while providing a footnote on how the field ratios come out with the Left to Right formulation. Our reasons for focusing on D to R rather than Left to Right are threefold. First, with the Left to Right formulation the ratios come out a bit lower, but not much so, because the Green and Libertarian voters are so few. Second, there is a precedence of focusing on D to R in the both Lipset tradition of scholarship and in the voter registration work reference earlier.

Third, in addition to the voting question, the survey contained 18 questions about policy issues. Each of the 18 policy questions posited a specific government intervention and asked the respondent to check her degree of support or opposition. Analysis of the responses shows that the Democrats and Greens are very close in their thinking, so it would be appropriate to group them together. However, there is no comparable likeness between the Libertarians and Republicans. Especially on issues of the military and immigration, but also on drug policy, prostitution, and gambling, the Democrats are more like the Libertarians than the Republicans are. In general, the Libertarians are extreme in opposing government interventions; in fact, the Republicans are generally closer to the Democrats than they are to Libertarians. These facts argue against grouping the Libertarians with the Republicans.

## The Democratic to Republican Ratios

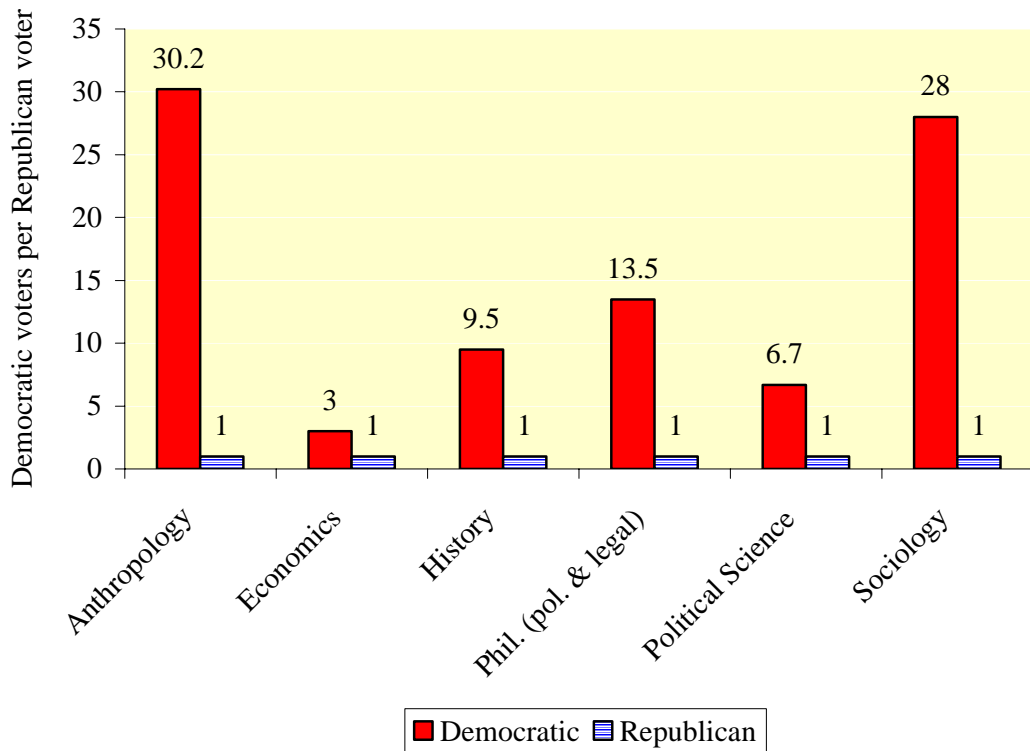
Narrowing the set of respondents to the 909 who answered the voting question either “Democratic” or “Republican,” we separate by discipline in Table 2. The D to R ratios are given visual manifestation in Figure 1.<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 2  
*D to R ratios of the associations studied*

	Persons voting D	Persons voting R	D to R Ratio
Anthropology	181	6	30.2 to 1
Economics	72	24	3.0 to 1
History	124	13	9.5 to 1
Philosophy (pol. and legal)	54	4	13.5 to 1
Pol. Science	173	26	6.7 to 1
Sociology	224	8	28.0 to 1
Ave of the six ratios			15.1 to 1

<sup>5</sup> Using instead Left to Right (where Left is Democratic, Green, and Democratic/Green and Right is Libertarian, Republican, and Libertarian/Republican), the ratios come out as follows: Anthropology 27 to 1, Economics 2.6 to 1, History 9.1 to 1, Philosophy (political and legal) 7.0 to 1, Political Science 6.0 to 1, Sociology 29.2 to 1. We caution against reading much into the large change in the Philosophy ratio: In that one case the association surveyed was specialized and small, and 4 Libertarians in the denominator generate a large change in the ratio.

**Figure 1**  
**D:R Ratio of Six Academic Associations**



**The One-Big-Pool Ratio for the Social Sciences and Humanities**

The 15.1 to 1 ratio computed by averaging the six ratios is an overstatement, as the average is wildly distorted upwards by Anthropology and Sociology. Even assuming complete and accurate data, there is no definitive ratio. It depends on the problem. For a student facing the problem of lack of ideological diversity, the ratio to consider will depend on her course plan (as well as the university she attends). Marginalization will be more extreme in some departments than others. Whether the campus community in general really hears non-Democratic voices will depend on how loud, organized, and tolerated they are.

It might make more sense to pool all the respondents together, without departmental division. Doing so brings down the ratio, because then the Republican professors are mathematically treated as evenly distributed among the departments, *maximizing each Republican person's dilution* of the Democrat's majority.

Here we construct an estimate of the D to R ratio by using the department size proportions at one large university, University of California-Berkeley, and another estimate using the department size proportions at one small university, Santa Clara University (where one of the present authors teaches). These two universities were selected arbitrarily. Neither of these exercises is based on D to R data about the specific university; in each case, the university is being used merely for its department size proportions.

In constructing the estimates we observe that, based on the data here and other evidence, no other discipline in the social sciences and humanities is nearly as balanced as Economics. We break the social-science/humanities faculty into two groups, economists and all others. We use an assumed D to R ratio for each of the two groups, and then calculate the one-big-pool ratio. For the economists, we use the 3.0 to 1 ratio as found in the data here. For all-others, we shall work with two assumptions: first, a lower-bound one-big-pool ratio of 8 to 1, and, second, a reasonable estimate of 10 to 1. The data here on the other disciplines as well as the voter registration studies support the reasonableness of the 10 to 1 assumption.

*Large university estimate:* For University of California-Berkeley's College of Letters and Science, we exclude 7 biological/physical/math departments and count 30 departments as constituting "the social sciences and humanities."<sup>6</sup> For that group, we

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<sup>6</sup> The 30 social-science/humanities departments are (in the Arts & Humanities division) Art History, Art Practice, Classics, Comparative Literature, East Asian Languages and Cultures, English, French,

found on the web a comprehensive Senate Faculty list (tenure-track only, excluding Emeriti faculty).<sup>7</sup> There were 508 non-econ-social-science/humanity faculty members, and 47 economics faculty members.<sup>8</sup> Under the all-other 8 to 1 assumption, we arrive at an overall D to R ratio for the social sciences and humanities of 7.1 to 1. Under the all-other 10 to 1 assumption, we arrive at an overall D to R ratio of 8.6 to 1.

*Small university estimate:* For Santa Clara University's College of Arts and Sciences plus the economics department (which is situated in the business school), we exclude 7 biological/physical/math departments and count 14 departments as constituting "the social sciences and humanities."<sup>9</sup> We counted the tenure-track professors (excluding Emeriti) as listed in the online telephone directory,<sup>10</sup> and found 139 non-econ-social-science/humanity faculty members, and 15 economics faculty members. Under the all-other 8 to 1 assumption, we arrive at an overall D to R ratio for the social sciences and humanities of 7.0 to 1. Under the all-other 10 to 1 assumption, we arrive at an overall D to R ratio of 8.4 to 1.

In doing empirical research, scholars should not overstate the level of exactitude or certainty achieved. Based on the investigations done here, we offer the following broad claim: ***In discussing the one-big-pool D to R ratio for the social sciences and humanities, 7 to 1 is safe lower bound estimate, and 8 to 1 or 9 to 1 are***

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German, Italian Studies, Music, Near Eastern Studies, Philosophy, Rhetoric, Scandinavian, Slavic Languages and Literatures, South and SE Asian Studies, Spanish and Portuguese, Theater Dance & Performing Arts, (and in the Social Sciences division) African American Studies, Anthropology, Demography, Economics, Ethnic Studies, Geography, History, Linguistics, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Women's Studies.

<sup>7</sup> Accessed August 15, 2004, at <http://ls.berkeley.edu/faculty/index.html>. The head of the document says: "Senate Faculty members, not including Emeriti or Professors of the Graduate School, as of July 1, 2002." The Senate Faculty list included a few adjunct professors, but all of them were in the biological/physical/math departments excluded here.

<sup>8</sup> In distinguishing the groups, for individuals with joint appointments, we went by first appointment listed.

<sup>9</sup> The 14 social-science/humanities departments are Anthropology and Sociology, Art and Art History, Classics, Communication, Economics, English, History, Modern Languages and Literatures, Music, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Religious Studies, and Theater/Dance.

<sup>10</sup> Accessed August 17, 2004: <http://www.scu.edu/directory/>.

*reasonable point estimates.* In our scientific judgment, the strongest basis upon which to doubt these estimates would be to suspect that the various academic associations surveyed are skewed toward Democratic voting, relative to the respective profession overall. We have no evidence on that matter, but we doubt that any such skew would be substantial. And the next most significant basis, again in our judgment, upon which to doubt these estimates would be to suspect response bias by one's politics (that is, that Democrats are more likely to return the survey than Republicans). The chief reason we doubt that these problems are real or significant is that the voter registration studies, free of both these problems, strongly support the range of estimates arrived at here.

### **Further Research**

The present paper concerns itself narrowly with the matter of the D to R ratio, based on the survey question concerning voting. The survey contained many other questions and the data will provide much more insight into the ideological profile of the social sciences and humanities. For example, the data show that the D to R ratio is somewhat higher for the younger half of the respondents, which means that lopsidedness has become more extreme over the past decades, and that, unless we believe that current professors occasionally mature into Republicans, it will become even more extreme in the future. Also, the survey asked whether the respondent is in academic employment, and the data clearly show the selection of Republicans out of academia. These and other findings will be reported in future papers. Entirely new investigations will be necessary to answer the question of whether, for any of the

individual fields, the national association is ideologically skewed relative to the entire population of the field it represents.

## **Discussion**

Campus culture proclaims discrimination a vice and diversity a virtue. For a long time, conservative and classical liberal commentators have contended that the “diversity” slogan really means that people of all races, ethnicities, and sexual-orientations may believe the dominant political ideology. Other ideologies are marginalized. Although we find the 10 to 1 ratio arrived at by voter registration methods to be possibly a bit of an overstatement, our results support the view that the social science and humanities faculty are pretty much a one-party system. Even if we think of a ratio of 6 to 1, clearly the non-Left points of view have been marginalized. In the U.S. population in general, Left and Right are roughly equal (1 to 1), like male and female among college students. A campus that had 6 males to 1 female would be universally recognized as very lopsided.

The *New York Times* article by David Brooks (2003) quotes Robert George about cultivating excellent conservative students:

“Here’s what I’m thinking when an outstanding kid comes in,” says George, of Princeton. “If the kid applies to one of the top graduate schools, he’s likely to be not admitted. Say he gets past the first screen. He’s going to face pressure to conform, or he’ll be the victim of discrimination. It’s a lot harder to hide than it was as an undergrad. ¶ But say he gets through. He’s

going to run into intense discrimination trying to find a job. But say he lands a tenure-track job. He'll run into even more intense discrimination because the establishment gets more concerned the closer you get to the golden ring. By the time you come up for tenure, you're in your mid-30's with a spouse and a couple of kids. It's the worst time to be uncertain about your career. Can I really take the responsibility of advising a kid to take these kinds of risks?"

Robert George's account shows how self-sorting exacerbates intellectual uniformity. The survey results suggest that George's account is entirely plausible. Even in Economics, the closest thing to a sanctuary for non-Left voices, with a Left to Right ratio of 3.0 to 1 the minority is decisively outvoted—always. Quite possibly, the academic environment, even in Economics, keeps the minority voices muffled and fearful. Being tolerated might depend on their avoiding aggressive intellectual and cultural competition.

Further, the 18 policy questions of the survey—not analyzed in the present paper—showed that there is rather little heterogeneity of opinion among Democrats, that the Green voters are essentially like Democrats. Thus the “tent” of the Left on campus is not a big tent, but a rather narrow tent.

The policy questions showed more significantly heterogeneity under the Republican tent. Moreover, the Libertarians have grounds for saying that most campus Republicans are not so different from Democrats. As small as the percentage of non-Left voices are, therefore, they become even smaller when separated into their own camps, such as, traditionalist, neo-conservative, and classical liberal/libertarian. Rather than Left v. Right, it makes more sense to view the campus landscape as composed of a very dominant Left—with some heterogeneity, of course, but less than

one might expect—and a heroic fringe of several different non-Left voices, each almost infinitesimal, who on certain issues join together but rarely sustain a faculty-led program.

The “one-party campus” is a problem irrespective of what one’s own views happen to be. The present authors wish to avoid any inference that they approach this issue as partisan Republicans or conservatives. In fact, neither has ever supported or voted for a conservative party, and both authors are strongly opposed to aspects of Republican politics—for example, U.S. military intervention. Even someone with Democratic views might be very disenchanted with the groupthink of campus politics today.

## **Reform proposal**

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently printed a major piece “The Antidote to Academic Orthodox” by Stephen H. Balch, the president of the National Association of Scholars (Balch 2004). Balch indicates the hazards of uniformity and explains how the faculty became so uniform:

[A]cademe’s characteristic mode of governance magnifies majoritarian power. As politics, colleges and universities bear more than a passing resemblance to federations of small, semi-autonomous republics—in this case the departments that make up their main subdivisions. Those generally hire, give tenure, and promote their teaching staff; fix major and graduate-studies requirements; admit and finance graduate students; award the doctorates that provide new practitioners with credentials; and help journeymen secure their initial jobs.

The bigger and more prestigious the institution, the less the department is likely to be subject to serious oversight from above. ¶ Little republics are subject to all the dangers memorably delineated by James Madison in *Federalist 10*. Being diminutive, they easily fall under the sway of compact majorities that persistently monopolize positions of power and grind down opponents. And because the admission of new academic citizens is subject to the majority's control, as time passes those majorities tend to expand. (Balch 2004: B8)

Balch seeks “devices that will nurture and protect a healthy degree of competition among intellectually diverse factions.” He suggests “procedural expedients that preserve minority influence—for example, proportional voting on curriculum and hiring decisions through which dissenters can determine a fractional share of the outcomes” (Balch 2004: B9). Balch is proposing, in effect, that factions have “property rights” that protect them from departmental democracy.

The property-rights approach will not be easy. The matter is one of education—faculty-student communion in the classroom—and that means that the minority faction must function within real departments, not as isolated institutes and centers that raise and spend their own money bringing in visiting researchers and organizing peer-to-peer conferences but with little classroom presence or weight in departmental personnel decisions. Departments, however, especially in the putative social sciences, strive for professional coherence and the minimization of what the British sociologist Richard Whitley calls “task uncertainty,” notably by building consensus around standards manufactured and validated by a professional elite (Whitley 1984). Mutual recognition and acceptance of deep intellectual and

existential differences, and then managing a *modus vivendi*, run counter to the very idea of a coherent discipline.

Moreover, as Balch notes, departments run by winner-take-all democracy. The majority of any given department will most likely regard the property-rights proposal as “divisive.” Even if higher administration is sympathetic to the heroic fringe individuals, even if they see that it would be good for business and for liberal education, they lack mechanisms to reach into departments and fiddle with internal workings.

Further, even if all the departmental players were in principle agreeable to an internal system of property rights, they would likely face serious problems in delineating the various factions, deciding which should have property rights, and what those rights should be.

Despite these challenges, the property-rights approach is eminently worthy. We have no better suggestions for internal policy. For externality policy, we favor significantly reducing involuntary payments from taxpayers to professors, a reform advanced by Vedder (2004) and Amacher and Meiners (2004).

For now, it will be progress if parents, students, taxpayers and the faculty themselves come to know the facts—and come to know they know them.

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