

# Groupthink in Academia

By Daniel B. Klein

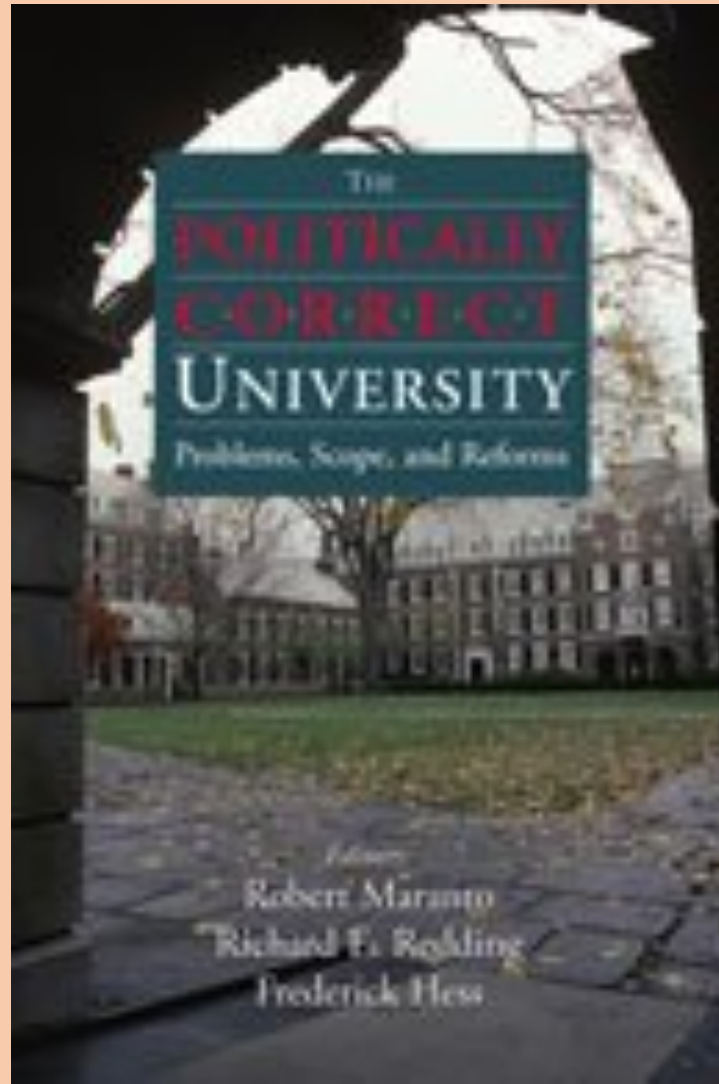
YouTube of lecture: <https://youtu.be/IM7BhXQCA5I>

For YouTube viewers

Click below for slide deck (pdf)  
containing links.

“Groupthink in Academia” by Klein and Charlotta Stern.

Published 2009 by AEI, and in *The Independent Review*



Focus on USA, but generalizes to many other.



“left” professor

What I mean:

- In D vs. R, *leans (or would lean) D.*

“left” includes centrist who leans D.

# “non-left” professor

What I mean:

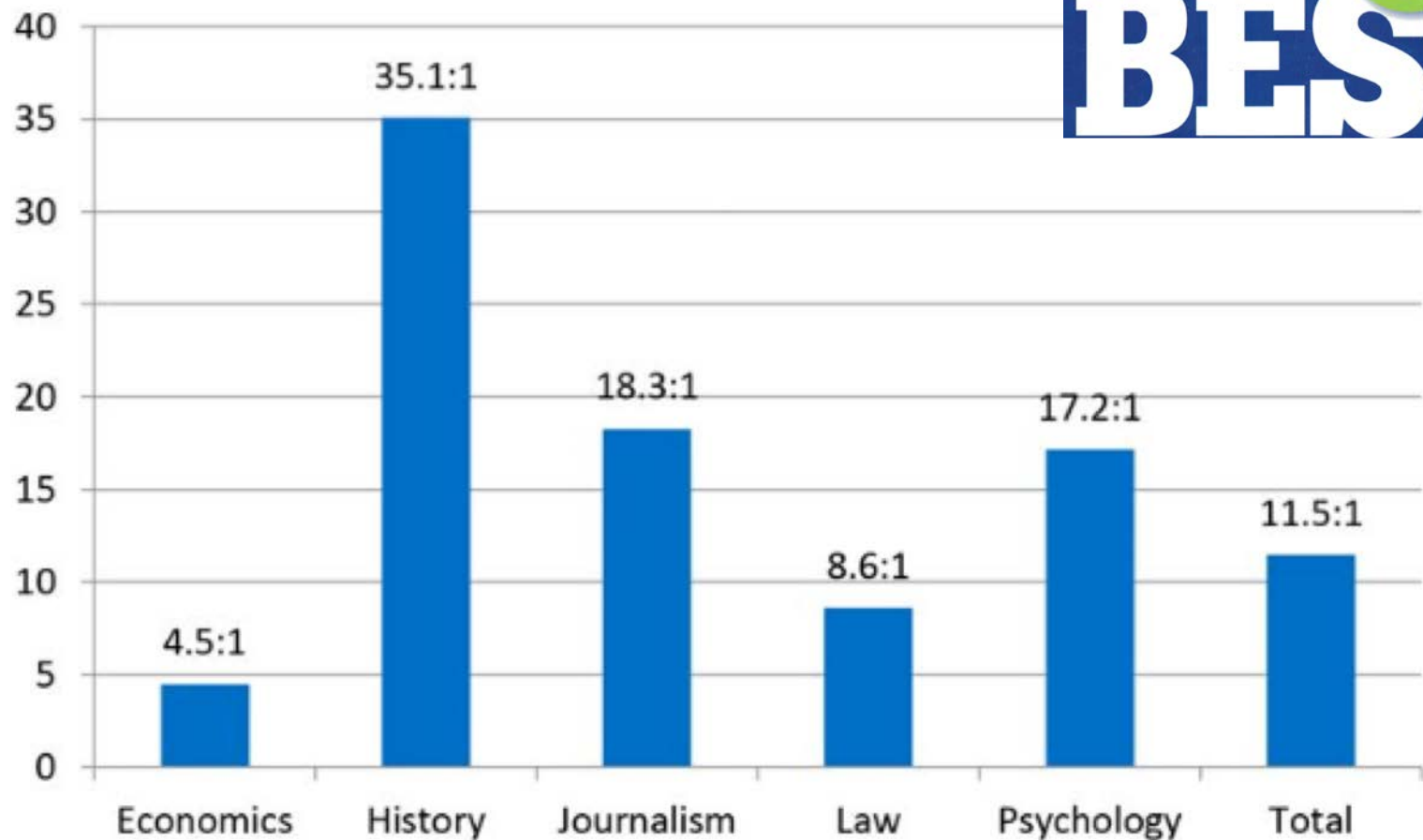
- Not only someone that would described herself as conservative, classical liberal, libertarian
- Also: In D vs. R, *does not (or would not) lean D.*

Thus, “non-left” implies not centrist-leaning-D.

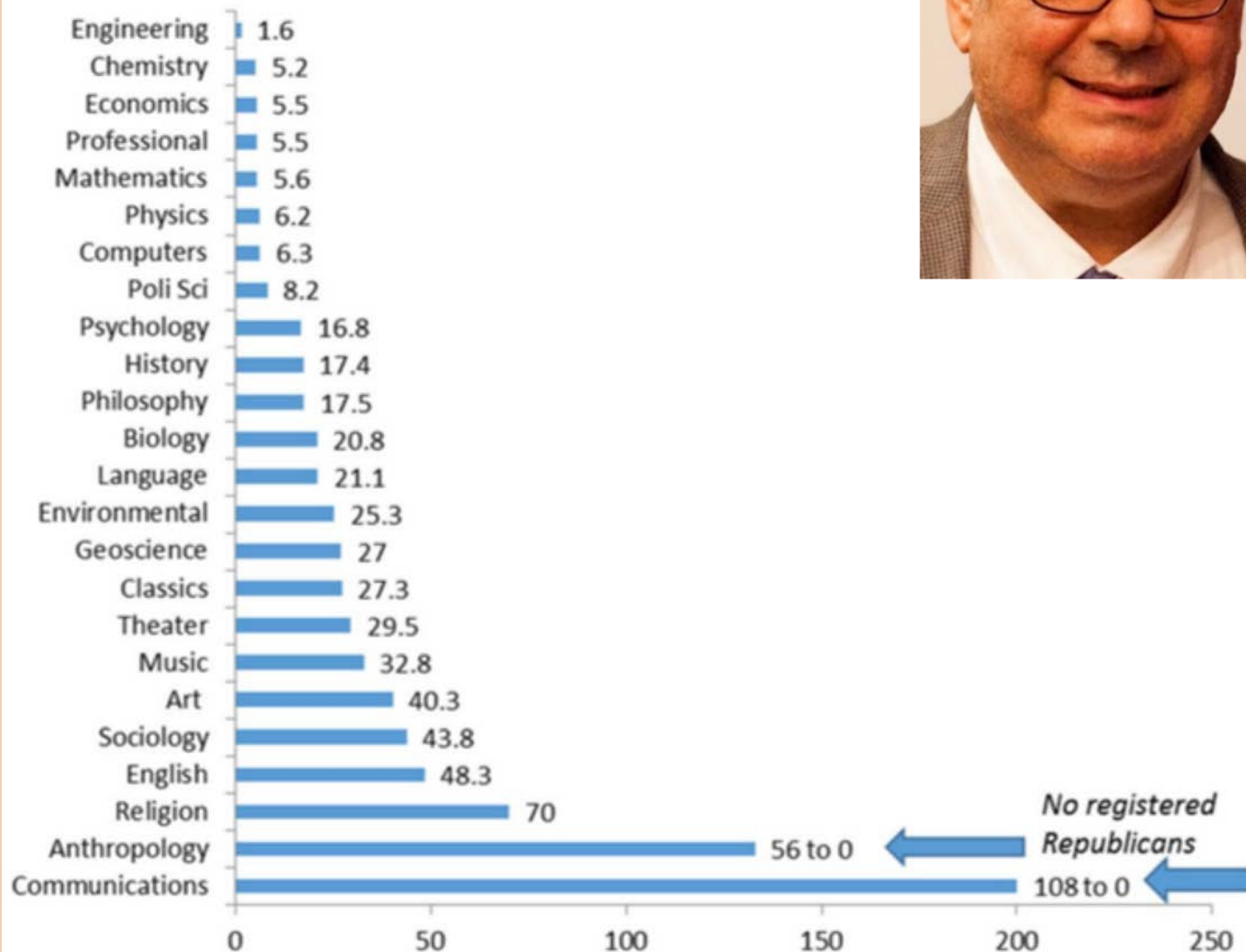
# Top Universities: Langbert, Quain, and Klein 2016



Figure A2. D:R ratios in five fields



# Top Liberal Arts Colleges, D:R: Langbert 2018





Responsible D:R estimates:  
H/SS faculty at *all* 4-year schools

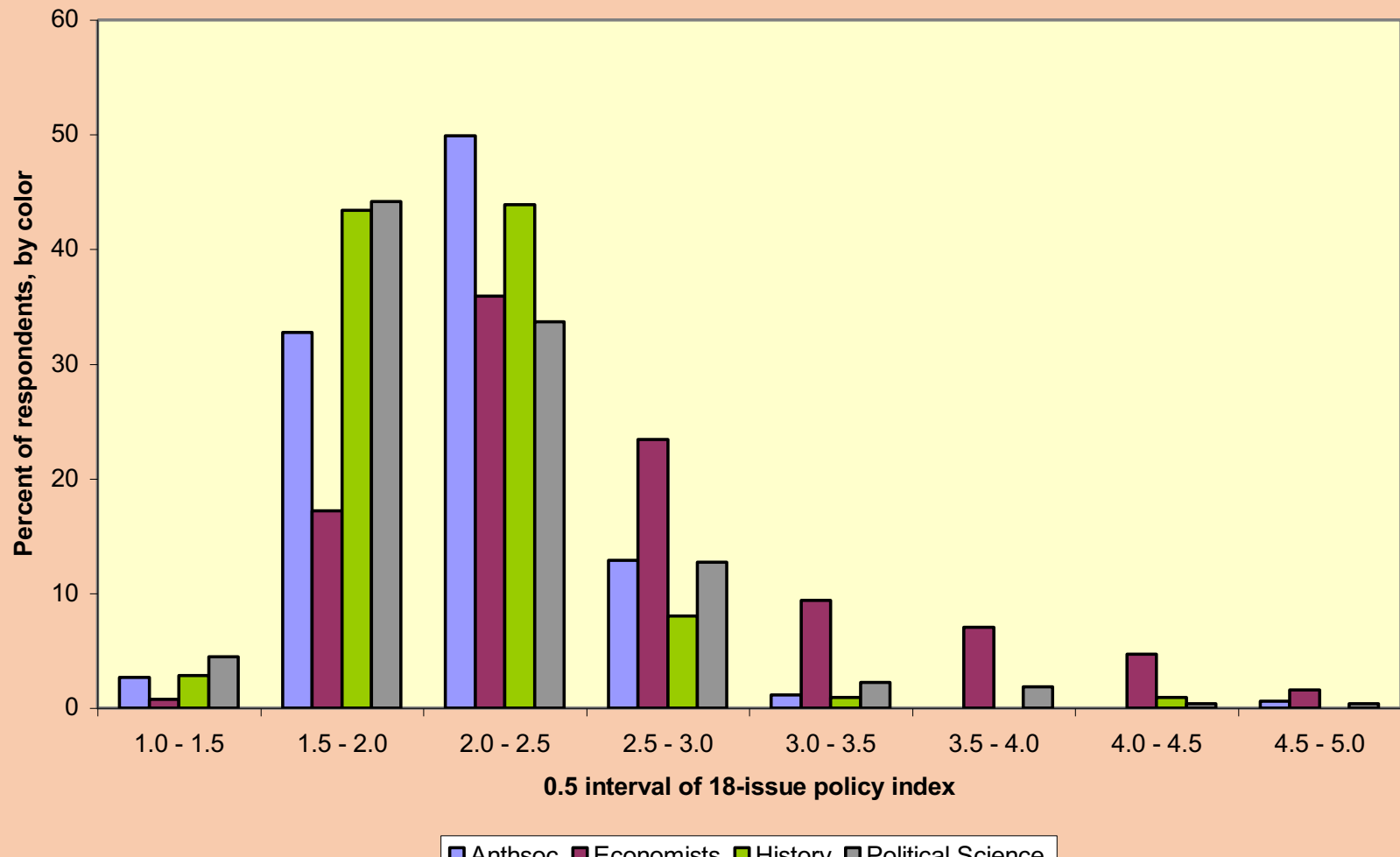
Composite '64/'68/' 72	Klein-Stern 2003	<u>Langbert,</u> <u>Quain,</u> Klein 2016
<u>4 : 1</u>	<u>8 : 1</u>	<u>10 : 1</u>

## Survey results on policy views

- Democrats are almost never CL.

1= pro-intervention  
5= pro-laissez-faire

Distribution of 18-issue policy index scores of academics in the disciplines



# Economics an exception?

	<i>Anth-Soc</i>			<i>History</i>			<i>Political Science</i>			<i>Economics</i>		
	D	R	All	D	R	All	D	R	All	D	R	All
<b>Mean</b>	2.15	2.39	<b>2.18</b>	2.04	2.38	<b>2.09</b>	2.02	2.53	<b>2.14</b>	2.36	3.29	<b>2.65</b>
<b>(St.D.)</b>	(0.34)	(0.43)	(0.40)	(0.32)	(0.67)	(0.41)	(0.33)	(0.58)	(0.49)	(0.46)	(0.71)	(0.73)
<b>[N]</b>	[443]	[21]	[519]	[169]	[20]	[212]	[208]	[37]	[267]	[78]	[27]	[128]

# Why so few CLs?

*Theory 1:* Academics are wise, and CLism is unwise.

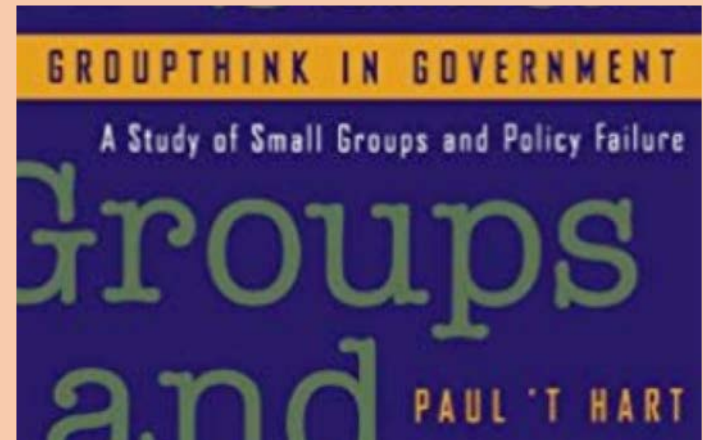
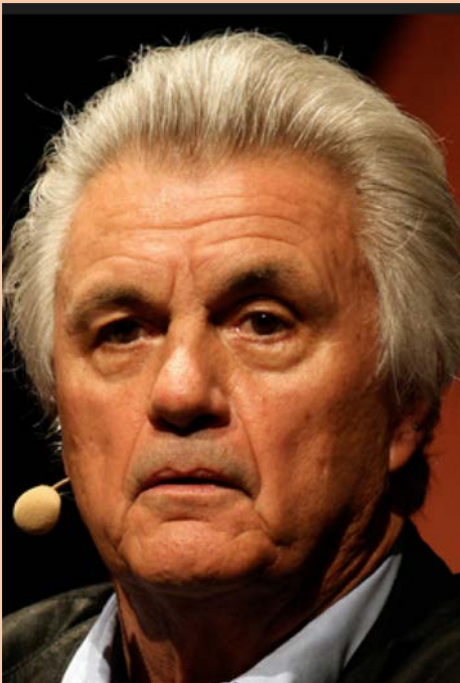
*Theory 2:* CLism is wise, and academics are unwise to the extent that they oppose CLism.

We proceed on Theory 2.

# Why are CL professors so rare?

- A **broader** question: Why are CLs rare in general?
- The question about professors is intertwined with the question about people in general.
- Here we focus on academia. We speculate on how **defective thinking** could become locked-in and self-perpetuating.

# Groupthink



# Groupthink

A group can make bad decisions and hold defective beliefs because:

- Excessive concurrence-seeking within the group. A lack of critical examination within the group.
- Too insulated from outside criticism. Outsiders are stereotyped.
- The group validates its own beliefs and decisions. Little independent testing, analysis, or evaluation.



# Groupthink

Presupposes **defectiveness**.

- “Groupthink” is pejorative.

# Groupthink settings

The contexts are narrow policy decisions taken by small group.

- Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba
- Vietnam War escalation
- Watergate cover-up
- Space shuttle Challenger disaster
- Etc.

Afterwards recognized as *fiascos*, even by perpetrators.

# Groupthink literature

- Sociology, social psychology literatures:
  - group dynamics
  - organizational theory and behavior
- Groupthink is also applied in:
  - political science
  - international relations
  - public administration
  - Management
- Janis “groupthink” works: 18,000+ Google Scholar cites

# Janis

“Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.”

(9)

# Hart

“the focus of this study will be on flaws in the operation of small, high-level groups at the helm of major projects or policies that become fiascoes.” (4)

# Similarities between Janis-Hart and our application

We, the analysts, presuppose  
that beliefs and actions are  
defective/unenlightened

There is an in-group

- many parallel mechanisms

# Differences between Janis-Hart and our application

J-H groups are

- small
- chief-based
- concerned about security leaks
- often under great stress
- often making high-stakes or risky decisions
- dealing with immediate exigent issues.

# Differences between Janis-Hart and our application

J-H groups sustain groupthink beliefs that are:

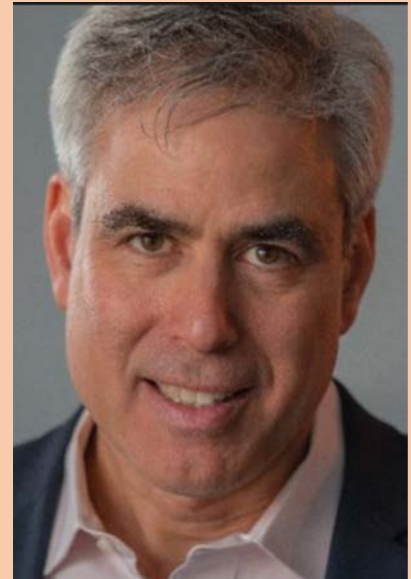
- specific to the decision at hand
- shallow, not about one's selfhood
- greater potential for eventual admission of defectiveness



# Differences between Janis-Hart and our application

Compared to J-H groups:

- Academic groups are:
  - larger
  - group boundaries are blurrier
  - not chief-based
  - less specific-action oriented
  - less stressful, urgent, risky, secret.
- Academic beliefs are:
  - deeper, more complex, 25-to-grave
  - more like moral, political, and aesthetic sensibilities
  - **SACRED BELIEFS**



## Adapting the theory to academia

Academia is a less cohesive group, with less clear policy decisions.

However, structural features make each academic “tribe” more cohesive than meets the eye.

Groupthink in academia?

How can entire disciplines  
remained mired in bad ideas?

# What is the XYU History Department?

You think of XYU as a hierarchical organization, led by the Provost or President, the trustees, the Deans of the divisions or colleges.



# XYU Humanities Building



Philosophy Dept

English Dept

**History Dept**

Romance Languages  
Dept

Communication Dept

“Department” sounds like a part.

Sounds like sub-unit.

Sounds subordinate.

# Unto Itself

## Important dept decisions

- Who to hire?
- Who to tenure and promote?
- What to teach?
- What to research? Whom to write for?
- Which students to promote?

The provost, dean, cannot meddle in dept decisions. On questions of History, no one is above the department. The dept is **autonomous**.

# Dept Procedure

How are hiring decisions made?

## **Majority vote.**

What happens when 51% share an ideology and feel that to be a good colleague and professor one must share it?

They hire one like themselves. **Homophily. Sacred.**

→ 60 percent, → 70 percent, → 80 percent . . .

→ eradication of minority viewpoints.

→ uniformity.



## Dept Ethos

- However, commonly an ethic of **consensus**.
- A vocal minority can sink a candidate.
- A tendency toward OK-by-everyone candidates.

Diverse History Depts?

The XYU History becomes ideologically uniform.

We get diverse History departments at different universities?

# On what basis does the dept decide?

## Important decisions

- Who to hire?
- Who to tenure and promote?
- What to teach?
- What to research? Whom to write for?
- Which students to promote?

Answer: The professional norms and standards of History, *the profession*.

- Partly, out of sincere faith in History
- Partly, out of practical need for focal points for consensus making

# The Professional Pyramid

The “ranking” of:

- Depts
- Journals
- Historians (“leaders of the sub-field”)
- Awards, kudos, grants

# History: The Profession

Nationwide, each History dept functions within a mono-centric club called History

The club hierarchy cuts laterally across the country

The XYU History dept is more a creature of History than of XYU

# XYU Humanities Building

Philosophy Dept

English Dept

**History Dept**

Romance Languages  
Dept

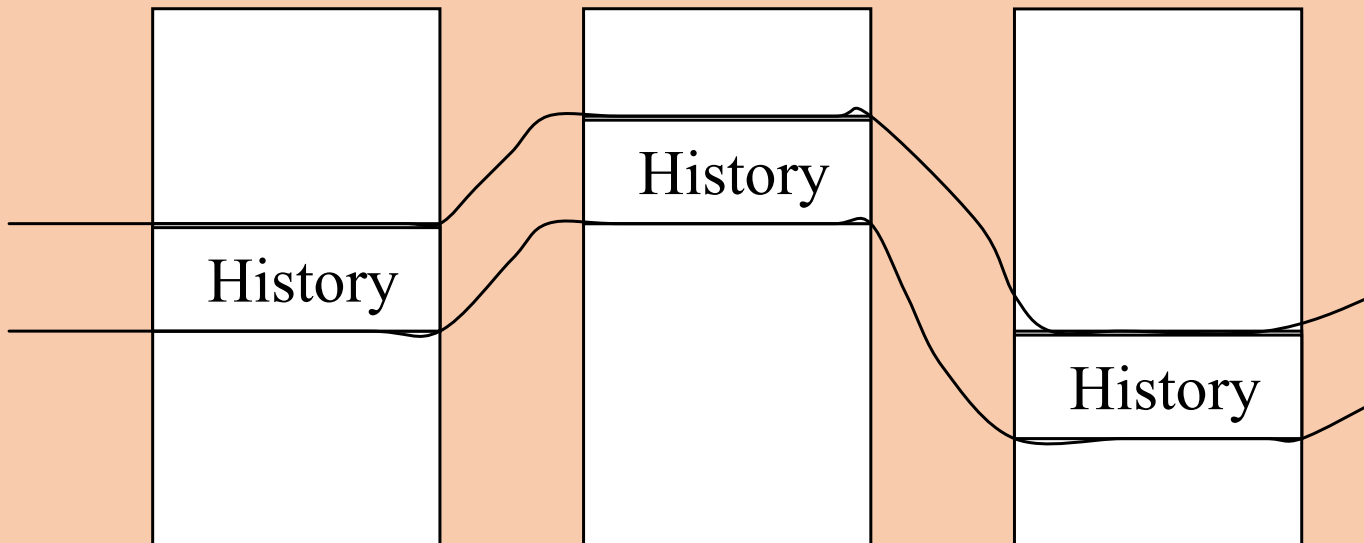
Communication Dept

# History cuts laterally in space

XYU

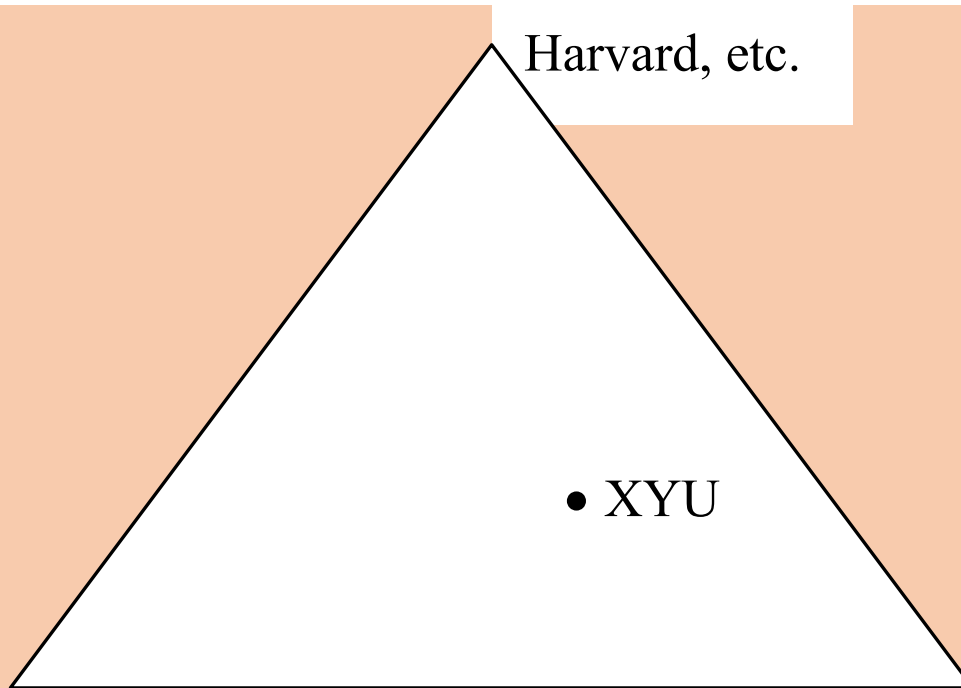
ABU

MNU



The XYU History Department is more  
a creature of History than of XYU

The History Profession Pyramid:  
Hierarchy of departments, journals, etc.





# Professional hierarchy

People like to think the discipline is:

- filled with independent spirits, independent centers of scholarship
- polycentric
- contestable
- diverse

It is very hierarchical.

Focused on the apex (including “field” apexes).

The *only* encompassing standard

Without an encompassing standard, a discipline has no prospect of being a coherent enterprise.

“History is what historians do. Historians are those with History degrees and History appointments.”

# Non-left views are heterodox

The pyramid remains the gravitational well of group practice and individual ambition.

If a parallel pyramid gets erected, it generally is either ignored. Sometimes co-opted.

How much real heterodoxy?

There are almost no non-left historians, especially at the apex.

What are the non-left parallel pyramids in History?

# Material resources

Jobs, pay and security

Not having to teach

Grant money

Grad students:

- research assistants
- teaching assistants
- an audience
- protégés

# Encompasses public and private

70-80 percent of professors are government employees.

Private schools are enmeshed in History.

New PhDs must be sold to History.

The market for History professors

Is it like the market for waiters?

**What if waiters were like  
History professors?**

# If Waiters were like History profs

- Each waiter job is controlled by a Waiter Dept.
- Each Waiter Dept spends money with slight regard for the preferences of restaurant customers.
- There are 200 Waiter Depts. Each Waiter Dept gets whatever prestige and revenue by adhering to the standards of the encompassing club.
- Each Waiter Dept produces the new young waiters, whom it tries to place in the pyramid.



# If Waiters were like History profs

Non-waiters are deemed unqualified to criticize the standards of the Waiter club.

Waiters at top depts set the tone.

- Waiters at the top depts rub shoulders with cultural elites.

If Waiters were like History profs

Then there might be a groupthink  
problem among waiters.

# The market for Historians

History is not like a normal labor market.

Supply and demand consist of historians.

Historians producing historians.

Historians buying historians.

# A Professional Club

History is like a genteel society drawing resources indirectly, much from tax-payers.

Circularities:

- Self-validating: Historians validate each other and the pyramid
- They replicate themselves in PhD students

# The case of Sociology in US

Val Burris, “The Academic Caste System: Prestige Hierarchies in PhD Exchange Networks,” *American Sociological Review*, 2004 . . .

# The case of US Sociology in US

“Graduates from the top 5 departments account for roughly one-third of all faculty hired in all 94 departments. The top 20 departments account for roughly 70 percent of the total. Boundaries to upward mobility are extremely rigid. Sociologists with degrees from non-top 20 departments are rarely hired at top 20 departments and almost never hired at top 5 departments.” (247-249).

# The case of Sociology in the US

“This information confirms the observation made by [six references deleted here] that mobility in academia is mainly horizontal and downward and seldom upward.” (249)

# The case of Law in the US

Brian Leiter of the University of Texas found that:

Among all new faculty who started in tenure-track law-school jobs 1996-2001, **more than one-third earned their J.D. from just three law schools: Yale, Harvard, and Stanford.**



# Intellectual culture beyond the academy?

Individuals and small groups can criticize. But little salience or eminence.

The academic discipline is highly insulated. Outsiders are ignored.

The market for History isn't free. Enlightenment will not necessarily win.

Majoritarian departmental politics, the professional pyramid, and sacred beliefs:

The combination can explain why unenlightened views come to dominate entire disciplines, and why the views go unchallenged in the society at large.

# Democrats per Republican

Composite '64/'68/' 72	Klein-Stern 2003	<u>Langbert,</u> <u>Quain,</u> Klein 2016
<u>4 : 1</u>	<u>8 : 1</u>	<u>10 : 1</u>

# Narrow-tent Democrats

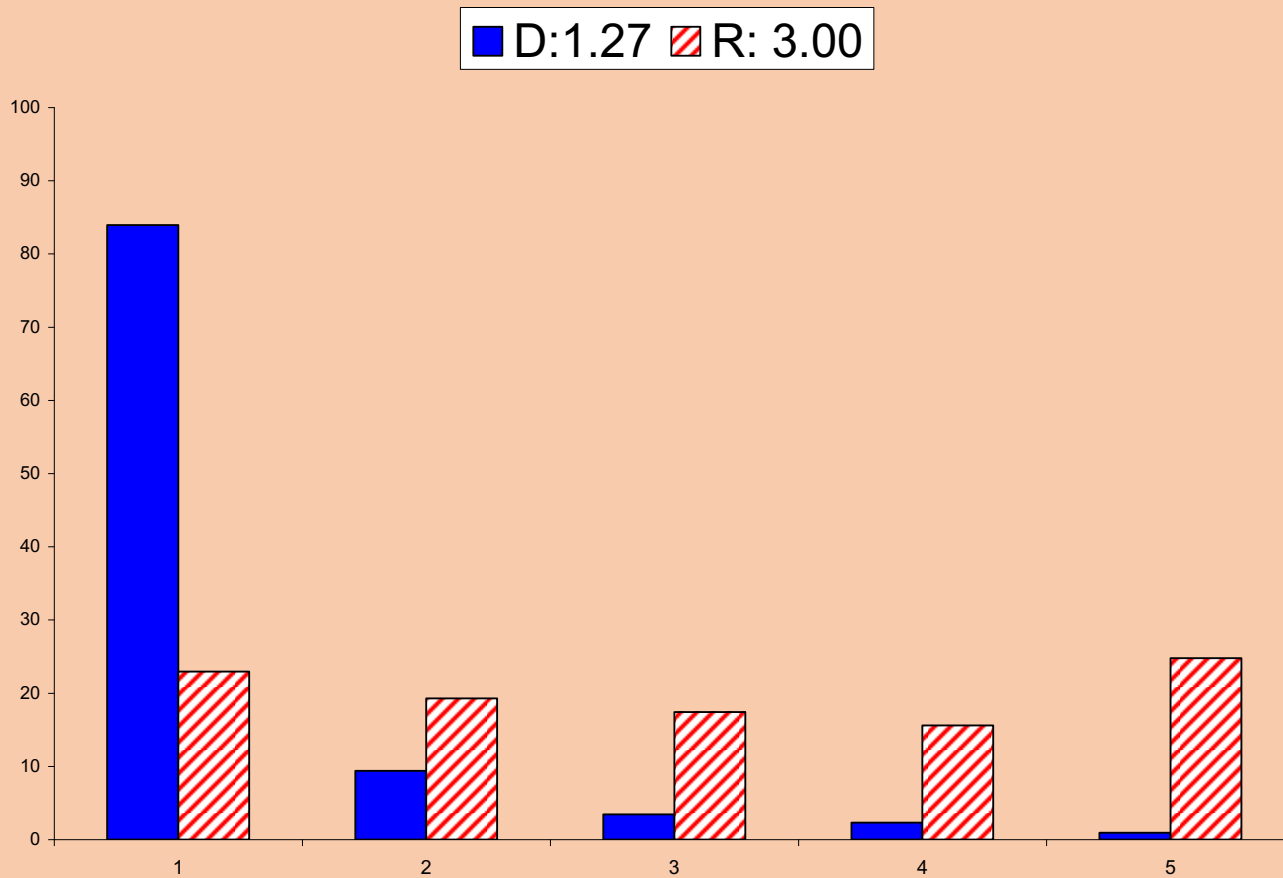
How much diversity under the Democratic tent?

1= pro-intervention

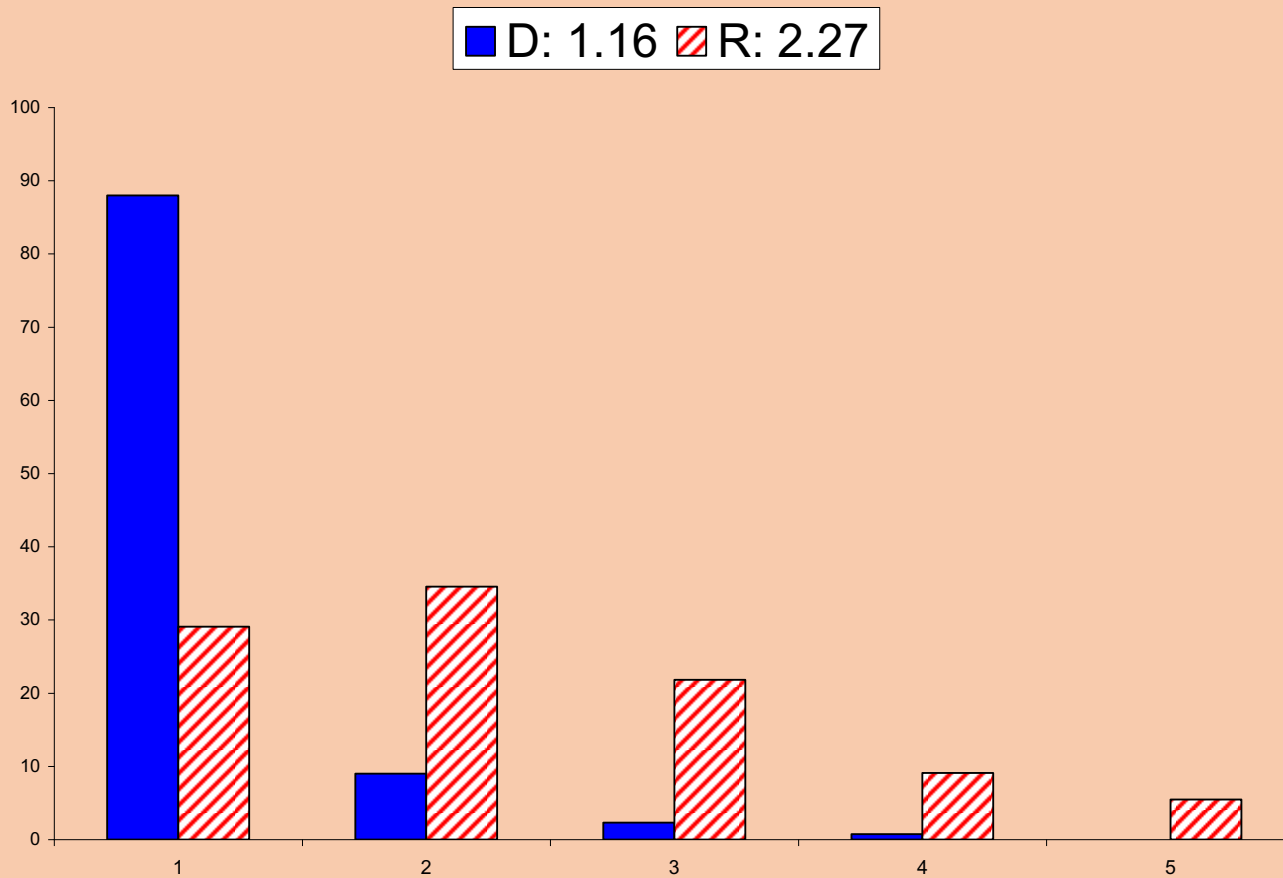
5= pro-laissez-faire

[Klein Stern Critical Review 2003](#)

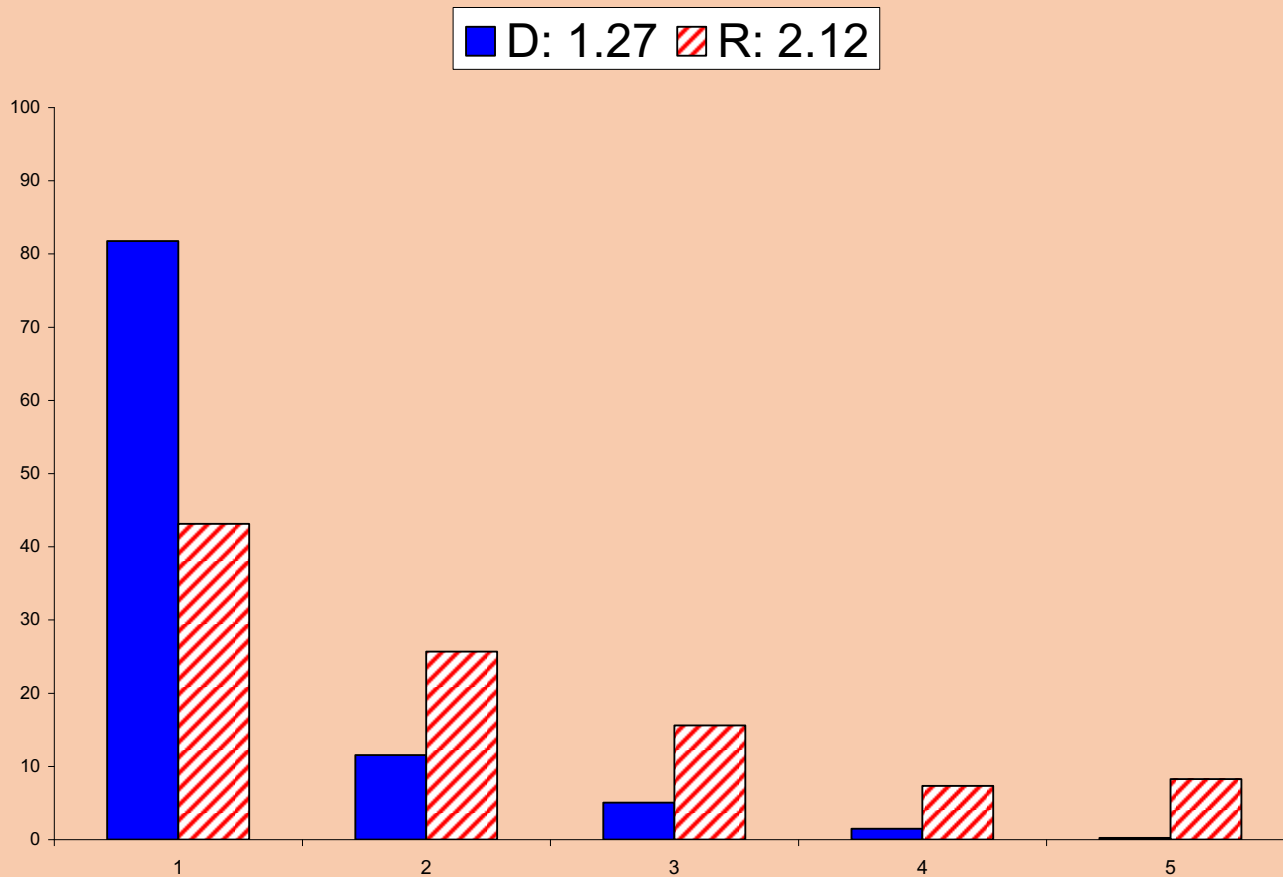
# Minimum wage laws



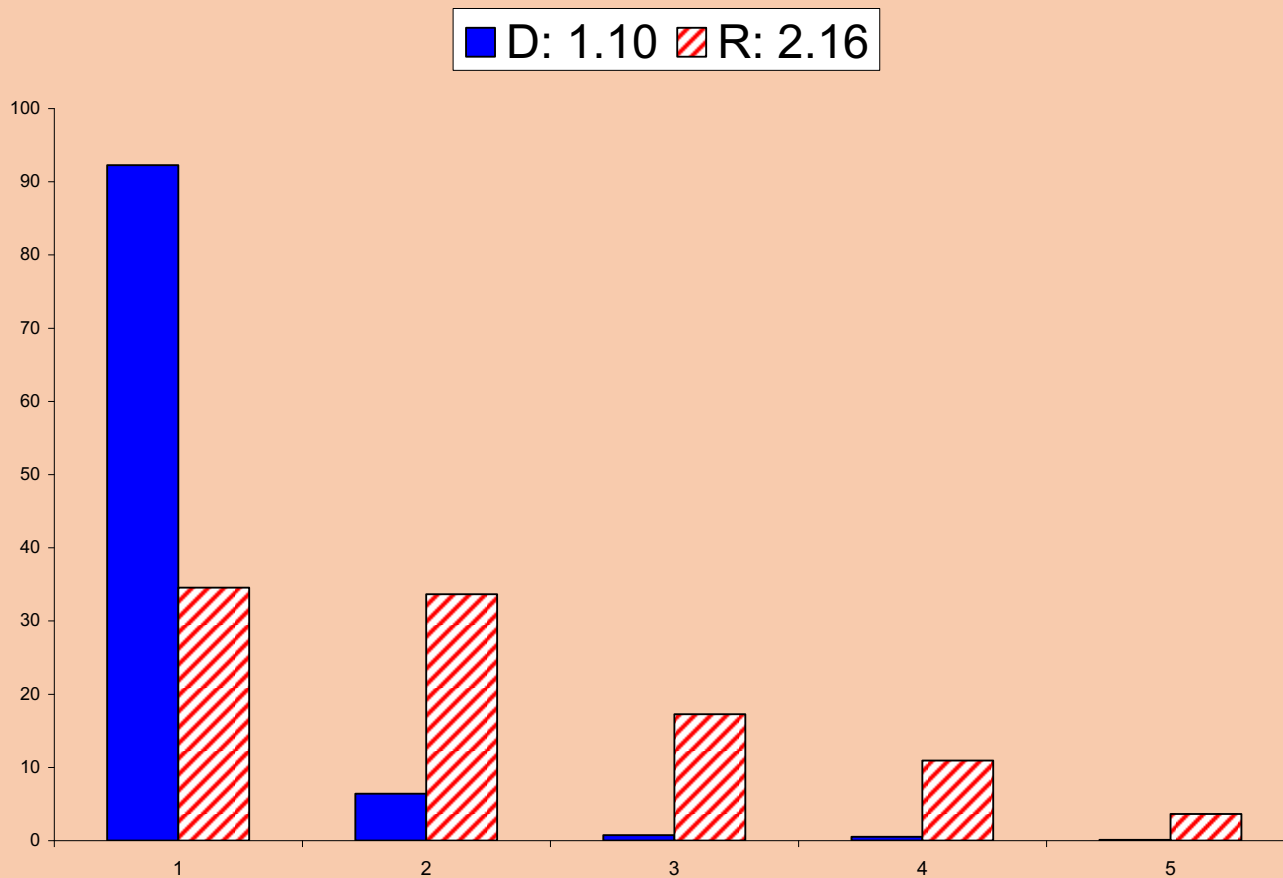
# Workplace safety regulation (OSHA):



# Pharmaceutical market regulation by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA):



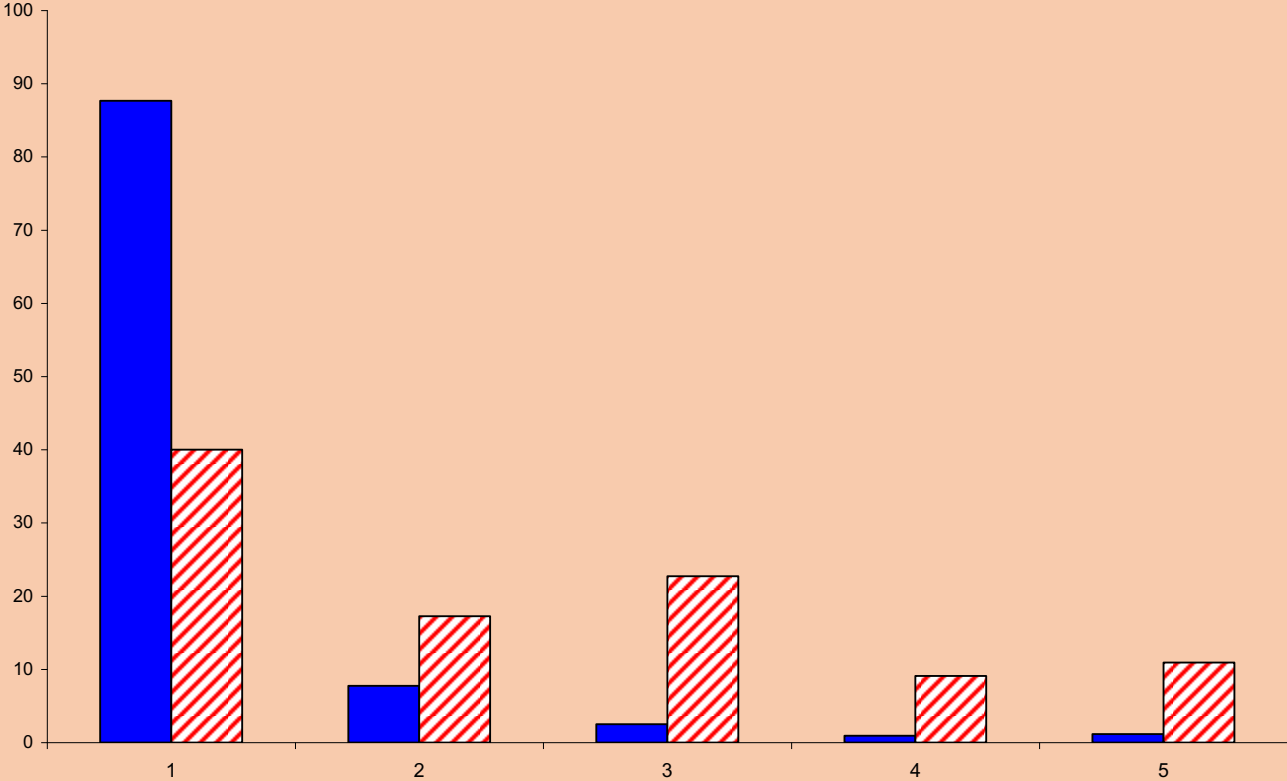
# Air-quality and water-quality regulation by the EPA:



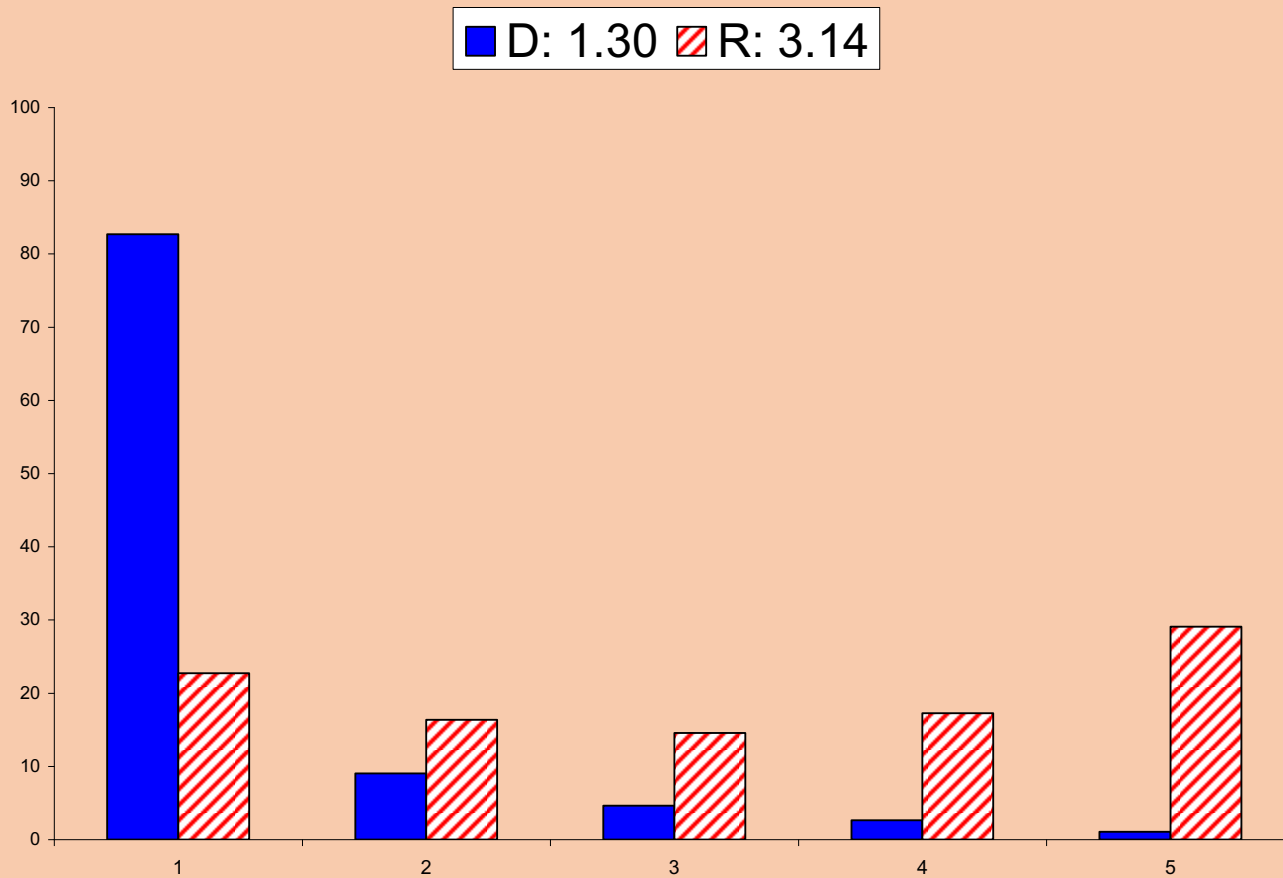


Laws making it illegal for private parties to discriminate (on the basis of race, gender, age, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation) against other private parties, in employment or accommodations?

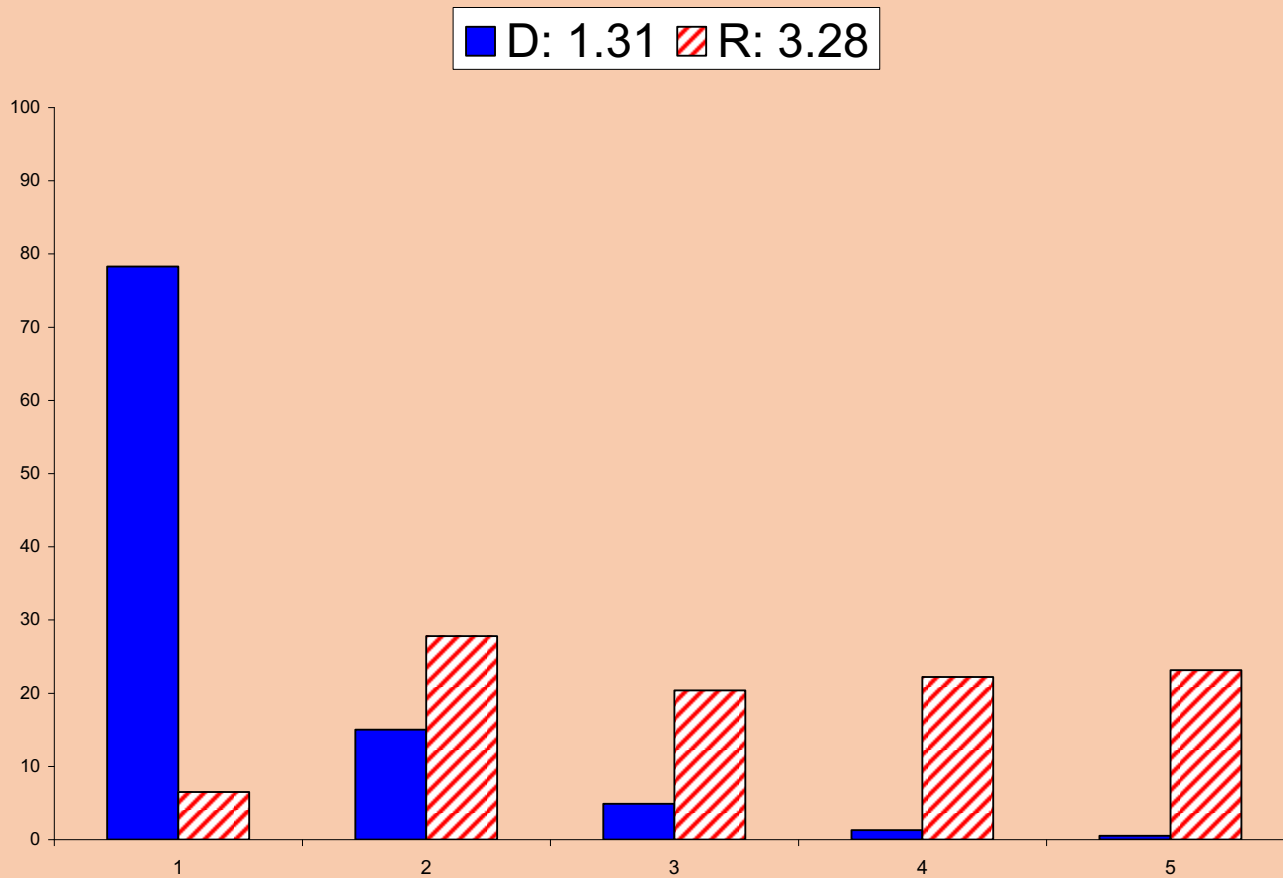
■ D: 1.20 ■ R: 2.34



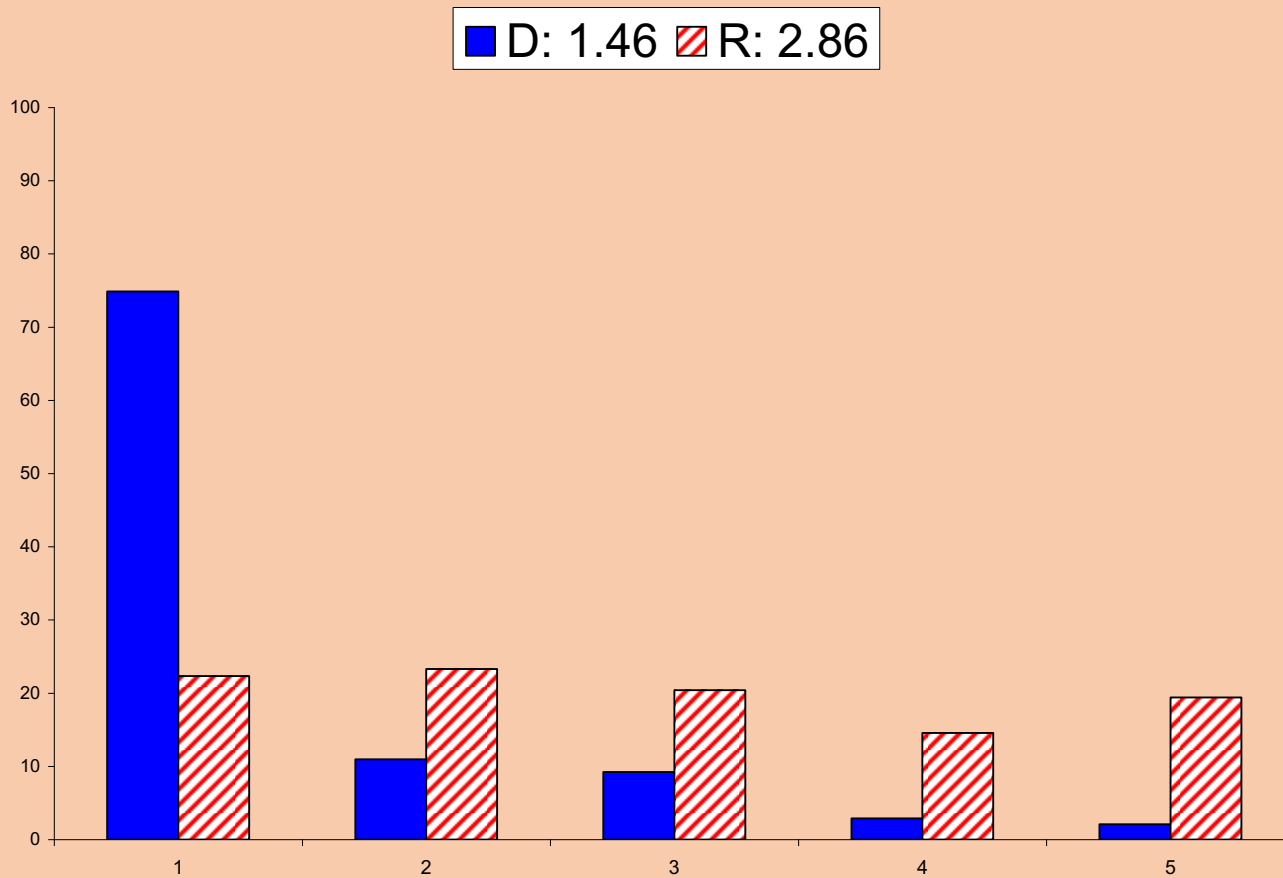
# Laws restricting gun ownership:



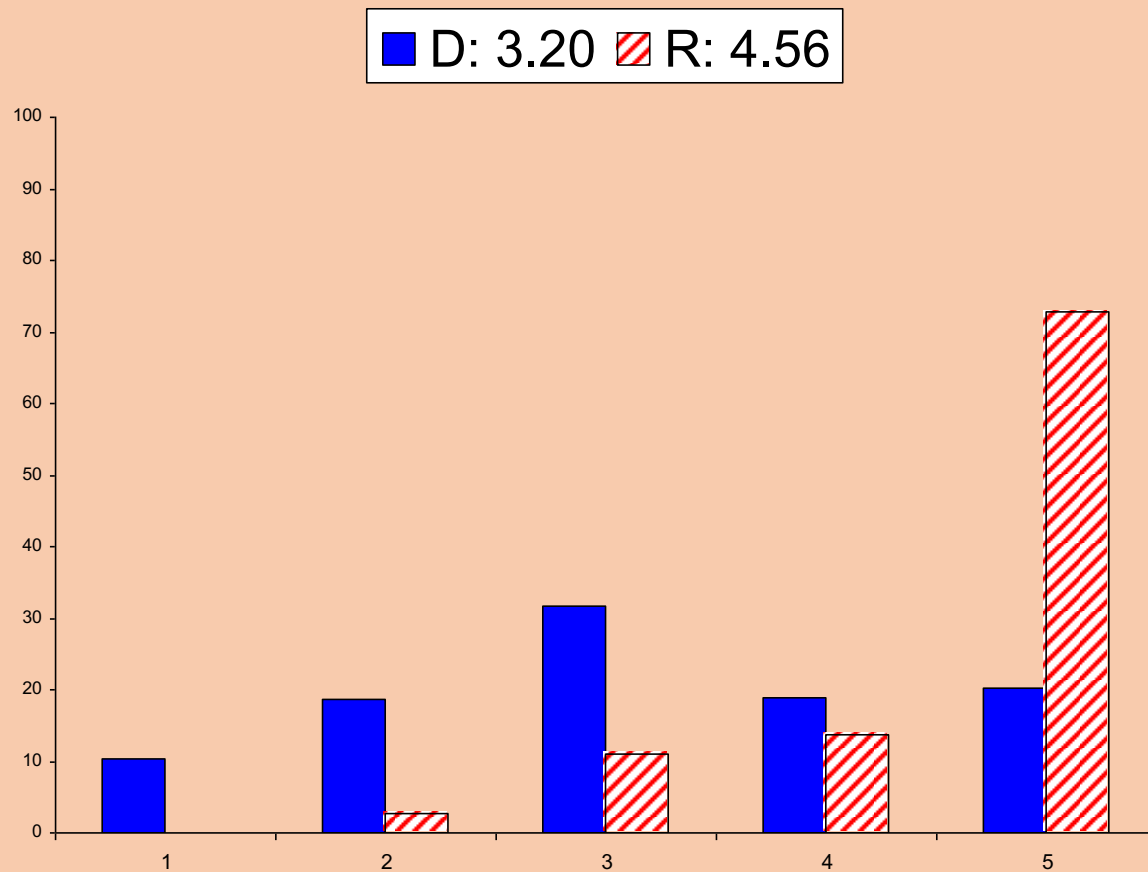
# Redistribution policies (transfer and aid programs and tax progressivity):



# Government production of schooling (k through 12):

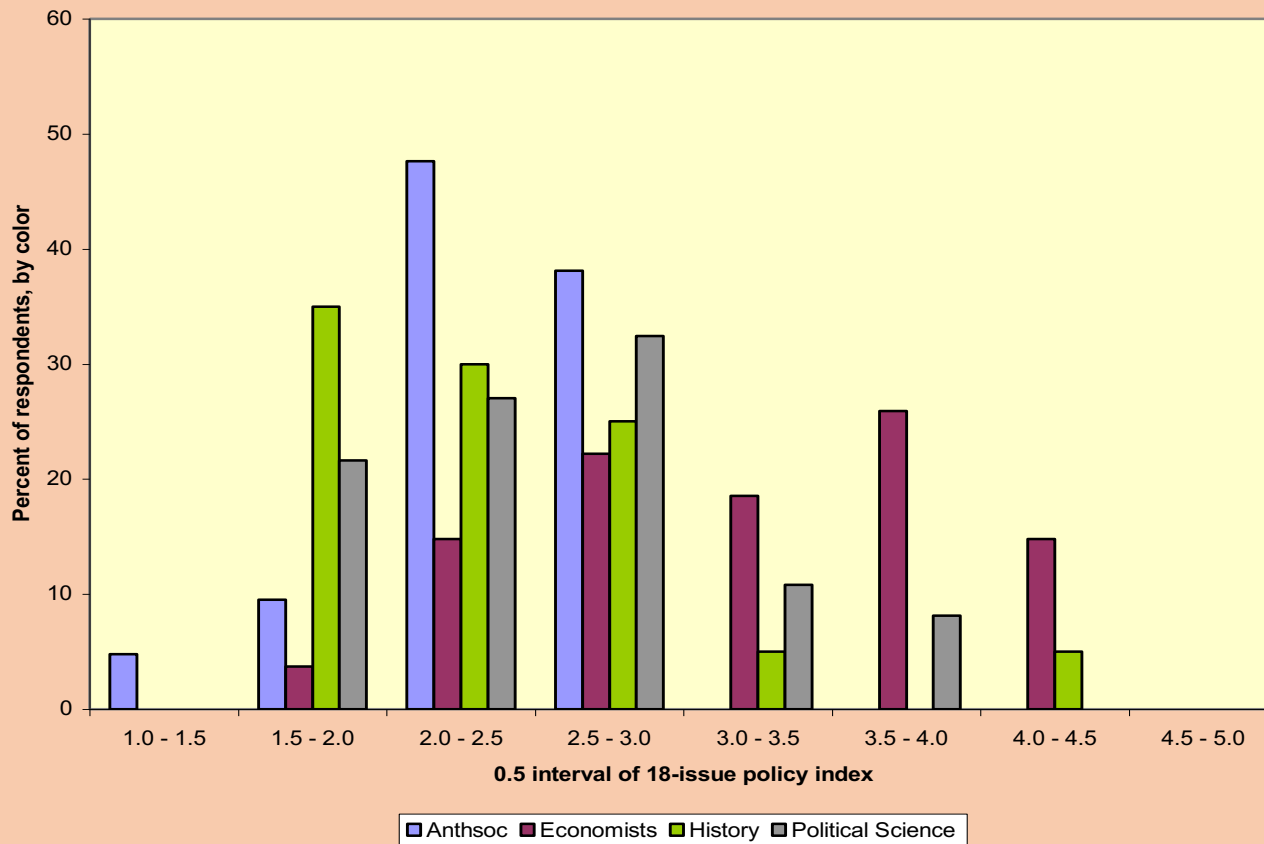


# Government ownership of industrial enterprises:



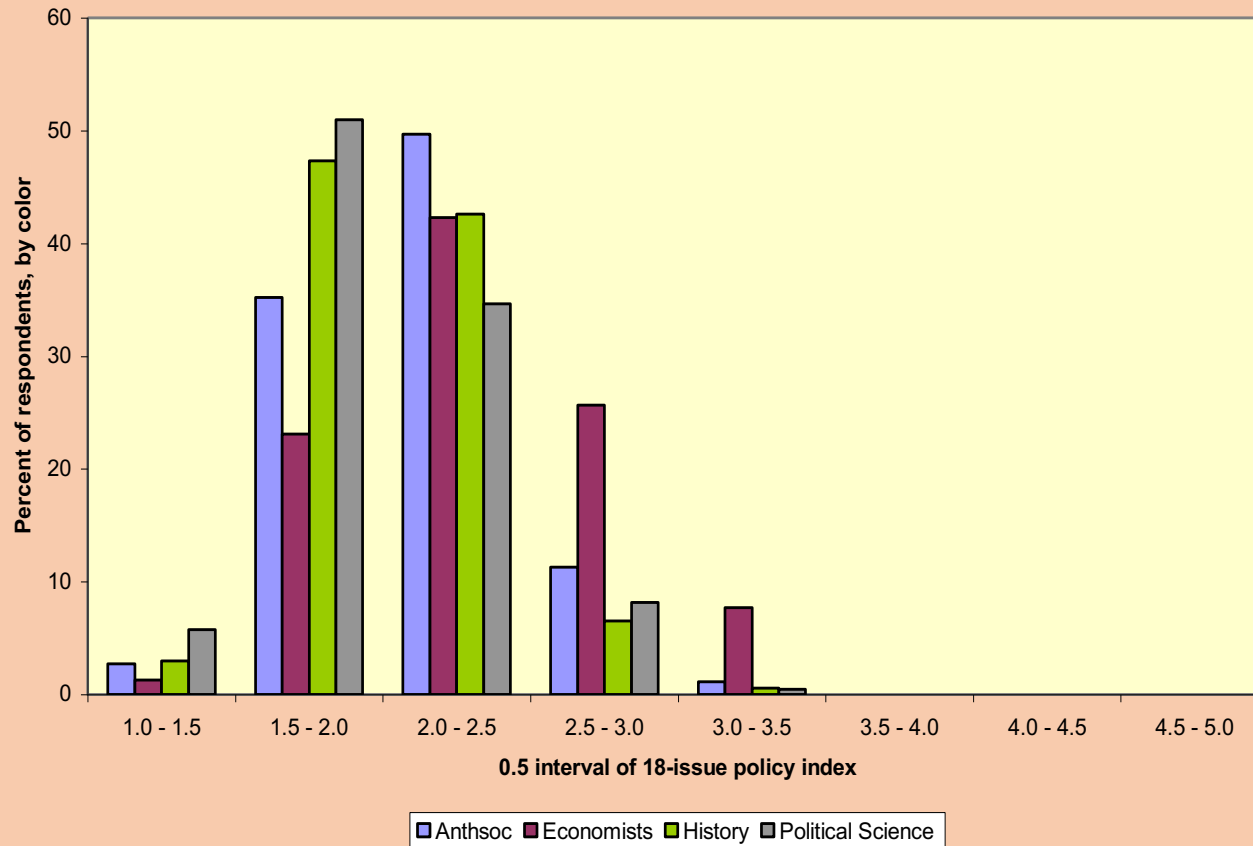
# Repubs' policy views

Distribution of 18-isse policy index scores of Republican academics in the disciplines



# Dem's' policy views

Distribution of 18-issue policy index scores of Democratic voters in the disciplines



# The Democratic tent is narrower

18 policy-response  
standard deviations

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Democrats 17.1

Republicans 23.1

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# Republicans sorted out

	Academic	Not academic
Dems:	962	322
Repubs:	112	78
<b>D:R</b>	<b>8.6:1</b>	<b>4.1:1</b>

Significant at 1%

Table 7. Chance of landing outside the academy.

	Anthropology- Sociology	Economics	History	Philosophy	Political Science	All disciplines
Dem.	0.239	0.490	0.268	0.220	0.126	0.25
Rep.	0.432	0.557	0.474	0.364	0.140	0.41

# Groupthink happens

Janis, *Groupthink*, Figure 10-1 (244), verbatim bits of the figure:

Antecedent Conditions:

A Decision-Makers Constitute a Cohesive Group

B-1 Structural Faults of the Organization

1. Insulation of the Group

4. Homogeneity of Members' Social Background and Ideology

# Irving L. Janis

## Symptoms of Groupthink

### Type I: Overestimation of the Group

1. Illusion of Invulnerability
2. Belief in Inherent Morality of the Group

### Type II: Closed-Mindedness

3. Collective Rationalizations
4. Stereotypes of Out-Groups
5. Self-Censorship
6. Illusion of Unanimity
7. Direct Pressure on Dissenters
8. Self-Appointed Mindguards

# Irving L. Janis

## *Symptoms of Defective Decision-Making*

1. Incomplete Survey of Alternatives
2. Incomplete Survey of Objectives
4. Failure to Reappraise Initially Rejected Alternatives
5. Poor Information Search
6. Selective Bias in Processing Information at Hand

# Groupthink happens

- “One of the symptoms of groupthink is the members’ persistence in conveying to each other the clichéd and oversimplified images of political enemies embodied in long-standing ideological stereotypes” (37).
- “When a group of people who respect each other’s opinions arrive at a unanimous view, each member is likely to feel that the belief must be true. This reliance on consensual validation tends to replace individual critical thinking and reality-testing . . . ” (37).

# A narrative

- In 1972 the h/ss faculty was preponderantly Democratic. Heightened uniformity made the group over-confident. Facing less testing and challenge, the habits of thought became more foolhardy and close-minded. Distant from real intellectual critics, the professors latch on to stereotypes. As the quality of belief deteriorated, the group became more sensitive to tension. This led to tighter vetting and expulsion, more uniformity, more intellectual deterioration.

- The result is a professoriate lacking intellectual tension. Taking behavioral cues from one another, each faculty member gets intellectually lazy and slips into bad intellectual habits. Their stereotypes, superstitions, and taboos are often institutionalized as “academic standards,” and permit them to evade real intellectual challenge.

The tenure vote cannot be put on trial.

They can lynch a vocal non-left Assistant Professor and get away with it.

Non-leftists know this and respond accordingly.



People often think that the non-left professor only needs to get tenure.

But graduate school and pre-tenure employment is about 11 years. You find you are no longer yourself.

Your 20s and early 30s are a crucial period of development and cannot be reversed.

Even after tenure, you depend on department colleagues for pay raises, resources, teaching assignments, scheduling, promotions, recognition, and consideration.

Standing up for your ideas usually brings acrimony.

Thus, even tenured non-leftists shrink from criticizing the dominant ways of thinking.

The non-left profs are cowed, reserved, domesticated. Only such could survive the process.

The more uncongenial academia becomes, the more non-leftists sort themselves out.

Anyone contemplating an academic career knows the score.

Graduate students never encounter non-leftists.

# “Diversity” fraud

Tumbling to uniformity, the faculty touts  
“diversity.”

- Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preferences, everyone equally may embrace leftism.

# Deep civilizational groupthink

Ancestral band: [Cohesionism](#) (Hayek's atavism thesis)

The big change in Anglosphere occurs 1880-1940

- Subversion of the liberal lexicon:
  - freedom
  - liberty
  - liberalism
  - justice
  - rights
  - law
  - rule of law
  - equity
  - equality
  - contract

# Deep groupthink

Epiphenomena of leftism:

“diversity”  
“multiculturalism”  
“postmodernism”  
“intersectionality”  
“sustainability”  
“social justice”

Is it possible that cohesionism

- ⇒ Leftist politics
- ⇒ How they do things
- ⇒ Impulse to cultural influence, activism?
- ⇒ [Steven Pinker “The Left Pole”](#)

Civilizational:

k-12  
media  
entertainment, arts  
publishing  
professions  
government sector  
academia

# Imagine the following dissertations:

- Adam Smith was not supportive of government redistribution.
- The welfare state is morally bankrupt.
- F.D.R. prolonged the Great Depression.
- Right-to-carry laws reduce violent crime.
- American labor law hurts the poor.
- Most government recycling interventions are a waste.
- The school system in this country is a socialist failure.
- “Social justice” is a misguided formulation.
- Most progressives of the progressive era were racist.
- Fascism is best understood as a left-wing phenomenon.
- Organizational integrity varies positively with the voluntary basis of participation and funding.

# Enlightened ideas frozen out

Such dissertations will tend to be frozen out of the “top” journals and jobs.

Editors and referees can resort to any manner of excuse, including that “liberty,” “voluntary,” etc. are illusory concepts.

If necessary, they will revert to dogmas that obscure the coercive nature of government and the collective foolishness of democracy.



# Deep groupthink in economics

Knowledge flattened down to information.

The entrepreneur has been eradicated from mainstream economics.

Vital work dismissed as “normative.”

Liberty is blurred as “institutions.”

# Deep groupthink in Sociology

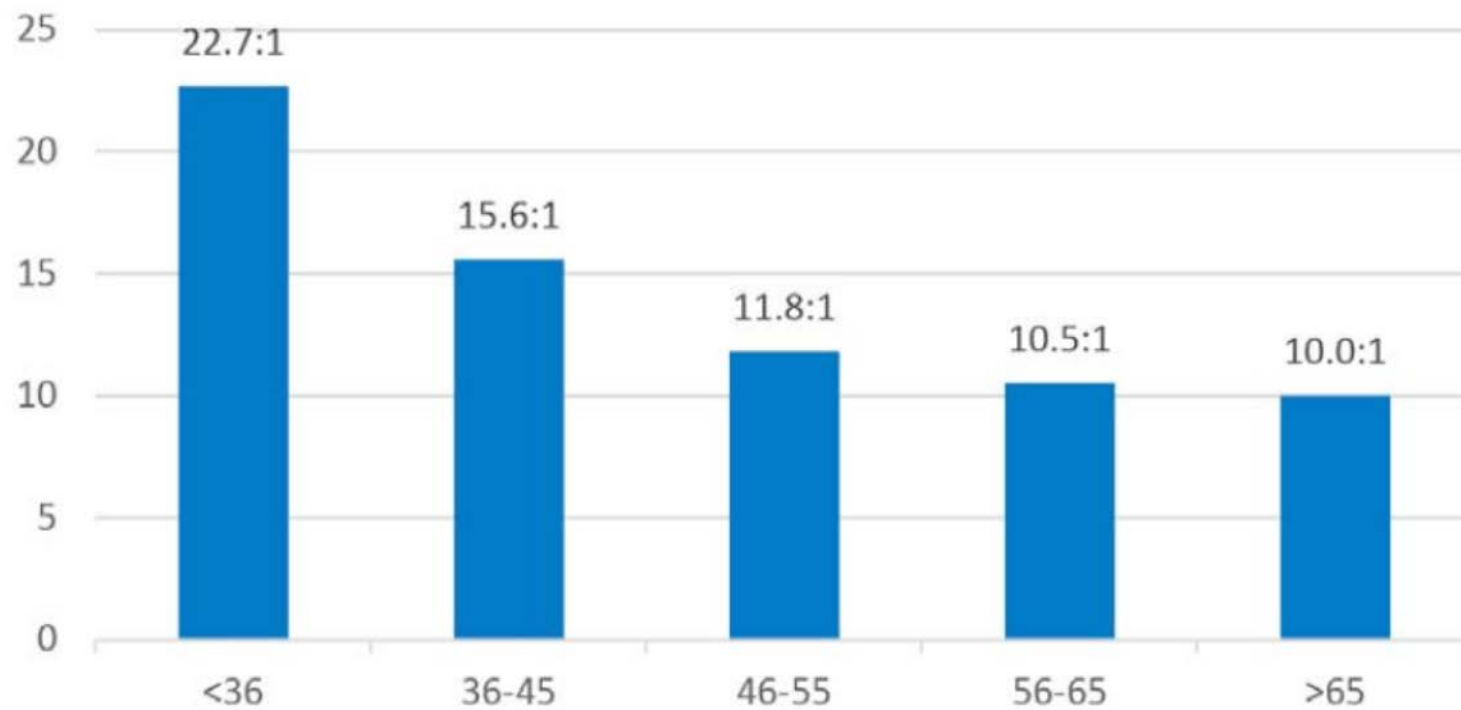
Code-words for governmentalization: “society,” “social,” “solidarity,” “community,” “cooperation.”

Code-words for liberty: “the market,” “competition,” “neo-liberalism.”

# Age

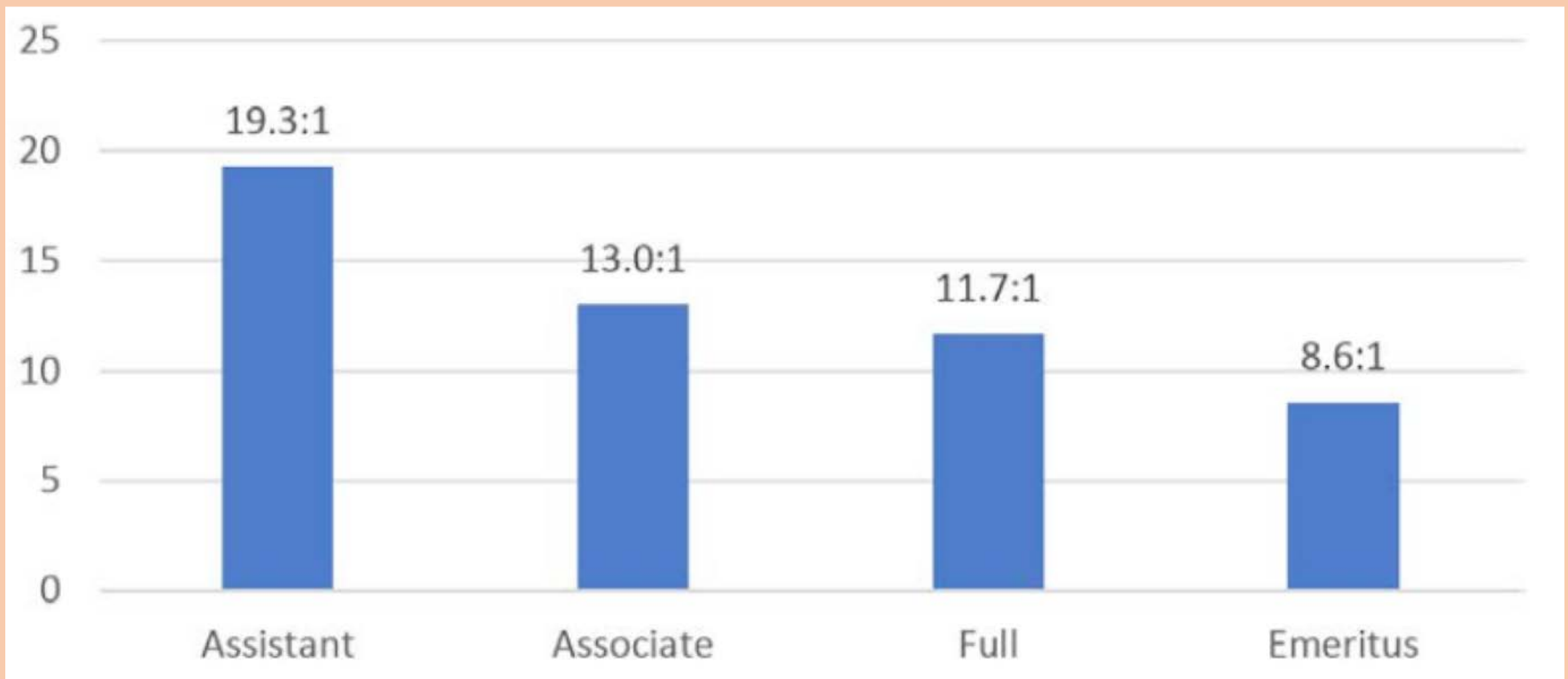
[Langbert, Quain, and Klein 2016](#)

**Figure 5.** D:R ratios by professor age



# Rank

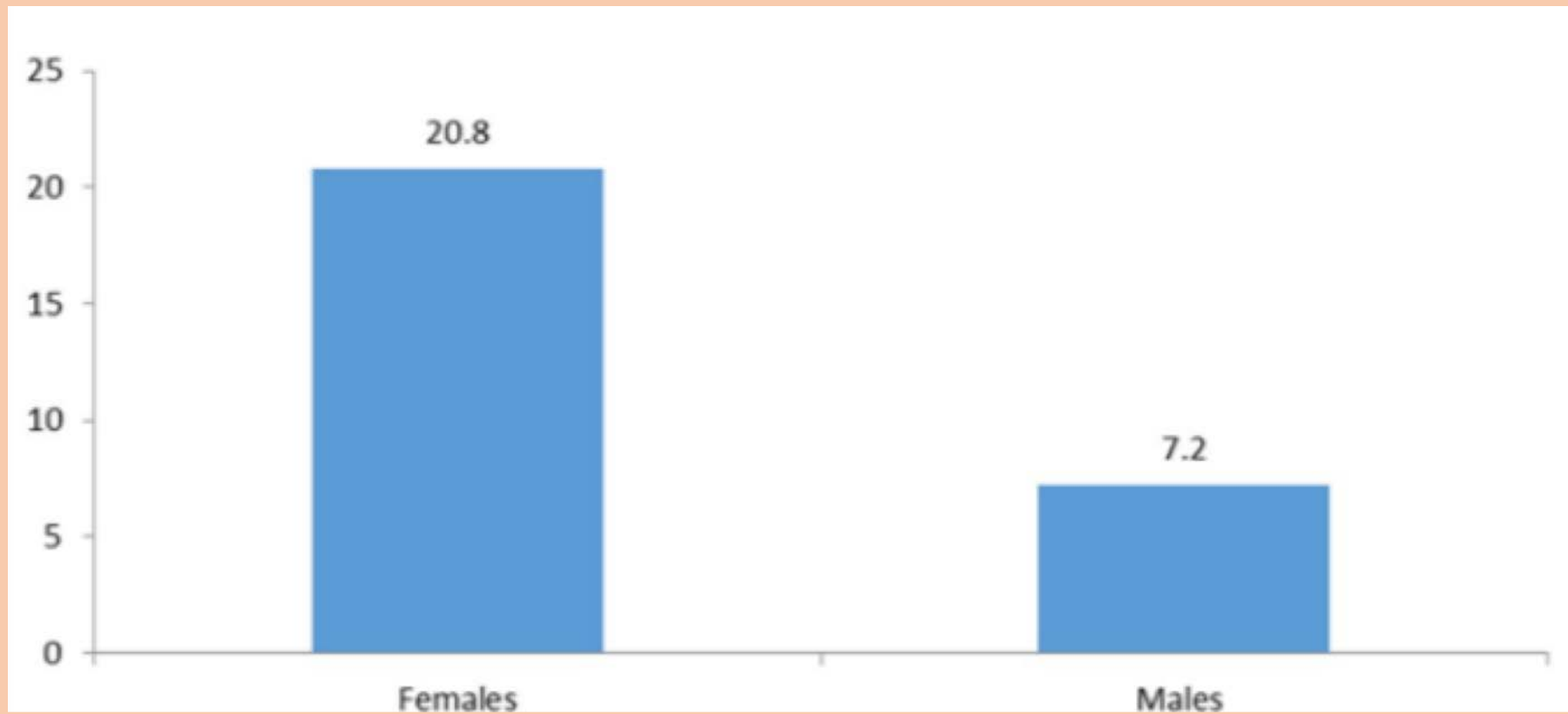
Langbert, Quain, and Klein 2016



# Gender

[Langbert 2018](#)

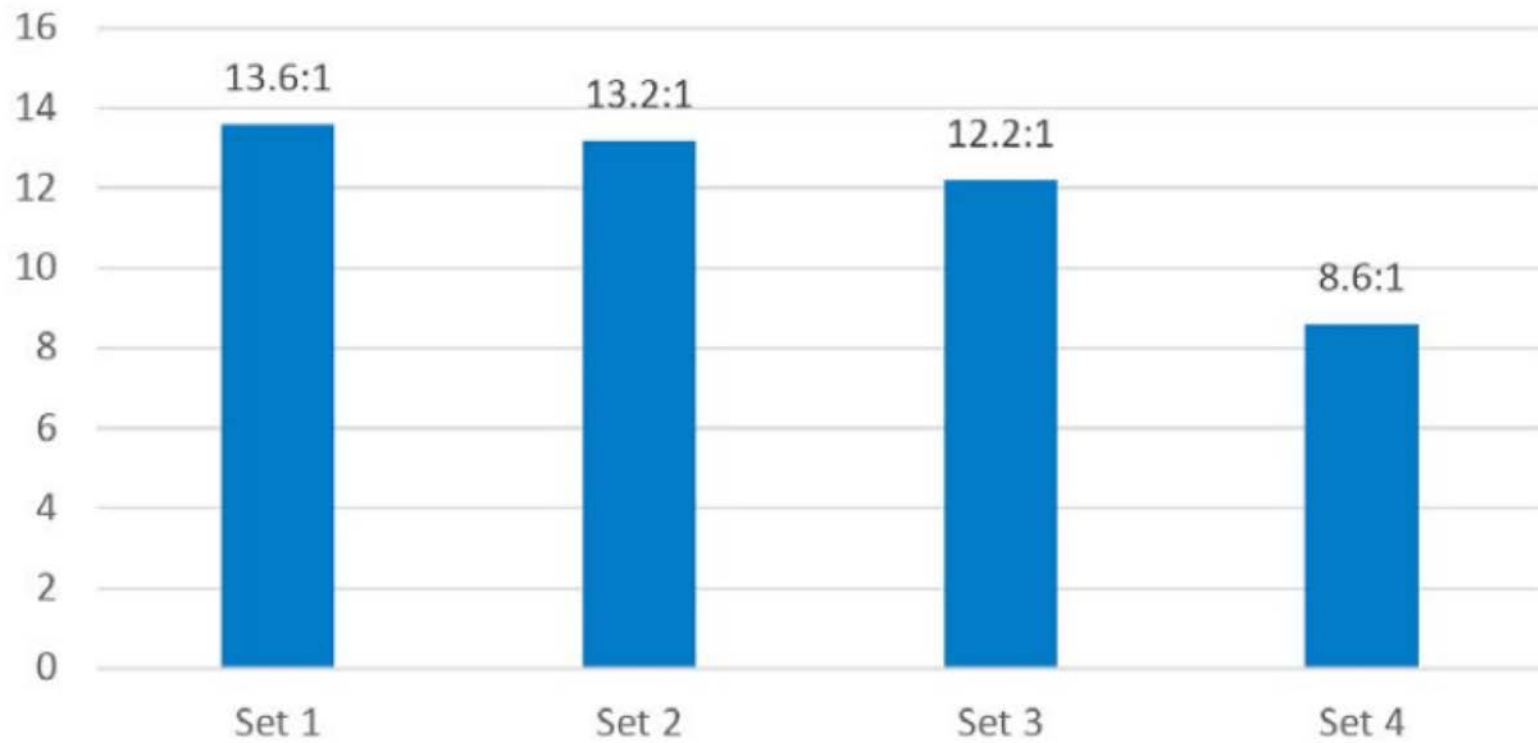
(similar in Langbert, Quain, and Klein 2016: F: 25:1, M 9:1)



# Tiers

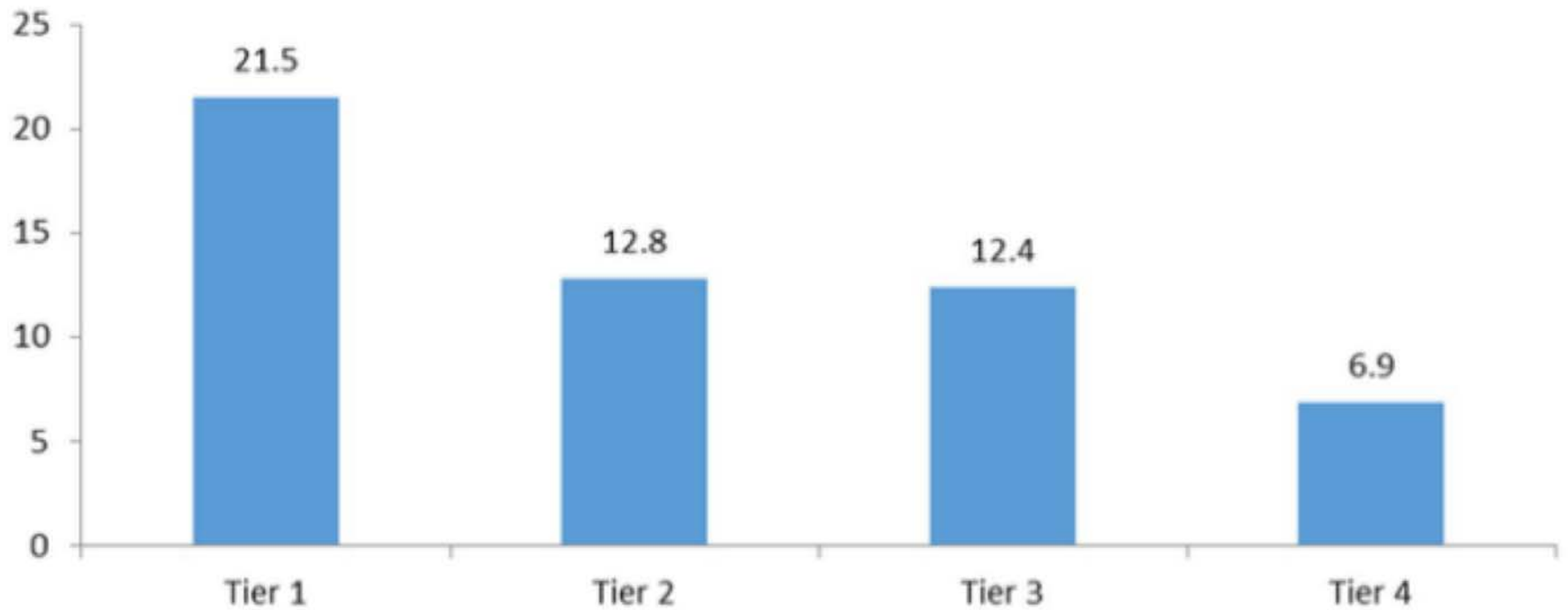
[Langbert, Quain, and Klein 2016](#)

**Figure 6.** D:R ratios by *U.S. News and World Report* university rank

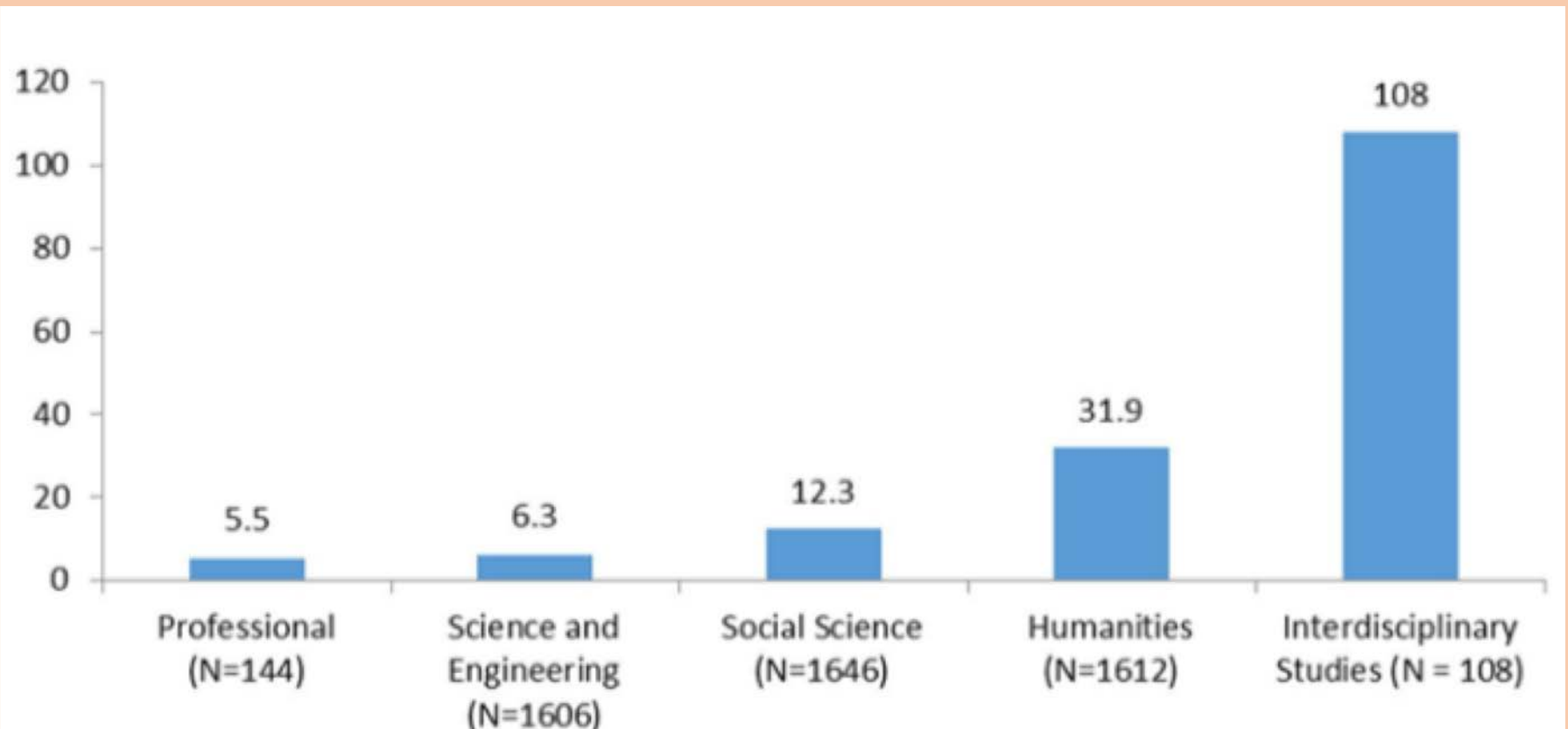


# Tiers

[Langbert 2018](#)

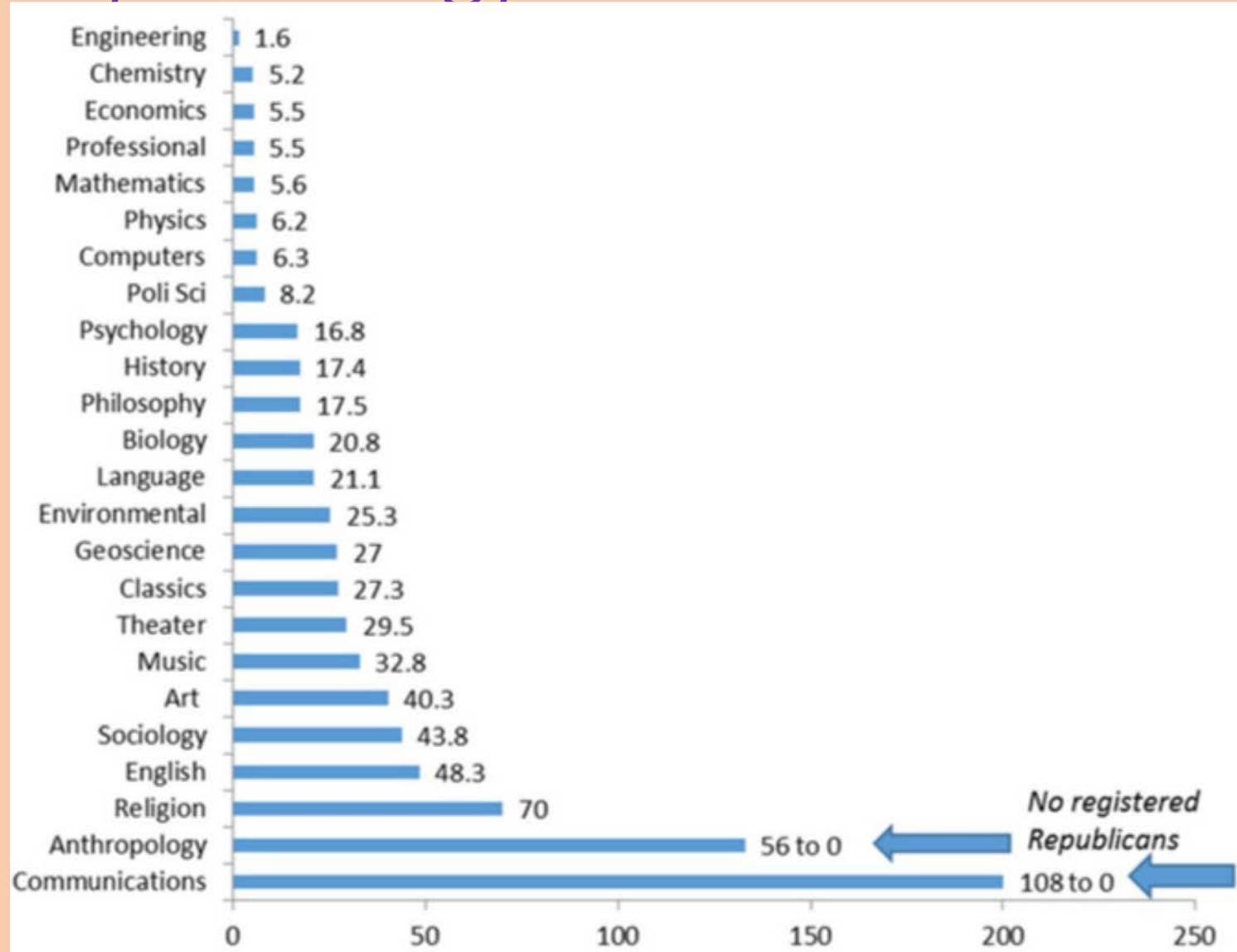


That's why I say 10:1 for *all* four-year schools, H/SS faculty.





# Why is Biology 20:1?



# What is to be done?

## By whom?

- By the left profs themselves:

Correct thyself:

Be more CL.

# Janis:

“If the members agree that loyalty to their group and its goals requires rigorous support of the group’s primary commitment to open-minded scrutiny of new evidence and willingness to admit errors (as in a group committed to the ideals of scientific research), the usual psychological tendency to recommit themselves to their past decisions after a setback can give way to a careful reappraisal of the wisdom of their past judgments. The group norm in such a case inclines them to compare their policy with alternative courses of action and may lead them to reverse their earlier decisions” (113).

# Overcome majoritarian departmental decision making?

How?

- Affirmative-action: Check an ideology box?
- Property rights within depts (Stephen Balch)

# Overcome the professional pyramid?

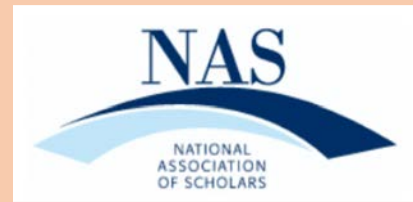
How?

- Create new departments
- Create campus institutes
- Create new schools





LIBERTY FUND



# What is to be done?



By non-left scholars



• **Challenge:** Take on leftism, outside the academy

- Create scholarly networks
- Scholarly IDW



• **Bargain:** Shake hands with the academic establishment

- Be a “domesticated dissenter” (Janis 115-116, 257)



# What is to be done?

By non-left public officials, citizens, voters:

- Reduce tax-payer support of academia.
- Liberalize labor, occupations, professions (lic. requirements)

By non-left donors:

- Stop giving.

By non-left parents and students:

- Find less lefty schools and programs.
- Bypass college altogether.

By non-left employers:

- Don't emphasize college degree.

# Recap

- I posit that CLism is enlightened.
- The lack of CLism among h/ss faculty has been interpreted as groupthink
- Although groupthink has traditionally been applied to small groups of policy makers, many of the differences are mitigated by the major groupthink mechanisms in academia.



Micro decisions:

*Majoritarian departmental politics*

- tends to make each department ideologically uniform.

Macro norms and values:

*The professional pyramid*

*Sacred beliefs*

- Once an ideological type gains control over the apex, it makes the entire pyramid that way.

Three elements:

1. majoritarian departmental politics
2. defective sacred beliefs
3. the professional pyramid

have made for groupthink.



thank  
you