

# THE POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF BRITISH ACADEMICS

*by*

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## Abstract

Carl (2017) recently published a report claiming that individuals with left-wing and liberal views are overrepresented in British academia. One weakness of this report was that it relied almost exclusively on party support data. Using data from the 2015 wave of the British Election Study Panel, the present study confirms that the political attitudes of British academics are somewhat more economically left-wing (0.35sd), and are substantially more socially liberal (0.84sd), than those of the general population. It also documents that British academics are substantially more likely to read *The Guardian* newspaper (the UK's most left-liberal newspaper) than members of the general population (31 ppts). Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduces the difference on social liberalism by 0.19sd, and reduces the difference on *Guardian* readership by 5 ppts, but increases the difference on economic leftism by 0.05sd.

### *Key words*

Academics; political attitudes; left-wing; liberal; education; openness

## 1. Introduction

Carl (2017a) recently published a report<sup>1</sup> claiming that individuals with left-wing and liberal views are overrepresented in British academia. This report was subjected to several criticisms (Morgan, 2017; Byrne, 2017; and see Carl, 2017b,c). Indeed, one of its major weaknesses was that it relied almost exclusively on party support data. Specifically, it cited evidence that British academics are substantially less likely than the general population to support the UK's two main right-wing parties: The Conservatives and The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Yet, except for one poll showing that British academics were overwhelmingly opposed to the UK leaving the European Union, it did not cite any evidence pertaining to their attitudes on specific political issues. Using data from the 2015 wave of the British Election Study Panel, the present study explores whether the political attitudes of British academics are indeed more left-wing and more liberal than those of the general population.

## 2. Method

Data from the 2015 wave (Wave 6) of the British Election Study Panel (Fieldhouse et al., 2015) were utilized for analysis. The British Election Study Panel (BES) is an internet-based survey that administers questions about political attitudes, party support, and political behavior to a large, nationally representative sample of the British population. While the study tracks the same individuals over time, each wave can be treated as a cross-sectional survey. There are two key reasons why the BES dataset was utilized: first, it contains a rich set of questions on political attitudes (unlike the Understanding Society dataset utilized by Carl, 2017a); and second, unlike some other social surveys in the UK, it has large sample size ( $n \approx 30,000$ ), which allows enough individual academics to be identified for a reasonably reliable analysis.

The BES includes a variable that assigns all respondents who are currently employed to an occupation, based on the 2010 Standard Occupational Classification (ONS, 2010). Academics were defined as those in the occupational category 2311: 'Higher education teaching professionals' ( $n = 107$ ). As the ONS (2010) notes:

Higher education teaching professionals deliver lectures and teach students to at least first degree level, undertake research and write journal articles and books in their chosen field of study.

A dummy variable was created that took the value 1 if the respondent was an academic, and took the value 0 if not. Insofar as academics comprise such a small share of the sample (0.4%), the reference category for this variable can be considered to be the general population, although strictly speaking it represents all non-academics (99.6%).

Three dependent variables were constructed. First, a dimension of economic leftism was obtained by extracting the first principal component from a PCA on nine measures of left-right attitudes. This component

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the theoretical mechanisms by which the academy's left-liberal skew arose, see Gross (2013), Duarte et al. (2014) and Carl (2015b, 2017).

had an eigenvalue of 4.6, and explained 51% of the variance. Second, a dimension of social liberalism was obtained by extracting the first principal component from a PCA on nine measures of liberal-conservative attitudes. This component had an eigenvalue of 4.1, and explained 46% of the variance. Both of the preceding dimensions were standardized prior to analysis. Correlation matrices for their constituent variables, as well as full wording for the relevant survey items, are given in **Appendix A**. Third, a dummy variable was created that took the value 1 if the respondent said that her daily newspaper was *The Guardian*, and took the value 0 if she said that it was any other newspaper (respondents who said that they did not read a daily newspaper were coded as missing). The reference category for this variable is therefore the population of individuals who read some other daily newspaper. *The Guardian* is the UK's most left-liberal newspaper (Smith, 2017).

The following covariates were utilized: age, gender, ethnicity, region, education, self-rated openness to experience. Age, gender, ethnicity and region were included as covariates in order to check whether any differences that emerged between academics and the general public were simply attributable to an overrepresentation of individuals with certain demographic characteristics within the relatively small sample of academics. For example, suppose that women tend to be more economically left-wing than men. If many more women academics had been selected to participate than men (which is not too unlikely, given  $n = 107$ ), the sample of academics would appear more economically left-wing, but purely due to a compositional effect from sampling error.

Self-rated openness to experience is based on the Ten Item Personality Test (TIPI; see Gosling et al., 2003 for further details)<sup>2</sup>, and is included in the dataset as a single variable scaled from 0–10. Note that the reason for utilizing education and openness to experience is that each has been posited to at least partially account for the left-liberal skew of academia (see Gross, 2013; Duarte et al., 2014; Carl, 2017). I.e., it has been asserted that academics tend to have more left-liberal attitudes due to their higher education and greater openness to experience. Including these variables as covariates in a multiple regression analysis allows one to estimate how much of the skew they do in fact account for. Note that academics had substantially higher education and openness to experience than the general population. For example, 87% of academics have a post-graduate qualification, compared to 22% in the rest of the sample ( $p < 0.001$ ). Likewise, mean openness to experience among academics is 0.40sd higher than the mean in the rest of the sample ( $p < 0.001$ ). A correlation matrix for the key variables utilized in this study is provided in **Appendix B**.

### 3. Results

**Table 1** displays estimates from OLS models of economic leftism. Academics are significantly more economically left-wing in all four models. The coefficient in the first column implies that academics are 0.35sd more economically left-wing than the general population. Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience increases this difference to 0.40sd. That increase is attributable to the fact that academics tend to have very high levels of education, yet people higher education tend to be more economically right-wing than those with lower education (see Carl, 2015a).

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<sup>2</sup> In the TIPI, openness to experience is constructed from two items: “I see myself as open to new experiences, complex” and “I see myself as conventional, uncreative”. It has a test-retest reliability of around  $r = .62$ .

**Table 2** displays estimates from OLS models of social liberalism. Academics are significantly more socially liberal in all four models. The coefficient in the first column implies that academics are 0.84sd more socially liberal than the general population. Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduces this difference to 0.65sd. That decrease is attributable to the fact that academics tend to have very high levels of education, and people with higher education tend to be more socially liberal than those with lower education (see Carl, 2015a). Histograms showing the distributions of economic leftism and social liberalism for academics and the general population, respectively, are given in **Appendix C**.

**Table 3** displays estimates from OLS models of *Guardian* readership. Academics are significantly more likely to read *The Guardian* in all four models. The coefficient in the first column implies that academics are 31 percentage points more likely to read *The Guardian* than the general population. Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduces this difference to 26 percentage points. (Note that both education and openness to experience had independent, statistically significant effects on all three dependent variables.)

An important caveat is that two of the results in **Table 1** (specifically, those in the first and second columns) were not robust to applying sampling weights; indeed, they were rendered non-significant by doing so. (Full weighted results are given in **Appendix D**.) This is somewhat surprising, since one would have expected that, if the difference observed in the first column were attributable to non-random sampling, then it would have disappeared after controlling for demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and region (as in the second column). **Appendix E** shows that the distribution of party support among academics in the BES is more similar to the distribution of party support among academics in Understanding Society (see Hanretty, 2017) when sampling weights are not applied than when they are, which provides some justification for not applying sampling weights to the models in **Tables 1, 2 and 3**.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1.** Estimates from OLS models of economic leftism.

	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)
Academic	0.35***	0.31**	0.42***	0.40***
Age dummies, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	22,444	22,444	22,444	22,444
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.05

*Notes:* Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Models are unweighted. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

<sup>3</sup> The correlation between the *unweighted* distribution from the BES and the average of the two distributions from Understanding society is  $r = .93$  for both the broad and narrow definitions of party identity. By contrast, the correlation between the *weighted* distribution from the BES and the average of the two distributions from Understanding society is  $r = .65$  for the broad definition of party identity and  $r = .64$  for the narrow definition.

**Table 2.** Estimates from OLS models of social liberalism.

	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)
Academic	0.84***	0.91***	0.69***	0.65***
Age dummies, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	23,160	23,160	23,160	23,160
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.12	0.17	0.19

*Notes:* Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Models are unweighted. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

**Table 3.** Estimates from OLS models of *Guardian* readership.

	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper
Academic	0.31***	0.32***	0.27***	0.26***
Age dummies, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	19,585	19,585	19,585	19,585
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.06	0.10	0.10

*Notes:* Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Models are unweighted. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

## Conclusion

Carl (2017) recently published a report which claimed that individuals with left-wing and liberal views are overrepresented in British academia. One weakness of this report was that it relied almost exclusively on party support data. Using data from the 2015 wave of the British Election Study Panel, the present study has confirmed that the political attitudes of British academics are somewhat more economically left-wing (0.35sd), and are substantially more socially liberal (0.84sd), than those of the general population. It has also documented that British academics are substantially more likely to read *The Guardian* newspaper than members of the general population (31 pts). Adjusting for demographic characteristics, education and openness to experience reduced the difference on social liberalism by 0.19sd, and reduced the difference on *Guardian* readership by 5 pts, but increased the difference on economic leftism by 0.05sd. The fact that sizable differences remained after adjusting for covariates indicates that the left-liberal skew of British academia cannot be explained simply by academics' high levels of education, or—apparently—by their high levels of openness to experience (see Carl, 2017a).<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the remainder of skew is likely to be attributable to one or more of the following: social homophily and political typing, individual conformity, status inconsistency, and discrimination (see Duarte et al., 2014; Carl, 2015b; Carl, 2017a).

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the measure of openness used in the present study was rather crude.

## Supporting Information

Review thread at OpenPsych forum: <https://openpsych.net/forum/showthread.php?tid=300>

Stata code for replication: <https://osf.io/q9e79/>

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## Appendix A

**Table A.1.** Correlation matrix for measures of economic leftism.

	Govt. should redistribute income	Big business takes advantage	Ordinary people do not get fair share	One law for rich, one for poor	Management exploits employees	Cuts have gone too far	Privatisation has gone too far	Zero hours cons. should be illegal	Deficit reduction unnecessary
Govt. should redist. income	1								
Big business takes advantage	.49***	1							
Ordinary people do not get fair share	.61***	.59***	1						
One law for rich, one for poor	.57***	.61***	.66***	1					
Management exploits emps.	.39***	.56***	.50***	.51***	1				
Cuts have gone too far	.52***	.39***	.47***	.45***	.32***	1			
Privatisation has gone too far	.45***	.42***	.45***	.44***	.32***	.65***	1		
Zero hours cons. should be illegal	.38***	.34***	.40***	.39***	.32***	.46***	.44***	1	
Deficit reduction unnecessary	.36***	.26***	.29***	.28***	.18***	.48***	.37***	.25***	1
Component loading	0.36	0.35	0.37	0.37	0.30	0.35	0.34	0.29	0.25

*Notes:* Entries in the first nine rows are Pearson correlations. Component loadings are given in the last row. Sampling weights were not applied. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.



**Table A.2.** Correlation matrix for measures of social liberalism.

	Young people respect Brit. values	Against death penalty	Schools should not teach kids to obey	Against censorship of films and mags.	Against harsher criminal sentences	More immigration	Equal opportunities for blacks	Equal opportunities for women	Equal opportunities for gays
Young people resp. Brit. values	1								
Against death penalty	.51***	1							
Schools should not teach kids to obey	.60***	.44***	1						
Against censorship of films and mags.	.38***	.32***	.39***	1					
Against harsher criminal sentences	.57***	.59***	.54***	.36***	1				
More immigration	.40***	.41***	.34***	.25***	.40***	1			
Equal opps. For blacks	.44***	.45***	.38***	.24***	.41***	.46***	1		
Equal opps. For women	.25***	.26***	.23***	.11***	.22***	.23***	.49***	1	
Equal opps. For gays	.35***	.35***	.32***	.26***	.30***	.34***	.61***	.53***	1
Component loading	0.38	0.36	0.35	0.26	0.37	0.31	0.37	0.26	0.33

*Notes:* Entries in the first nine rows are Pearson correlations. Component loadings are given in the last row. Sampling weights were not applied. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

**Table A.3.** Full wording for survey items measuring economic leftism.

Measure	Full wording of survey item
Govt. should redistribute income	Left-right values: Government should redistribute incomes (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Big business takes advantage	Left-right values: Big business takes advantage of ordinary people (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Ordinary people do not get fair share	Left-right values: Ordinary people do not get their fair share (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
One law for rich, one for poor	Left-right values: There is one law for the rich and one law for the poor (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Management exploits employees	Left-right values: Management will always try to get the better of employees (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Cuts have gone too far	Cuts to public spending in general (1–5 scale from “Not gone nearly far enough” to “Gone much too far”)
Privatisation has gone too far	Private companies running public services (1–5 scale from “Not gone nearly far enough” to “Gone much too far”)
Zero hours cons. Should be illegal	Employers should be allowed to hire workers on zero-hours contracts (1–4 scale from “Should definitely be illegal” to “Should definitely be legal”)
Deficit reduction unnecessary	Deficit reduction necessary/unnecessary (1–4 scale from “It is completely unnecessary” to “It is completely necessary”)

**Table A.4.** Full wording for survey items measuring social liberalism.

Measure	Full wording of survey item
Young people respect Brit. values	Young people today don’t have enough respect for traditional British values (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Against death penalty	For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Schools should not teach kids to obey	Schools should teach children to obey authority (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Against censorship of films and mags.	Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
Against harsher criminal sentences	People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences (1–5 scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”)
More immigration	Immigration level increased/decreased (1–5 scale from “Decreased a lot” to “Increased a lot”)
Equal opportunities for blacks	Equal opportunities for ethnic minorities gone too far/not far enough (1–5 scale from “Not gone nearly far enough” to “Gone much too far”)
Equal opportunities for women	Equal opportunities for women gone too far/not far enough (1–5 scale from “Not gone nearly far enough” to “Gone much too far”)
Equal opportunities for gays	Equal opportunities gays and lesbians gone too far/not far enough (1–5 scale from “Not gone nearly far enough” to “Gone much too far”)

## Appendix B

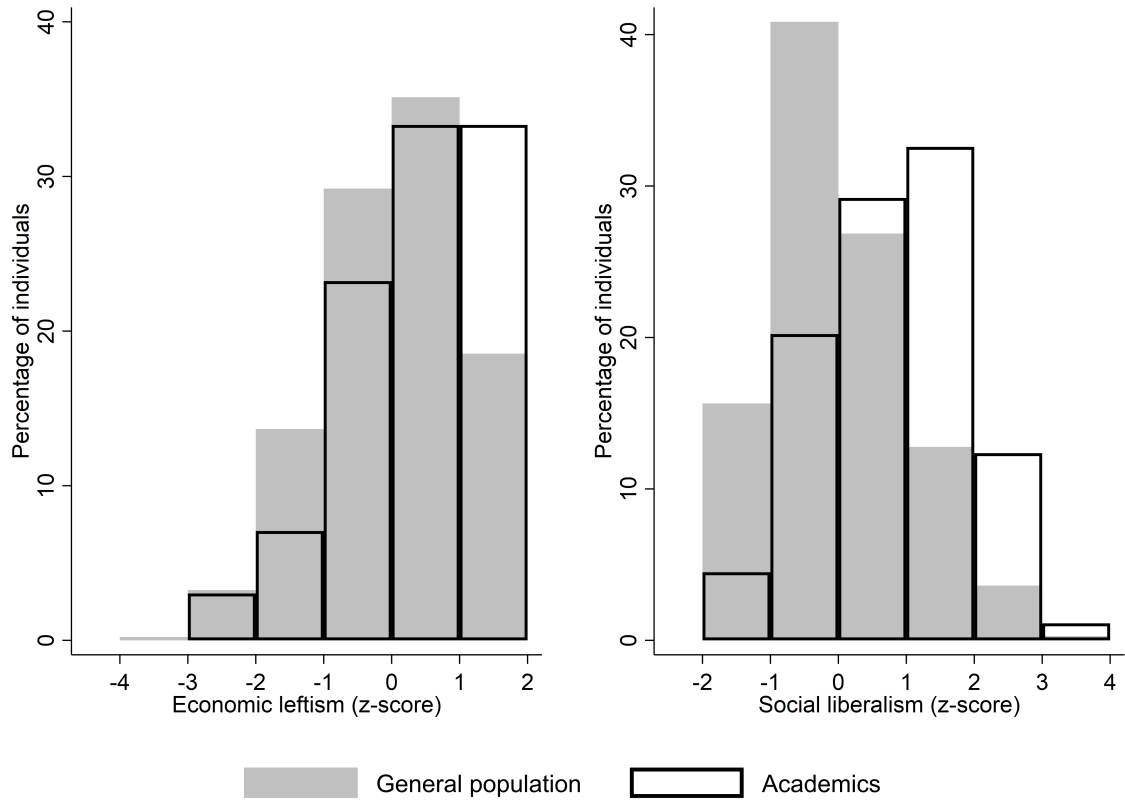
**Table B.1.** Correlation matrix for key variables utilized in this study.

	Economic leftism	Social liberalism	Guardian reader	Academic	Postgraduate education	Openness to experience
Economic leftism	1					
Social liberalism	.24***	1				
Guardian reader	.24***	.48***	1			
Academic	.02***	.05***	.07***	1		
Postgraduate education	-.06***	.12***	.09***	.09***	1	
Openness to experience	.09***	.20***	.14***	.02***	.08***	1

*Notes:* Sampling weights were not applied. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

## Appendix C

**Figure C.1.** Histograms plotting the distributions of economic leftism and social liberalism for academics and the general population, respectively.



## Appendix D

**Table D.1.** Estimates from weighted OLS models of economic leftism.

	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)	Economic leftism (z-score)
Academic	0.26	0.23	0.38*	0.37*
Age dummies, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	22,444	22,444	22,444	22,444
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.06

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Cross-sectional sampling weights were applied. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

**Table D.2.** Estimates from weighted OLS models of social liberalism.

	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)	Social liberalism (z-score)
Academic	0.74***	0.92***	0.74***	0.73***
Age dummies, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	23,160	23,160	23,160	23,160
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.10	0.13	0.14

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Cross-sectional sampling weights were applied. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

**Table D.3.** Estimates from weighted OLS models of *Guardian* readership.

	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> is daily newspaper
Academic	0.19***	0.20***	0.18***	0.17***
Age dummies, gender, ethnicity, region		Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies			Yes	Yes
Openness to experience				Yes
<i>n</i>	19,585	19,585	19,585	19,585
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.05

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Cross-sectional sampling weights were applied. Significance levels: \* 0.05, \*\* 0.01, \*\*\* 0.001.

## Appendix E

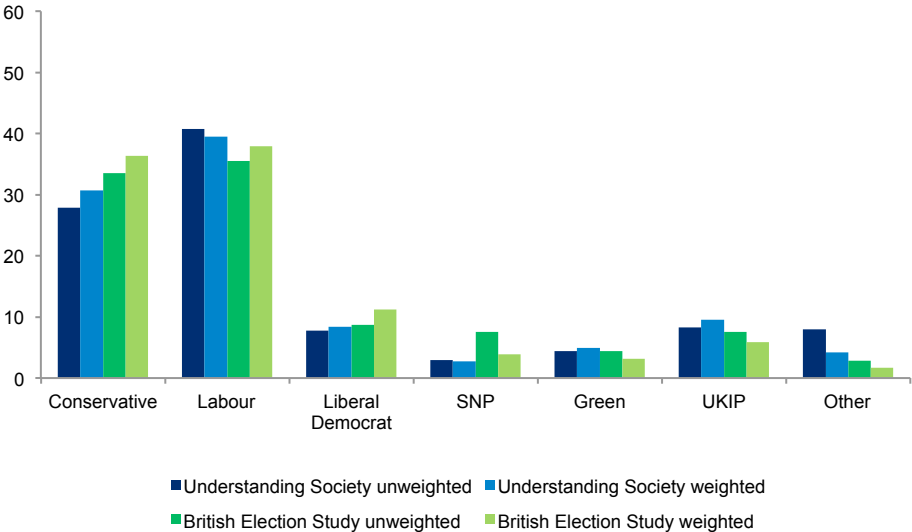
Another weakness of Carl's (2017) report was that it relied on a self-selecting poll of academics from 2015 (Morgan, 2017; Byrne, 2017; and see Carl, 2017b,c). If academics' political views are correlated with their propensity to respond to online polls, then the distribution of party support uncovered by a self-selecting poll might be biased. However, Hanretty (2017) identified academics in the Understanding Society dataset (University of Essex, 2015), and showed that the distribution of party support among these individuals is actually quite similar to the distribution of party support among those who responded to the 2015 poll cited by Carl (2017). As Hanretty (2017) notes:

There is, therefore good evidence—which is not derived from a self-selecting sample—to suggest that left-wing opinions are over-represented in academia when compared to the general population.

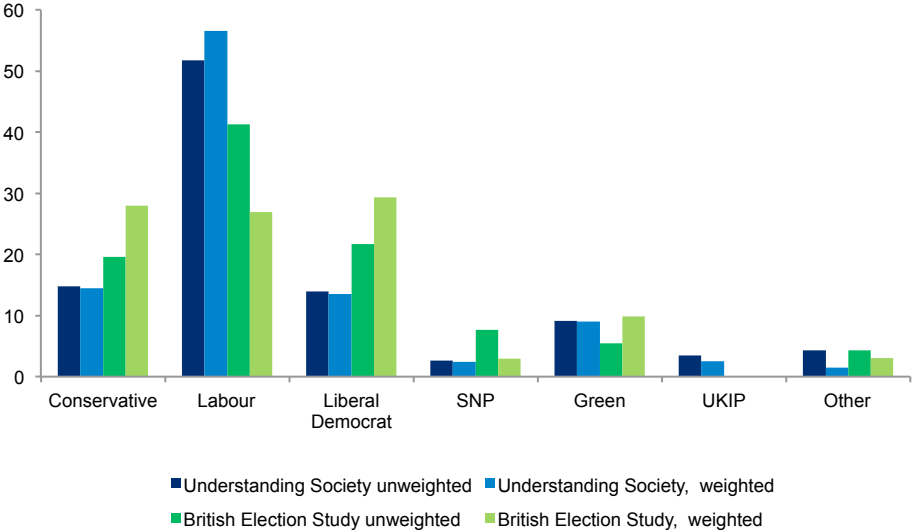
This section compares—for both the general population and academics, with and without sampling weights—the distribution of party support in the BES data to the distribution of party support in Wave 5 the Understanding Society data. In the BES, party support was measured using the party ID variable: respondents are asked to say which party, if any, they identify with. In Understanding Society, two definitions of party support were utilized: first, a broad definition, corresponding to the one used by Hanretty (2017), and second, a narrow definition, corresponding to the one used by Carl (2017). Party support in this dataset is based on three questions, asked sequentially. First, respondents are asked whether they support any party, and—if so—which one. Second, those who answer 'No' are then asked which party they feel closest to. Third, those who say they don't feel closest to any party are then asked which party they would vote for tomorrow, if they had to. The broad definition of party support results from combining answers to all three questions, while the narrow definition of party support results combining answers to just the first two questions.

**Figure E.1** compares the distribution of party support within the general population, between Understanding Society and the BES, using the broad definition of party support from Understanding Society. **Figure E.3** provides the corresponding comparison for the narrow definition of party support. **Figure E.2** compares the distribution of party support among academics, between the BES and Understanding Society, using the broad definition of party support from Understanding Society. **Figure E.4** provides the corresponding comparison for the narrow definition of party support. As **Figure E.1** and **Figure E.3** show, the distribution of party support within the general population is quite similar across the two datasets, with and without weights. However, as **Figure E.2** and **Figure E.4** show, the distribution of party support among academics differs between the two datasets: in Understanding Society, relatively more academics support Labour, whereas in the BES, relatively more support the Liberal Democrats. Moreover, the differences between the two datasets are much larger when sampling weights are applied than when they are not. Since, the weighted figures from the BES are the most aberrant, it is arguably more appropriate to estimate unweighted models. Note that the weighted figures from the BES also deviate most from the figures from the 2015 poll cited by Carl (2017; THE, 2015).

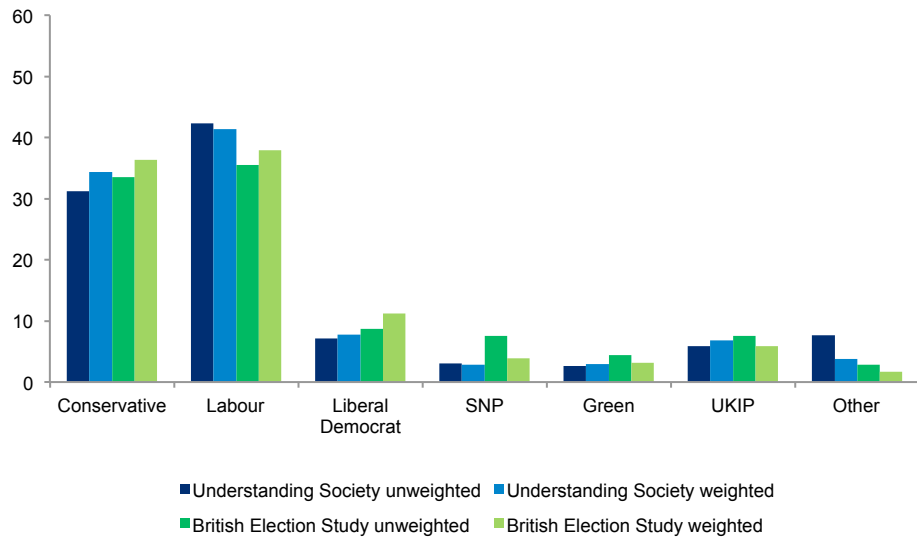
**Figure D.1.** Distribution of party support within the general population using broad definition of party support from Understanding Society.



**Figure D.2.** Distribution of party support among academics using broad definition of party support from Understanding Society.



**Figure D.3.** Distribution of party support within the general population using narrow definition of party support from Understanding Society.



**Figure D.4.** Distribution of party support among academics using narrow definition of party support from Understanding Society.

