

The Faculty

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i21/21a00901.htm>

From the issue dated January 26, 2007

'They Jump to Those Claims'

Political-bias studies often rush to judgment, researcher says

John B. Lee is president and founder of JBL Associates Inc., a prominent higher-education-research firm in Bethesda, Md. Recently the American Federation of Teachers retained him to assess the research that purports to find a liberal predominance and bias in academe. He reviewed eight studies, some of them carried out by groups like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and some of them produced by individual professors. Mr. Lee found problems with each of the studies he reviewed. On the eve of the release of Mr. Lee's study, *The Chronicle's* John Gravois sat down with him to discuss the problems he sees with measuring bias.

Q. In many quarters of public opinion, the proposition that professors are predominantly liberal is as safe as the assertion that major-league baseball players are predominantly overpaid. Do these studies provide data that support that conclusion — that professors are much more likely to be liberal than to be conservative?

A. In most of these studies, they're fairly limited in which institutions they looked at. Their tendency was to go to some list, *U.S. News & World Report* or other lists similar to that, and find the most-prestigious schools, which does a couple of things. First of all, they overemphasize private institutions. They don't include community colleges, for example, in any systematic way. And it's not clear, when they've chosen faculty, whether they've included part-timers.

In several of the studies, they only looked at certain departments. So if you looked at engineering, the medical faculty, let's say, or others, you might get some different results than if you look at the limited numbers that they looked at.

So they've been fairly limited in the institutions they've included in their studies. And even within those constraints, they've gotten pretty broad estimates that vary. If we wanted to make a universal judgment as to what the faculty looks like, we certainly can't get that from these studies.

Q. Some of these studies seem to pick a segment of the professoriate, analyze its voting records, and then conclude that the content of liberal politics is pushing its way into the classroom while conservative viewpoints are being pushed out. In your analysis, why doesn't that conclusion follow from those premises?

A. It's one thing to say we think that these people are Democrats or they tend to be liberal. Then to say that somehow global political orientation or ideology then distorts or changes, in some systematic way, what and how they teach — that's where the evidence really is not very clear. They jump to those claims but have no evidence to support that — how that happens or what that means.

One of the things I did look at as sort of a similar sort of problem was the dominance of Republicans in the

military. And that's fairly well documented. But there's not, I don't think, any particular evidence that liberals or Democrats are systematically kept out of the military or not promoted when they're there, just as there's no evidence that conservatives and Republicans are systematically kept out of academe. There is a certain self-selection process that goes on in the world, and I think the choice of occupation is a reflection of a lot of different values and beliefs and interests.

Q. Since you find all of these studies incomplete, what kind of research do you think it would take to show whether the professional advancement of conservative professors is in fact impeded by their politics? Or whether liberal views are in fact crowding out conservative ones in classroom discussion?

A. That's a huge logical problem, if you think about it for a while. How you would design a study to do that is not altogether clear. In the case of promotion, the question is, How would you control all these other factors? You get accepted into graduate school based on a whole lot of things: Are there openings? Are you prepared in clear ways to be successful in that program? And do you have the resources and time to go through it? So those things become, I think, much more critical. The political part explains so very little in any of the outcomes. Statistically you'd be hard pressed to decide how that works.

Q. One of the studies you evaluated says that a "one-party campus is a problem irrespective of what one's own views happen to be." Even if the effects of that "problem" haven't been fully drawn out, is it fair to say it's a problem?

A. I don't think so. In an academic tradition you've got a long body of knowledge that's come to be, and it's carefully investigated by each new generation of scholars and extended and modified and changed, so it doesn't ever sit in the same sort of place. And I don't think that the politics of the people who are doing that intellectual work necessarily reduce the diversity of ideas and the diversity of approaches or theories in those fields.

Q. These studies seem to be coming out at a pretty good clip now, arguing both sides of the issue. Should we expect to see more?

A. I don't know. In many cases, bad science induces better science. And one would hope that if this debate's going to continue, that at least some people do a little bit better job of framing the issue. I think if they did that, my hunch is that most of the claims they're making here would not be supported. I think that if academics out there sort of saw themselves being challenged by this, they may well take it up. There is not a tradition of folks trying to do that — of taking the global personal beliefs of the faculty and trying to figure out how they affect how they teach what they teach. All of that is so global and so difficult to operationalize and study that it may be it will take place more in this little trench warfare.

One of the concerns is that as a person who deals in policy research, you see these things migrate into other settings in the press, into news stories, into op-ed pieces. A lot of these authors say, "This is very preliminary; we realize that we don't meet all of these standards," so they're open about that in their conversation — at least some of them. And yet that kind of conditional language gets lost as it comes up on the op-ed page.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Faculty

Volume 53, Issue 21, Page A9

[Copyright](#) © 2006 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Help](#)