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Issue Brief

Top Public Policy Programs Have Almost No Conservative Faculty

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Introduction

The stark leftward tilt of the American professoriate has been widely documented.[1] Defenders of higher education often blame this imbalance on a dearth of conservative applicants and argue that, in any event, it does not matter much because ideology does not affect how scholars approach teaching or research (a convenient claim that is conspicuously absent when it comes to faculty race, ethnicity, or gender).

Setting aside those familiar debates, though, there is at least one place on campus where accomplished conservative candidates would be relatively easy to find and where ideology is clearly relevant to teaching and research: schools of public policy. After all, one advantage that these schools enjoy is that they hire a lot of adjunct faculty, lecturers, and "professors of practice" drawn from former elected officials and political appointees. In a closely divided nation, Republicans constitute about half of this pool of officials, making it no great feat to assemble an ideologically diverse faculty.

Given that, do the faculty in these schools, charged with preparing students for public service and equipping them to navigate charged public debates, reflect the breadth of American thinking on government and policy?

Schools of public policy are *explicitly* charged with preparing their students to play significant roles in public life. That's the job. Four decades ago, Aaron Wildavsky, founding dean of UC–Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy, explained that institutions like his "were designed to be organizations that would do for the public sector what business schools had done for the private sector"—namely, supply graduates who staff public bureaucracies and provide educated leadership.[2] As Harvard University president Derek Bok put it a half-century ago, programs like his institution's famed Kennedy School of Government exist "to prepare a profession of public servants" who can "occupy influential positions in public life."[3]

Policy schools make clear that they see this as their mission. Syracuse's Maxwell School says that it is helping to "prepare new generations of leaders with an expansive foundation of knowledge and a socially responsible mindset."[4] Matthew Auer, dean of the University of Georgia's School of Public and International Affairs, holds that his school is "training two generations of leaders who, if we get it right, will preserve and strengthen our democracy."[5] The University of Michigan's Ford School aims to "inspire and prepare diverse leaders grounded in service, conduct transformational research, and collaborate on evidence-based policymaking to take on our communities' and the world's most pressing challenges."[6]

This kind of role requires equipping students to engage with people, interests, and policies spanning the political spectrum. That is especially true, given how polarization and declining trust have complicated the work of government. Pew Research Center reported in April 2024 that 77% of Americans have an "unfavorable" opinion about the federal government, and half feel that way about their state government. Breaking it down by party, just 11% of Republicans have a "favorable" opinion of the federal government, and the comparable figure among Democrats is only 32%.[7] Meanwhile, Gallup has found that the share of Americans satisfied with the way democracy is working in the U.S. is at a record low.[8]

Here, then, is the opportunity for policy schools to fulfill their promise: to cultivate leaders—in government and public policy—who can provide competent, inclusive leadership and help rebuild public trust in a divided nation. Yet AEI scholar and former Kennedy School faculty member Howard Husock recently raised hard questions about whether these schools are committed to this charge.[9] Are they making a real effort to prepare their graduates to operate in a world of competing views, values, ideologies, and governing philosophies?

These schools certainly pay lip service to the importance of ideological diversity and bridge-building, at least in their mission statements and public positioning. At Harvard, the Kennedy School defines "public leadership" as "the opportunity to motivate and mobilize collaborative action across differences for a common good."[10] At the University of Texas, the LBJ School's mission statement promises that the school will "foster civic engagement by providing a forum for reasoned discussion and debate on issues of public concern."[11] Last year, the deans of the policy schools at Columbia and Princeton wrote that policy school faculty teach their students to wrestle "with tough questions that require understanding opposing ideas."[12]

This paper looks at the degree to which policy schools appear to be honoring that commitment. We took a closer look at the ideological composition of the faculty in 10 of the nation's most prominent policy programs. Are these schools assembling a faculty that is broadly reflective of the world that their graduates will inhabit and that will allow students to encounter a broad spectrum of competing views, values, ideologies, and governing philosophies?

Methodology

During the spring of 2024, we analyzed faculty composition at 10 of the 15 top-ranked schools in *U.S. News & World Report*'s Best Public Affairs Programs,[13] with an eye to a mix that included public and private institutions, graduate-only and graduate-undergraduate programs, and geographic spread. For each program, we generated a list of all teaching faculty members. This resulted in a list of 1,208 faculty, including 746 tenure-track faculty and 462 limited-term appointments.

For all faculty members, we used faculty web pages, bios, and CVs to identify their two most prominent external affiliations. The affiliations need not be current—prior service under a Democratic governor or as a Republican member of Congress, for example, would qualify. For faculty who had affiliations, we determined whether those could be coded as left-leaning, right-leaning, or centrist. For the many faculty whose key affiliations consisted of things like academic associations, scholarly journals, or private-sector employment, we coded their affiliation as indeterminate.

Faculty members who held elective office, were political appointees, or worked on political campaigns were coded accordingly. For affiliations that were not explicitly partisan, faculty were coded left-leaning, right-leaning, or centrist, based on the public materials of the organization in question. Keywords used to identify left-leaning organizations included "Diversity Equity and Inclusion" (DEI) and "immigrants' rights"; right-leaning ones included an explicit commitment to "faith-based" or "conservative" values; and centrist ones included technology policy and an explicit commitment to data or "bipartisanship." Left-leaning affiliations, for example, included the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Environmental Justice Institute. Right-leaning ones included the Hoover Institution and Legatum Institute. Centrist affiliations included the Consensus Building Institute and National Endowment for Democracy. (The most common affiliation was the centrist National Bureau of Economic Research, with 58 affiliated faculty members.)

Using this framework, we coded faculty with identifiable affiliations as left-leaning, centrist, or right-leaning. A half-dozen faculty members had two affiliations that were not consistent (e.g., one left-leaning and one centrist). In these six cases, coding was based on the organization with which they had been affiliated for a longer period.

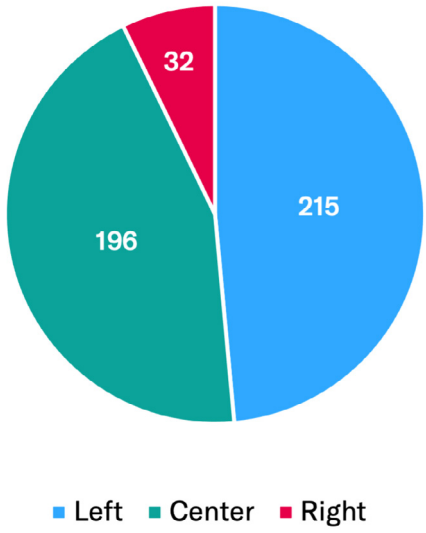
Findings on Ideological (Im)Balance

Of the 1,208 faculty, 443 had affiliations that could clearly be identified as left-leaning, right-leaning, or centrist. We were able to locate identifiable affiliations for 37% of the 462 limited-term faculty and 36% of the 746 tenure-track faculty. We want to be clear: we are *not* suggesting that the other faculty are apolitical but only that they cannot be readily coded based on external positions or affiliations.

Figure 1 illustrates that, of the 443 faculty for whom ideological affiliation could be reliably determined, 215 were left-leaning, 196 were centrist, and 32 were right-leaning. In percentage terms, 49% were left-leaning and 7% were right-leaning. The ratio of left-to-right-leaning faculty was 7-to-1.

Figure 1

Faculty by Ideological Lean



We noted earlier that policy schools tend to appoint limited-term "practitioners" who come from the ideologically 50-50 world of politics and government. As **Figure 2** shows, of the 443 faculty discussed in Figure 1, 172 are those sorts of limited-term appointments (39%) while 271 are tenure-track appointments (61%). Given that these appointments constitute nearly 40% of the faculty with ideological affiliations, is there evidence that policy schools are using these hires to foster more ideological balance?

Figure 2

Faculty by Tenure Status

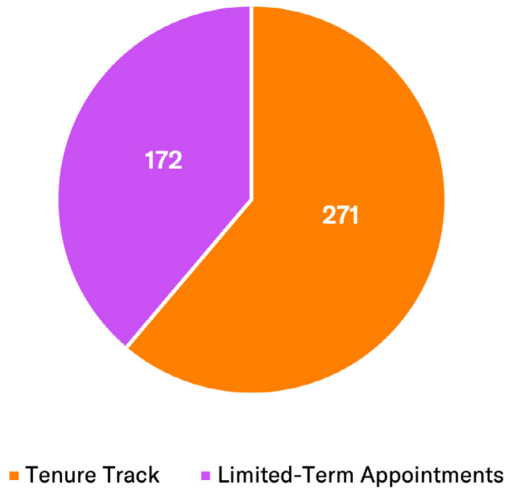
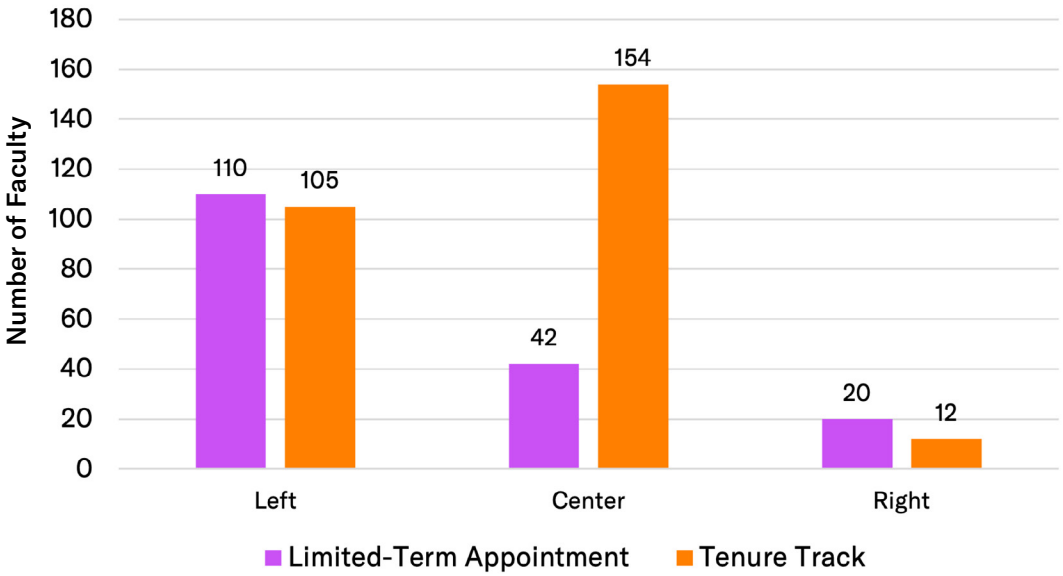


Figure 3 suggests that policy programs are not, in fact, using limited-term appointments to promote ideological diversity. While the left-right tilt among limited-term faculty is slightly less dramatic than among tenure-track faculty, the difference is trivial. Among tenure-track faculty, left-leaning faculty outnumber their right-leaning peers 105-to-12, or by about 9-to-1. Among limited-term faculty, the leftward tilt is 110-to-20, or about 6-to-1. Indeed, the big difference among limited-term faculty may be that there are far fewer identifiable centrists than among tenure-track faculty.

Figure 3

Ideological Affiliation by Tenure Status

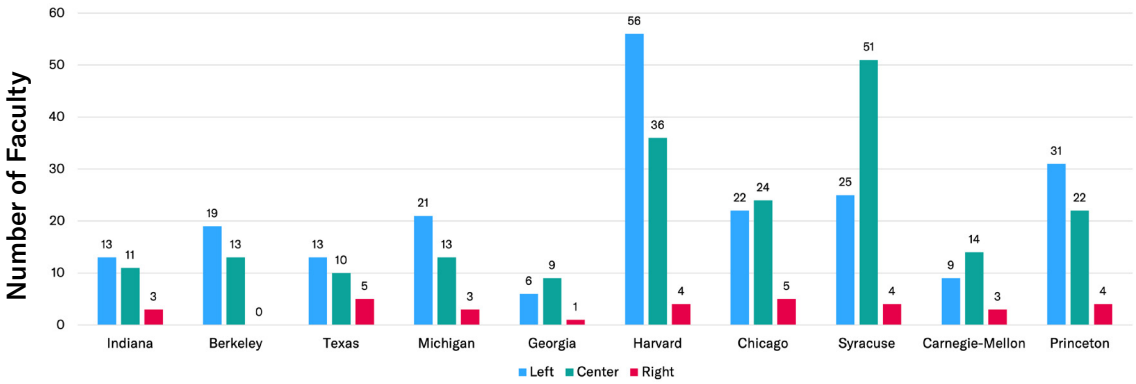


We should point out that the more severe imbalance in tenure-track faculty is most significant, as it's the tenure-track faculty who influence hiring, tenure, curricula, and admissions and who will rise to positions of influence in the school and university. While it is nice that the tilt to the left is modestly less overwhelming among short-timers than among their tenured peers, the short-timers also have less influence on the culture and direction of these programs.

Figure 4 depicts the ideological makeup across the policy schools that we examined. There is some notable variation, e.g., the LBJ School at the University of Texas showed less imbalance, leaning left by a margin of "only" 13-to-5. On the other hand, UC–Berkeley's Goldman School leans left by 19-to-0, Michigan's Ford School by 21-to-3, and Harvard's Kennedy School by 56-to-4. There were more progressives and more moderates than conservatives at every institution, with no noticeable difference between private and public institutions or between graduate-only and graduate-undergraduate programs.

Figure 4

Ideological Lean Across Leading Policy Schools



Even in red and purple states, prominent policy schools at public institutions like the University of Texas, Indiana University, and the University of Georgia still show a decidedly leftward tilt. To the extent that these institutions are preparing graduates for public leadership positions in the state, this tilt does an additional disservice to both students and taxpayers, as it leaves graduates spectacularly ill-equipped to do the work for which they have been trained.

Conclusion

Setting aside concerns about the broader shape of the American professoriate, we examined faculty at leading public affairs programs, where faculty focus explicitly on government, civic leadership, and public policy. Among the 10 programs and 443 teaching faculty members who had identifiable affiliations, those with left-leaning affiliations outnumbered their right-leaning counterparts 7-to-1.

The leftward tilt was more pronounced among tenure-track faculty than among limited-term faculty, but the progressive lean was still 6-to-1 even among the latter group. This is especially important because these positions could—and should—help promote a healthy ideological balance. These patterns were broadly consistent across all 10 schools, with right-leaning faculty dramatically outnumbered by left-leaning (and centrist) faculty in every case.

The takeaways here are straightforward. Schools of public policy and government must do a better job of cultivating a faculty that captures the breadth of views, values, and perspectives that constitute the larger world of American political thought. It is more than a little surprising that this even needs to be said. After all, it's not as though these schools are unaware of the importance of diversity and inclusion.

In its mission statement, for instance, Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs promises that its faculty and students approach "the challenges of public and international affairs, with particular emphasis on diverse scholarly perspectives and evidence-based analysis."[14] Well, when it comes to the study of government and public policy, ideological and political perspectives are a crucial dimension of diversity. To state the obvious, right-leaning and left-leaning Americans have fundamental disagreements about how best to approach public and international affairs.

Schools seeking to equip their students for the rigors of leadership and public affairs need to help them grapple with competing views on the role of government, desirable public policy, and the role of the U.S. in the world. That's why it is so problematic that, of the 58 faculty members with identifiable political affiliations at Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs, there are eight left-leaning faculty members for every one right-leaning member.

If there is any field where exposure to a robust range of competing viewpoints is essential, it's the study of public policy and government. While one can dream up rationales (no matter how tortuous) as to why ideological groupthink is acceptable elsewhere in the academy, such claims collapse when it comes to schools of public policy. Today's academic discourse about health care, gender identity, race, immigration, abortion, DEI, or Israel does little to support the claim that progressive scholars are able and willing to forcefully articulate right-leaning views on such questions. Indeed, recent developments on campus pose a particular burden for those who would claim that left-leaning faculty are creating room for robust discourse or exposing students to good-faith accounts of conservative thought.

In light of the foregoing, a few recommendations are in order. Schools of public policy must work harder at ensuring that their faculty encompasses a broad spectrum of views regarding government and public policy. Moreover, boards and donors (and, in the case of public institutions, public officials) should insist that these schools do better and should demand heightened transparency as to how they are faring; and they should insist that these schools cast a wider net in recruiting faculty.

If campus leadership is unable or unwilling to do better, external intervention will be appropriate. Especially when it comes to public institutions, publicly funded scholarships, or publicly funded programs, public officials do well to ask whether public policy schools that operate as progressive echo chambers deserve taxpayer support.

In the meantime, employers, including government agencies and elected officials, should be conscious that the students produced by these programs may have little exposure to right-leaning views and may not be conversant in conservative thinking. This is a handicap for any graduates hired for their supposed acumen in policy, but it may well be disqualifying from the perspective of right-leaning elected and appointed officials.

Four decades ago, Aaron Wildavsky, a giant in the field, observed that the "major motivation for establishing graduate schools of public policy" was so that students might learn to analyze public policies "to see what went wrong" and "how to do better."[15] Of course, one thing that defines American democracy is that those on the left and right have deep-seated, principled disagreements about where policies go wrong and how to do better. It is hard to see how schools of public policy and government that reflect only half the nation's thought can responsibly prepare future public leaders for their roles. The nation needs these schools to do better.

Endnotes

1 See Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, "The Social and Political Views of American College and University Professors," working paper, Sept. 24, 2007; Sam Abrams, "Professors Moved Left Since 1990s, Rest of the Country Did Not," Heterodox Academy, Jan. 9, 2016; Samuel J. Abrams, "Think Professors Are Liberal? Try School Administrators," *New York Times*, Oct. 16, 2018.

2 Aaron Wildavsky, "The Once and Future School of Public Policy," *The Public Interest*, Spring 1985.

3 Derek C. Bok, "Report of the President of Harvard College and Reports of Departments. 1973–1974," *Official Register of Harvard University* 72, no. 14 (Nov. 5, 1975).

4 "About the Maxwell School," Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

5 "Message from Dean Auer," School of Public and International Affairs, University of Georgia.

6 "Major in Making a Difference," Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy International Policy Center, University of Michigan.

7 Joseph Copeland, "Americans Rate Their Federal, State and Local Governments Less Positively than a Few Years Ago," Pew Research Center, Apr. 11, 2024.

8 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Record Low in U.S. Satisfied with Way Democracy Is Working," Gallup, Jan. 5, 2024.

9 Howard Husock, "The Failure of Public-Policy Schools," *National Affairs* no. 59 (Spring 2024).

10 "What We Do," Harvard Kennedy School, Center for Public Leadership.

11 "The LBJ Legacy," Texas LBJ School.

12 Amaney Jamal and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Discourse Is Toxic. Universities Can Help." *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2023.

13 "Best Public Affairs Programs," *U.S. News & World Report*, 2024.

14 "Our Mission," Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

15 Wildavsky, "The Once and Future School of Public Policy."