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THE POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF BRITISH ACADEMICS

by

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Abstract

Carl (2017) recently published a report claiming that individuals with left-wing and liberal views are overrepresented in British academia. One weakness of this report was that it relied almost exclusively on party support data. Using data from the 2015 wave of the British Election Study Panel, the present study confirms that the political attitudes of British academics are somewhat more economically left-wing (0.38sd), and are substantially more socially liberal (0.84sd), than those of the general population. It also documents that British academics are substantially more likely to read *The Guardian* newspaper (the UK's most left-liberal newspaper) than members of the general population (31 ppts). Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduces the difference on social liberalism by 0.20sd, and reduces the difference on *Guardian* readership by 5 ppts, but increases the difference on economic leftism by 0.07sd.

Key words

Academics; political attitudes; left-wing; liberal; education; openness

1. Introduction

Carl (2017a) recently published a report claiming that individuals with left-wing and liberal views are overrepresented in British academia. This report was **subjected** to several criticisms (Morgan, 2017; Byrne, 2017; and see Carl, 2017b,c). Indeed, one of its major weaknesses was that it relied almost exclusively on party support data. Specifically, it cited evidence that British academics are substantially less likely than the general population to support the UK's two main right-wing parties: The Conservatives and The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Yet, except for one poll showing that British academics were overwhelmingly opposed to the UK leaving the European Union, it did not cite any evidence pertaining to their attitudes on specific political issues. **Using data from the 2015 wave of the British Election Study Panel, the present study confirms that the political attitudes of British academics are indeed both more left-wing and more liberal than those of the general population.**

2. Method

Data from the 2015 wave (Wave 6) of the British Election Study Panel (Fieldhouse et al., 2015) were utilized for analysis. The British Election Study Panel (BES) is an internet-based survey that administers questions about political attitudes, party support, and political behavior to a large, nationally representative sample of the British population. While the study tracks the same individuals over time, each wave can be treated as a cross-sectional survey. There are two key reasons why the BES dataset was utilized: first, it contains a rich set of questions on political attitudes (unlike the Understanding Society dataset utilized by Carl, 2017a); and second, unlike some other social surveys in the UK, it has large sample size ($n \approx 30,000$), which allows enough individual academics to be identified for a reasonably reliable analysis.

The BES includes a variable that assigns all respondents who are currently employed to an occupation, based on the 2010 Standard Occupational Classification (ONS, 2010). Academics were defined as those in the occupational category 2311: 'Higher education teaching professionals' ($n = 107$). As the ONS (2010) notes:

Higher education teaching professionals deliver lectures and teach students to at least first degree level, undertake research and write journal articles and books in their chosen field of study.

A dummy variable was created that took the value 1 if the respondent was an academic, and took the value 0 if not. Insofar as academics comprise such a small share of the sample (0.3%), **the reference category for this variable can be considered to be the general population.**

Three dependent variables were constructed. First, a dimension of economic leftism was obtained by extracting the first principal component from a PCA on nine measures of left-right attitudes. This component had an eigenvalue of 4.5, and explained 50% of the variance. Second, a dimension of social liberalism was obtained by extracting the first principal component from a PCA on nine measures of liberal-conservative attitudes. This component had an eigenvalue of 4.1, and explained 46% of the variance. Both of the preceding

dimensions were standardized prior to analysis. Correlation matrices for their constituent variables are given in **Appendix A**. Third, a dummy variable was created that took the value 1 if the respondent said that her daily newspaper was *The Guardian*, and took the value 0 if she said that it was any other newspaper (respondents who said that they did not read a daily newspaper were coded as missing). *The Guardian* is the UK's most left-liberal newspaper (Smith, 2017). The following covariates were utilized: age, gender, ethnicity, region, education, self-rated openness to experience.

3. Results

Table 1 displays estimates from OLS models of economic leftism. Academics are significantly more economically left-wing in all four models. The coefficient in the first column implies that academics are 0.38sd more economically left-wing than the general population. Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience increases this difference to 0.45sd. That increase is attributable to the fact that academics tend to have very high levels of education, yet people higher education tend to be more economically right-wing than those with lower education (see Carl, 2015a).

Table 2 displays estimates from OLS models of social liberalism. Academics are significantly more socially liberal in all four models. The coefficient in the first column implies that academics are 0.84sd more socially liberal than the general population. Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduces this difference to 0.64sd. That decrease is attributable to the fact that academics tend to have very high levels of education, and people with higher education tend to be more socially liberal than those with lower education (see Carl, 2015a).

Table 3 displays estimates from OLS models of *Guardian* readership. Academics are significantly more likely to read *The Guardian* in all four models. The coefficient in the first column implies that academics are 31 percentage points more likely to read *The Guardian* than the general population. Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduces this difference to 26 percentage points.

An important caveat is that two of the results in **Table 1** (specifically, those in the first and second columns) were not robust to applying sampling weights; indeed, they were rendered non-significant by doing so. (Full weighted results are given in **Appendix B**.) This is somewhat surprising, since one would have expected that, if the difference observed in the first column were attributable to non-random sampling, then it would have disappeared after controlling for demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and region (as in the second column). **Appendix C** shows that the distribution of party support among academics in the BES is more similar to the distribution of party support among academics in Understanding Society (see Hanretty, 2017) when sampling weights are not applied than when they are, which provides some justification for not applying sampling weights to the models in **Tables 1, 2 and 3**.

Table 1. Estimates from OLS models of economic leftism.

	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)
Academic	0.38***	0.36***	0.47***	0.45***
Age, age squared, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	22,096	22,096	22,096	22,096
<i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.06

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Models are unweighted. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Table 2. Estimates from OLS models of social liberalism.

	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)
Academic	0.84***	0.91***	0.69***	0.64***
Age, age squared, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	23,160	23,160	23,160	23,160
<i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.13	0.18	0.20

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Models are unweighted. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Table 3. Estimates from OLS models of Guardian readership.

	Guardian is daily newspaper	Guardian is daily newspaper	Guardian is daily newspaper	Guardian is daily newspaper
Academic	0.31***	0.32***	0.27***	0.26***
Age, age squared, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	19,585	19,585	19,585	19,585
<i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.06	0.10	0.10

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Models are unweighted. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Conclusion

Carl (2017) recently published a report which claimed that individuals with left-wing and liberal views are overrepresented in British academia. One weakness of this report was that it relied almost exclusively on party support data. Using data from the 2015 wave of the British Election Study Panel, the present study has confirmed that the political attitudes of British academics are somewhat more economically left-wing (0.38sd), and are substantially more socially liberal (0.84sd), than those of the general population. It has also documented that British academics are substantially more likely to read *The Guardian* newspaper than members of the general population (31 pts). Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduced the difference on social liberalism by 0.20sd, and reduced the difference on *Guardian* readership by 5 pts, but increased the difference on economic leftism by 0.07sd. The fact that sizable differences remained after adjusting for covariates indicates that the left-liberal skew of British academia cannot be explained simply by academics' high levels of education, or—apparently—by their high levels of openness to experience (see Carl, 2017a).¹ This suggests that the remainder of skew is likely to be attributable to one or more of the following: **social homophily and political typing, individual conformity, status inconsistency, and discrimination (see Carl, 2015b; Carl, 2017a).**

Supporting Information

Review thread at OpenPsych forum:

Data, along with Stata code and R code for replication:

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¹ It should be noted that the measure of openness used in the present study was rather crude.

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Appendix A

Table A.1. Correlation matrix for measures of economic leftism.

	Govt. should redistribute income	Big business takes advantage	Ordinary people do not get fair share	One law for rich, one for poor	Management exploits employees	Cuts have gone too far	Privatisation has gone too far	Zero hours cons. should be illegal	Enviro. protect. not gone far enough
Govt. should redist. income	1								
Big business takes advantage	.49***	1							
Ordinary people do not get fair share	.61***	.59***	1						
One law for rich, one for poor	.57***	.61***	.66***	1					
Management exploits emps.	.39***	.56***	.50***	.51***	1				
Cuts have gone too far	.52***	.39***	.47***	.45***	.33***	1			
Privatisation has gone too far	.45***	.42***	.45***	.45***	.32***	.65***	1		
Zero hours cons. should be illegal	.38***	.34***	.40***	.39***	.32***	.47***	.45***	1	
Enviro. protect. Not gone far enough	.26***	.17***	.18***	.14***	.08***	.30***	.27***	.19***	1

Notes: Entries are Pearson correlations. Sampling weights were not applied. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Table A.2. Correlation matrix for measures of social liberalism.

	Young people respect Brit. values	Against death penalty	Schools should not teach kids to obey	Against censorship of films and mags.	Against harsher criminal sentences	More immigration	Equal opportunities for blacks	Equal opportunities for women	Equal opportunities for gays
Young people resp. Brit. values	1								
Against death penalty	.51***	1							
Schools should not teach kids to obey	.60***	.45***	1						
Against censorship of films and mags.	.38***	.32***	.39***	1					
Against harsher criminal sentences	.58***	.59***	.54***	.36***	1				
More immigration	.41***	.41***	.34***	.26***	.40***	1			
Equal opps. For blacks	.44***	.45***	.38***	.24***	.41***	.46***	1		
Equal opps. For women	.25***	.26***	.23***	.11***	.22***	.23***	.49***	1	
Equal opps. For gays	.35***	.35***	.32***	.26***	.30***	.35***	.61***	.52***	1

Notes: Entries are Pearson correlations. Sampling weights were not applied. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Appendix B

Table B.1. Estimates from weighted OLS models of economic leftism.

	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)
Academic	0.28	0.26	0.43*	0.41*
Age, age squared, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	22,096	22,096	22,096	22,096
<i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.06

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Cross-sectional sampling weights were applied. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Table B.2. Estimates from weighted OLS models of social liberalism.

	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)
Academic	0.74***	0.92***	0.72***	0.71***
Age, age squared, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	23,160	23,160	23,160	23,160
<i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.12	0.15	0.16

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Cross-sectional sampling weights were applied. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Table B.3. Estimates from weighted OLS models of *Guardian* readership.

	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper
Academic	0.19***	0.20***	0.17***	0.17***
Age, age squared, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	19,585	19,585	19,585	19,585
<i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.05

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Cross-sectional sampling weights were applied. Significance levels: * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Appendix C

Another weakness of Carl's (2017) report was that it relied on a self-selecting poll of academics from 2015 (Morgan, 2017; Byrne, 2017; and see Carl, 2017b,c). If academics' political views are correlated with their propensity to respond to online polls, then the distribution of party support uncovered by a self-selecting poll might be biased. However, Hanretty (2017) identified academics in the Understanding Society dataset (University of Essex, 2015), and showed that the distribution of party support among these individuals is actually quite similar to the distribution of party support among those who responded to the 2015 poll cited by Carl (2017). As Hanretty (2017) notes:

There is, therefore good evidence—which is not derived from a self-selecting sample—to suggest that left-wing opinions are over-represented in academia when compared to the general population.

This section compares—for both the general population and academics, with and without sampling weights—the distribution of party support in the BES data to the distribution of party support in Wave 5 the Understanding Society data. In the BES, party support was measured using the party ID variable: respondents are asked to say which party, if any, they identify with. In Understanding Society, two definitions of party support were utilized: first, a broad definition, corresponding to the one used by Hanretty (2017), and second, a narrow definition, corresponding to the one used by Carl (2017). Party support in this dataset is based on three questions, asked sequentially. First, respondents are asked whether they support any party, and—if so—which one. Second, those who answer 'No' are then asked which party they feel closest to. Third, those who say they don't feel closest to any party are then asked which party they would vote for tomorrow, if they had to. The broad definition of party support results from combining answers to all three questions, while the narrow definition of party support results combining answers to just the first two questions.

Figure C.1 compares the distribution of party support within the general population, between Understanding Society and the BES, using the broad definition of party support from Understanding Society. **Figure C.3** provides the corresponding comparison for the narrow definition of party support. **Figure C.2** compares the distribution of party support among academics, between the BES and Understanding Society, using the broad definition of party support from Understanding Society. **Figure C.4** provides the corresponding comparison for the narrow definition of party support. As **Figure C.1** and **Figure C.3** show, the distribution of party support within the general population is quite similar across the two datasets, with and without weights. However, as **Figure C.2** and **Figure C.4** show, the distribution of party support among academics differs between the two datasets: in Understanding Society, relatively more academics support Labour, whereas in the BES, relatively more support the Liberal Democrats. Moreover, the differences between the two datasets are much larger when sampling weights are applied than when they are not. Since, the weighted figures from the BES are the most aberrant, it is arguably more appropriate to estimate unweighted models. Note that the weighted figures from the BES also deviate most from the figures from the 2015 poll cited by Carl (2017; THE, 2015).

Figure C.1. Distribution of party support within the general population using broad definition of party support from Understanding Society

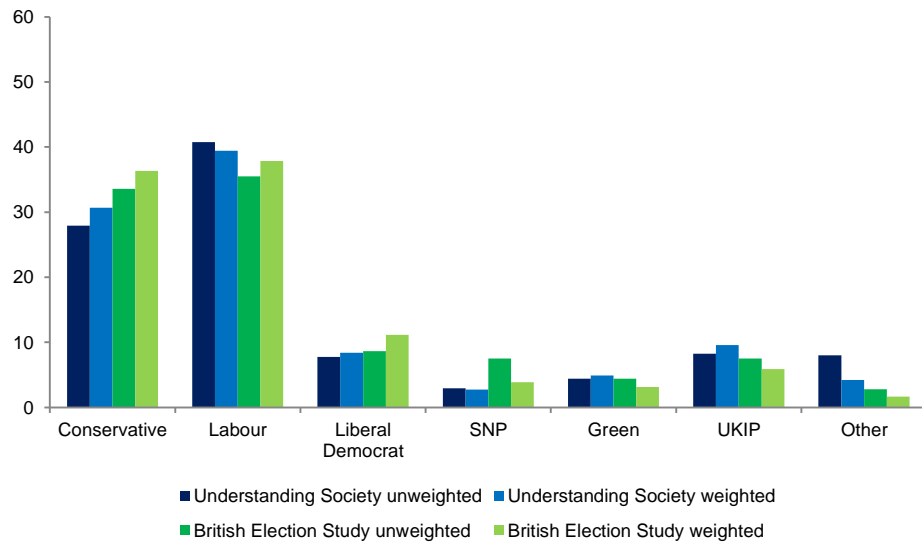


Figure C.2. Distribution of party support among academics using broad definition of party support from Understanding Society

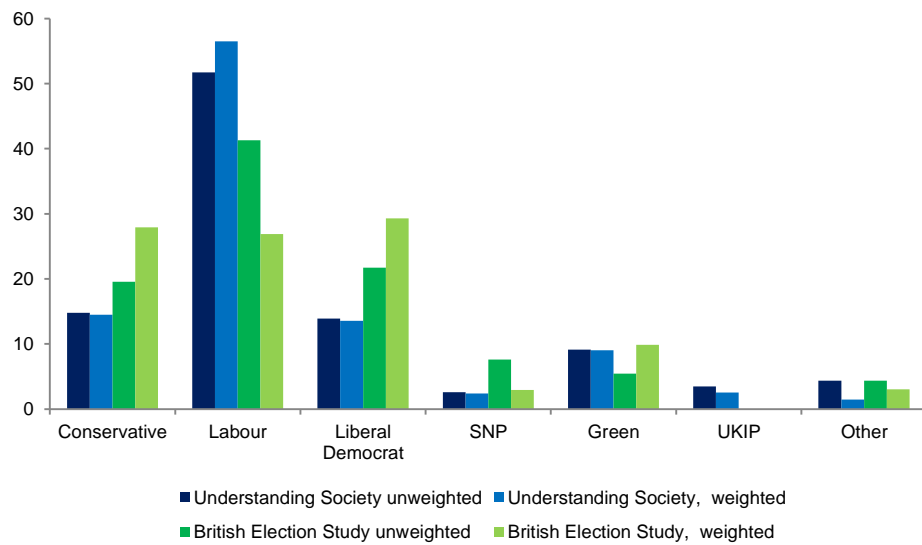


Figure C.3. Distribution of party support within the general population using narrow definition of party support from Understanding Society

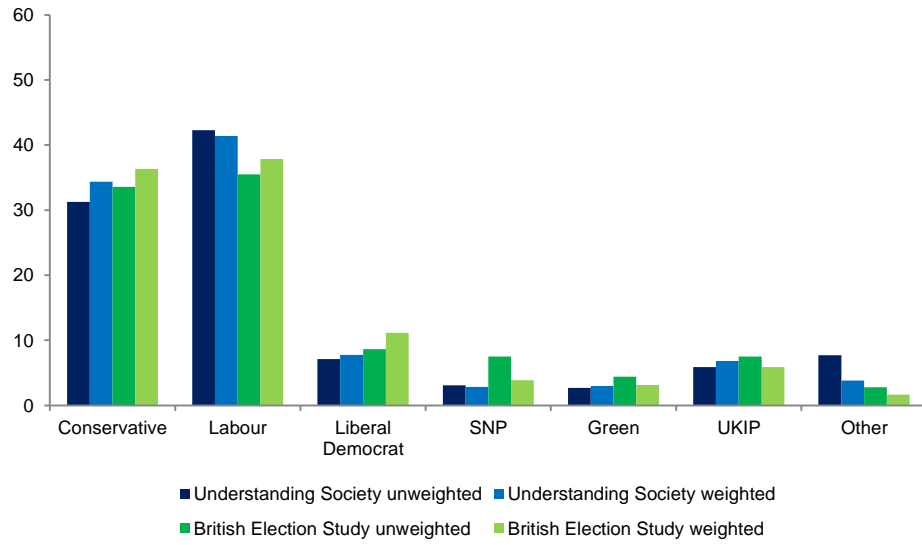


Figure C.4. Distribution of party support among academics using narrow definition of party support from Understanding Society

