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Review of Woessner & Maranto (2025)

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The paper “Do Gradebooks Lean Left” has fascinating findings, particularly as it concerns students with socially conservative attitudes. Perhaps the most interesting findings in the paper concern the potential treatment of socially conservative students. This is tied to work done by Rothman and Lichter (2009). The finding is more than just interesting as it opens up areas of research to focus on the potential plight of the socially conservative in academia.

However, at this point, I have to address the shortcomings of the paper. I will first start with the inadequate literature review. The paper basically goes from an introduction to the theory and hypothesis. But there is important literature needed to set up the theory. There have been arguments about academic bias that are not covered by the author. For example, scholars such as Gross argue that the political disparities in academia are determined by self-selection. Others have followed in that vein and yet I see no literature on self-selection. Furthermore, others have argued that conservatives are less interested in pursuing knowledge and would rather pursue money. The literature on the origins of academic bias is not adequately discussed in a literature review. The literature review can be built up by some of the arguments offered by the authors on pages 14 and 15 when they speculate on how political bias may impact the performances of students. As I read those pages I wondered why some version of them was not in the literature review. Is there no data on how religiosity may enhance the performance of conservative students in high school? An exploration of that possibility can be in the literature review. Finally, the literature review needed to go into more detail about the type of qualitative work that has already been done on conservative students and why it is insufficient for the task at hand.

The theory and hypothesis section also needs work. It does not seem to be written up in a traditional way as a hypothesis. For example, the argument about lawmakers seeing the university as politically biased is an argument for why the research question has merit, but not why we want a certain hypothesis. Furthermore, because the literature review is inadequate I am not certain the hypothesis is justified. For example, in H1 without a better understanding of the larger argument of bias versus self-selection, why would we think there is a global academic effect rather than an effect in certain disciplines or types of universities? Concerning H2, there is work looking at political and ideological disparities in the social sciences and humanities as opposed to

hard science and businesses. This seems more convincing to me that a general argument of ideological disparity. Finally, it seems to me that if you are going to assess high school students at least one of your hypotheses should include them.

Looking at the methods section there are clearly areas that need cleaning up. First, the regression tables were confusing since the authors did not indicate what were the values that were entries and what are the values in the parentheses. I assume that we are looking at standard Bs and SE but I am uncomfortable assuming such. The authors consistently make arguments that certain predictors are better than others but without knowing which coefficients are used in the models I am lost as to how to evaluate those predictions. In table 2 I wonder why not have a full model that contains both the ideological self-placement and the different political issues. That way we can see how much of the effect is due to an overall political perspective and how much is tied to specific political issues. Also, the discussion of the methods needs to be more thorough. I do not know if Sex is a Male or Female dummy variable. Did you check for missing cases? Did you check for multicollinearity with the policy variables?

And now comes my big concern about the methods. The hypothesis is that conservative students will have decreased grades more than liberal students. This is used by having grades as the dependent variable in the models. But for the life of me, I cannot figure out why you do not have change of grade as your dependent variable. That directly measures what you are assessing. If there is some statistical reason why you have not arranged your models with that as your dependent variable I do not see it. If you do then you should discuss that and why you used grades as your dependent variable. Otherwise, I would redo the models with change of grade as the dependent variable.

Minor points.

1. In the sentence about lawmakers in the first paragraph of the Theory and Hypothesis section I am not certain if “them” means lawmakers or students.
2. The tables are hard to read. It would have been better to put them in 12 point.
3. The sentence on the second to the last line on page 5 is unclear. Is she supposed to be see?
4. It would be interesting to look towards some data in sociology of religion to better understand how social conservatives may be more satisfied even if they suffer grade bias.