

# Yes, academics tend to be left wing – but let's not exaggerate it

March 30 2017, by Gavin Bailey And Chris O'leary

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The [accusation that](#) that academia is disproportionately left-wing and liberal is not a new one. Nor is the main thrust of the claim, in a report by the Adam Smith Institute, contentious. Many accept that [academics tend towards the left](#), even if we cannot be sure of precise levels of inclination or whether the tendency is on the rise. The more important

issue is whether or not this actually matters, both in terms of impartiality in research and teaching, and equality for staff and students.

It should not be much of a surprise, after all, that certain professional sectors have a bias in their intake – towards both ends of the political spectrum. No-one seems overly concerned about whether the banking industry is predominantly right wing. And in the case of universities facing mostly to the left, there are some good reasons why this is likely to be the case.

First, there is a [correlation](#) between levels of education and social liberalism. Given that academics are (by necessity) highly educated, they will at the very least be more liberal on average. Second, they have chosen to become academics, while others chose to do something else. The Adam Smith Institute report states that "openness to experience" is something that attracts people to academia, as we are supposed to be asking questions and finding out about things.

However, there is more to career choice than this. So we should also consider whether the other elements of an academic career also bias the kind of people who choose the industry. For a start, it is part of the public sector. It also involves teaching the next generation, plenty of bureaucracy, and different risk and reward structures from other industries graduates may gravitate towards.

But theories of "[public service motivation](#)" do not fully explain the choice to enter academia. It is simply the case that two people with the same skills and knowledge, but different ideas of what they want to do in the world, will differ in their choice of career. Research in this area also suggests that, as might be expected, [motivations differ by academic discipline](#). The choice of degree, then choice of further study, and eventual choice of what to do for a living are all intertwined.

We then need to ask whether a general political leaning towards the left has an effect on the work of universities, and on students, staff and society at large. Here evidence is mixed, and is mostly from the US where this discussion has a history going back to at least [1951](#). Studies of a few particular disciplines found "[discrimination against conservative people and ideas](#)", although in general, academics identifying as conservative in the US [did not report feeling targeted](#).

[Another study](#) found "no evidence that [staff] ideology at an institutional level has an impact on student political ideology", nor were American conservative students [disadvantaged by lower grades](#).

Indeed, what the Adam Smith Institute's figures don't tell us is what kinds of ideas are held by the 80% they count as left wing. We should expect the problems of bias to be greater when the political distance is greater, but broad brush labels such as "liberal" or "left leaning" do not tell us much. It also becomes difficult to disentangle the actual degree of [political bias](#) from that which is perceived – when academia becomes stereotyped as a hotbed of radicalism, the fear of bias will grow.

## **The messy reality**

In this way, the Adam Smith Institute links left voting academics with "curtailment of free speech", "no-platforming" and ideological homogeneity. But these connections imply that society can be divided into two groups, diametrically opposed on a range of issues, and with a deep divide and disagreement. A similarly simplistic approach is also [often behind](#) accusations by left-wing activists about right-leaning voters. Too often, arguments on both sides of the debate draw on over-the-top stereotypes and exaggerations that make conflict more likely, not less. As in the US, this debate conjures up "culture wars" with most people in two polarised groups which strongly disagree with each other on a range of issues, and "[look at each other like they are on separate planets](#)".

Such analysis assumes there is a loud, clear and divided political conversation going on between activists. But this doesn't allow for [the messy reality](#) of ordinary people's (including academics') political attitudes. Most people do not fit neatly into one of two divided camps. Instead they are clustered around the centre on most issues, and don't agree with everything their supposed group believes. Conservative voters can be anti-racist and pro-gay-marriage, while Labour voters can be racist and homophobic.

Many issues just do not exercise some [people](#). Yes, it's likely that most academics voted to Remain in the European Union in the UK referendum in 2016, but for a range of reasons, including access to research funding and a desire to maintain playing host to bright foreign students. It doesn't have to be because of "groupthink" and unquestioning support for the EU. After all, it is unlikely that most [academics](#) are extremists, and many won't be all that politically minded; much like the rest of society.

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