

**Smith, Bruce L. R.; Mayer, Jeremy D.; Fritschler, A. Lee (2008). *Closed Minds?: Politics and Ideology in American Universities*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.**

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Bruce L. R. Smith, Jeremy D. Mayer, and A. Lee Fritschler offer a compelling account of the intertwined history of U.S. universities and politics in their *Closed Minds? Politics and Ideology in American Universities*. Largely in response to contemporary indictments about leftist bias in U.S. universities, they offer a thoughtful account of the many factors that have influenced the development of universities and departments, in conjunction with a quantitative and qualitative study of faculty and student perspectives at major Research 1 institutions across the country.

Rather than drawing principally on anecdotal evidence and unreliable data (often the sources for complaints of leftist bias), Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler offer a rigorous, large-scale, mixed method study. Their findings suggest that ultimately, it has been only the small number of loud, visible complaints that

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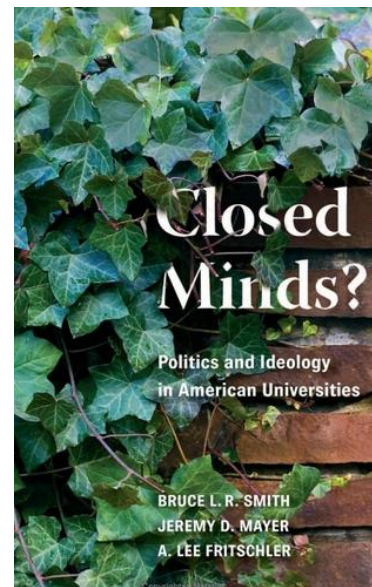
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created the impression that conservatives are discriminated against and forced out of academia because of an activist, leftist faculty. In Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler's surveys, 91% of all faculty do not believe that their political orientations have at all affected their career opportunities, and still 75% of faculty self-identifying as very conservative hold this same opinion. The authors instead find that there is a disillusionment with, and shying away from, political debate and engagement in U.S. university departments and classrooms; far from rampant leftist proselytizing, the authors argue, there is a *lack* of open, active engagement with political issues and perspectives, and as such, universities are failing in their responsibility to foster civically engaged citizens. Indeed, a premise for the book is that "to have a view, viewpoint, approach, or interpretation of an event – and to bring such views to one's classroom – is not to impose bias on one's students, but to teach" (p. 5). The authors encourage those in the academy not to limit their students by assuming that they are not savvy enough to tell when they are being presented with a particular viewpoint. Above all, the authors stress the need for universities to take up civic education as part of their mission and responsibility.



My central concern as a reader is related to this "next step" of sorts posited by the authors: I remain unsure how the authors' vision of civic education engages globalization and global student populations. The authors' insistence that universities become more involved in civic life is centered on citizenship defined as "what we have in common, the shared experiences and values that unite otherwise very diverse groups of citizens," (p. 210), meaning, as is indicated throughout the book, what United States citizens have in common. The authors' definition of civic education is centered on U.S. "shared experiences" and "shared values" (pp. 206-207). The authors make clear that they value a diversity of people and perspectives in the academy given their assessment of the downfall of the "old boy system" and the potential for a new phase of "democratic centralism" (p. 197). Yet it was unclear to me how (or if) *global* citizenship fits into the kinds of civic education the authors promote. And I wondered more pragmatically where international students and immigrants fit into this citizenship education and the teaching of shared

values – if, for example, students are not citizens and do not share these alleged values. I wondered how this envisioned arrangement would speak to and engage those international, national, and personal values and traditions that are not a part of U.S. “shared” culture.

One of the clear contributions of the book was Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler’s portrayal of how much faculty profiles and partisanship depend on the surrounding political and educational events in U.S. history. Such portrayals raise important questions about whether certain developments were and are “right” for the academy. For example, as the authors detail the era of “regulated competition” (following the Educational Amendments to the Civil Rights Act) in which universities had to move away from the “old boy system,” making their hiring strategies more transparent and fair; they also comment that such developments led to higher salaries, more faculty mobility, and reduced teaching loads for higher-profile scholars (p. 172). Such a narrative should challenge us to question the consequences of such developments, such as the privileging of scholarship over teaching in the academy. In another example, Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler repeatedly point to developments that have put some of the direction of departments into the hands of provosts, wealthy alumni, and others outside of those departments, a direction the authors caution against.

By politics, the authors primarily refer to politics as partisanship, which serves a key part of their research: faculty self-identification in terms of party support and leaning “left” or “right.” I hope that future studies, which share these authors’ rigor and investment, continue to shed light on a wider range of politics within universities, such as protests of university building projects or organizing for lecturer and graduate funding and support or, and in a broader range of university types.

The book is divided into ten chapters, including an introductory and concluding chapter. Each chapter clearly maps out and addresses a piece of the larger issue of ideology and politics in U.S. universities.

Chapter One introduces the premises and background for the book, in which the writers state upfront that they do not find evidence of “rampant bias” in the universities or of liberal bias in the conventional meaning of the term (p. 2). They also lay out a key belief that informs the book: that universities should return to the idea that they have the responsibility of “educating students for citizenship in our democratic society” (p. 7).

Chapter Two addresses higher education and the “culture wars” and takes on the notion that universities have been overwhelmed by radicals who practice identity politics and have “subverted the quest for truth” (p. 13). The authors use their overview of the debate to lay out the historical context and also suggest that actually, universities “are mostly not sufficiently engaged in political debate, in the correct sense of that term” (p. 13). The authors contend that after the public engagement and activism of the 1960s and 1970s, universities became less politically engaged, while students were content with university-sanctioned forms of self-expression and faculty pursued their own careers (p. 14). As a result, “the goal of a shared education experience” suffered (here the authors reiterate the need for university preparation for citizenship in “our democratic society”(p. 15)). Even the “culture wars” of the 1990s were isolated within universities rather than engaging the larger public (p. 16).

Chapter Three narrates the “Emergence of the U.S. Research University.” The authors describe that it was not until the period 1870-1910 that research universities emerged in the form of “decentralized structures, with various schools reporting to a more or less centralized hierarchy headed by a president and a board”(p. 29). At that time, each department pursued the advancement of their respective fields. In the late 19th Century, however, two camps emerged: the traditionalists, who were dedicated to the “teaching and transmission of cultural values”(p. 30); and the reformists, who challenged this model and pushed for a curriculum with less rote learning and greater separation between colleges and religious orders. Smith, Mayer and Fritschler contend, however, that the reformists lacked a unifying idea beyond the vague notion of being “useful” to

society (p. 30); and at two points around that time (1893-94 and 1910), universities were affected by restrictions of academic freedom. Finally, this chapter offers an overview of the major aspects of the Progressive Era, a historical period which becomes an important reference point for the rest of the book. The authors delineate how this period contributed to the initial faculty lean to the left; this period also included New Deal developments important to universities, such as governmentally-funded research in the “hard sciences” and the GI Bill resulting in an increase in the number of students. During this period, “the intellectual tone of even nonscientific disciplines reflected an admiration for, and a desire to imitate the rigor and precision of, the hard sciences” (p. 43). The authors emphasize the relatively unified goals of university faculty and boards at this time compared to the previous decades.

Chapter Four narrates the period after World War II until the late 1960s, in which the U.S. post-secondary student body expanded greatly and research and graduate education flourished. In this period, the research university gained “a broader social significance as it became the symbol of American’s technological leadership in the world” (p. 45). Faculty numbers grew as universities did, and faculty values “largely drove the system” (p. 47). While a commitment to modern science and a scientific outlook were at the core of postwar universities and the new knowledge-based economy, there were also calls during this time for education that was directly relevant to a racially diverse society and democratic citizenship (p. 49). Nonetheless, the “objective,” rigorous nature of the sciences was valorized above all, affecting other disciplines such as the social sciences and driving the work that sought a scientific explanation for politics. It is in this period that undergraduate students began to be more rigorously prepped to be “professional specialists” rather than “future citizens,” such as in the case of the field of economics (p. 53). Also during this period, university faculty adopted a more radical stance on issues such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, and the range of opinions broadened. There was, however, fewer “common dialogues,” as fields morphed into narrower subspecialties (p. 55).

The authors go on in Chapter Four to describe the “cultural turn” of the 1960s. During that time, activism and riots on campuses were markedly different from periods before or after. Further, the authors stress that “If the 1960s events radicalized some faculty and university administrators, they also produced a conservative pushback that continues to this day”(p. 58). The political demonstrations that marked that period morphed into inter-university debates and “studies” programs after the Vietnam War, as faculty turned “inward-looking” rather than outward and activist (p. 65). Contrary to what may be perceived to be constant, open discussion, and unified political engagement on campuses since the 1960s, the authors write that “there was on campus not political uniformity but difference, and toleration among warring factions only by virtue of avoiding direct engagement. Faculty members were like most Americans generally in their distaste for politics and contention,” and they were not recruited based on ideological or political grounds but “whether they were good researchers”(p. 61). The “problem,” as the authors assert in this chapter and throughout the book, “was not to keep professors from talking incessantly about politics; it was to get them to talk about politics at all”(p. 61). The 1970s and 1980s in universities lacked a focus on and engagement with “real-world political issues” or with “the practicalities of citizenship.” Nonetheless, the authors note, “universities have always been interested in how they should relate to the outside world and in how their own preoccupations should contribute to society”(p. 70). The chapter closes with the observation that the role of universities has reached heightened public interest.

Having laid out the contexts of faculty orientations, the authors turn to the reporting of their qualitative and quantitative research. Chapter Five looks at the responses from the authors’ 2007 national survey to explore whether there has been a marked shift recently in faculty political attitudes. Their survey sought to capture the basic ideology, partisanship, classroom conduct, and treatment of colleagues, in order to examine the truth of claims that faculty have gotten more “left” in political leanings since the 1960s.

Some interesting results from the surveys are that professors in the “hard sciences” report being more “left” on a ten-point scale than faculty in the social sciences (p. 75). Another major finding coming out of the surveys was that most professors do not see discrimination as a part of their own professional path (e.g., tenure decisions, and the like). This chapter also reports the partisanship and ideology of professors by disciplines (with ten or more respondents), showing a spectrum of party identification ranging from Democrat to Independent to Republican, in addition to offering the percentage of those identifying as left/liberal. The surveys show that most professors reject open advocacy of their own opinions in the classroom (p. 84), and over 95 percent of professors claimed to be an “honest broker among all competing views” in the classroom. In fact, discrimination against non-Christians appears to be more widespread than discrimination against conservatives in American higher education. Overall though, most professors, including conservative and Christian professors, do not believe that political ideology or religion plays a significant role in hiring and promotion (p. 89). Instead, the authors insist that political bias has received much public attention due to “the interest groups, the political partisans, and the activists who have found common ground (and fundraising success) in identifying a crisis within American higher education” (p. 91).

Chapter Six addresses the “politics of politics” in the classroom and points to a resistance to intervention in university curricula, accompanied by calls for accommodation (p. 94). Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler also point out that both sides use similar common argumentative themes, such as a reluctance to disrupt arrangements that have worked in the past. Much of Chapter Six focuses on people and arguments indicting universities for liberal politics in university classrooms, such as David Horowitz. The authors point out that the conservative movement has attained many key goals, and conservatives have established an “active force at least in the organizational circles of the nation’s capital,” though less so on the state level.

Chapter Seven picks up on the latter point to describe conservative activism on the state level, namely during the Pennsylvania Hearings on Academic Freedom. The chapter opens with a reminder of the battles that conservative activism has won in university systems, such as curbing affirmative action policies, limiting stem cell research funding, and funding for other conservative-aimed research projects (p. 117). The chapter recounts the details and questions during the Pennsylvania hearings, which sought to determine whether political orientations affected faculty hiring and promotion decisions and whether students and faculty were able to explore and defend a variety of viewpoints rather than having their ideas overshadowed by dominating leftist ideas. Overall, the hearings more or less appeased both sides and found that the issue of leftist imposed bias in the classroom was a non-issue. At the same time, the authors note that these hearings were perhaps a missed opportunity for nuanced, open dialogue about curriculum and the complicated distinction and relation between pedagogy and advocacy (pp. 134-135). As in the introduction, the authors stress that students are capable of listening to opinionated perspectives and understanding them as such.

Chapter Eight drives this same point home, as the authors address students' perspectives on classroom bias and emphasize that student campus activists are "ideologically diverse" and "generally sophisticated in their discussions of faculty bias." The chapter takes seriously students' capabilities and desires for meaningful discussion of faculty bias on campus, and they address studies that have researched students' responses to grades and course evaluations. These studies have found that students prefer an instructor who presents her/himself as politically moderate, and also that students are capable and willing to hear professors' perspectives on political issues. The authors close the chapter with their concern for the few places in which American civic life is addressed and fostered, claiming the U.S. universities are sites where young people can and should learn "the values of citizenship" (p. 162).

Chapter Nine addresses the question, "Do Universities Discriminate in Hiring?" Smith, Mayer, and Fritschler tell the

story of the practices (and discrimination) of the “old boy network” and its transition, during and after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to regulated competition. Here they pick up the potential residual contemporary effects of the Progressive Era’s “celebration of neutral expertise” and address the Stanley Rothman critique that faculty have become more “left” in recent decades. The authors make a case for the political issues and the status and practices of religious institutions that explain the overrepresentation of left-leaning faculty in most elite universities in the U.S. In other words, contrary to Rothman’s study (which the authors doubt in method as well as conclusions), Smith, Mayer and Fritschler find a number of historical and cultural details that account for faculty shifts within universities. Again in this chapter, the authors stress that we must not banish political debate on college campuses, but rather that we need more, and higher order debate (p. 182). While admittedly the ideological beliefs (and discrimination based on them) are harder to gauge than race and other forms of discrimination, the authors continually stress that the issue is actually the *anti-political* mindset of faculty rather than an overbearing one. The authors close the chapter by insisting that universities not shy away from this political debate because “diversity of ideas is the most important diversity of all for the university’s intellectual vitality” (p. 196). This chapter and the subsequent concluding chapter underscore the authors’ point that “democratic citizenship” is more urgent than ever since 9/11 and that “the nation’s major universities should face the task of educating future citizens, both leaders and followers, with genuine commitment,” including hiring faculty who are committed to educational tasks “beyond traditional research and publication interests” (p. 210). They end the book by stressing that this vocation is complicated and not without difficult realities and implications, but that universities are best able to confront such issues and serve society when they are “somewhat insulated from the short-run pressures to which government and commercial enterprises are immediately responsive” (p. 212).

### **About the Reviewer**

L. L. Aull is a doctoral candidate in the joint PhD program in English and Education at the University of Michigan. In her dissertation research, she analyzes the editorial apparatus of university American literature and composition textbooks using genre and positioning theories. Such an approach brings critical analysis to bear on often overlooked materials, materials which help (re)construct disciplines, nations, and student and scholar authority.

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