

Political Activism and Research Ethics

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ABSTRACT *Those who care about and engage in politics frequently fall victim to cognitive bias. Concerns that such bias impacts scholarship recently have prompted debates – notably, in philosophy and psychology – on the proper relationship between research and politics. One proposal emerging from these debates is that researchers studying politics have a professional duty to avoid political activism because it risks biasing their work. While sympathetic to the motivations behind this proposal, I suggest several reasons to reject a blanket duty to avoid activism: (1) even if it reduced bias, this duty would make unreasonable demands on researchers; (2) this duty could hinder research by limiting viewpoint diversity; (3) this duty wrongly implies that academia offers a relative haven from bias compared to politics; and (4) not all forms of political activism pose an equal risk of bias. None of these points suggest that researchers should ignore the risk of bias. Rather, researchers should focus on stronger evidence-based strategies for reducing bias than a blanket recommendation to avoid politics.*

A hazard of dedicating one's life to the study of politics – whether in philosophy, political science, psychology, or some other field – is developing passionate views on the subject. Beyond just studying politics at arm's length, some researchers look to use their expertise to effect political change. They champion policies, work on campaigns, and even run for office.¹ But such activism raises concerns, since the desire to advance political ends can consciously and unconsciously influence research in ways that undermine its validity.² Though appealing to some researchers, political activism also can pose risks to their work.

What are the ethical obligations of researchers facing this dilemma? Among professional organisations, the American Political Science Association addresses this question perhaps most directly. Its guide to professional ethics recognises that professors often feel pulled to politics and rejects an outright ban on activism,³ a position dating back to the 1960s.⁴ Research on cognitive bias, however, recently has prompted other disciplines to reevaluate their relationship to politics. In psychology, Jonathan Haidt and others raise concerns that the dominance of certain partisan views in the field undermines research by biasing methodological approaches and the interpretation of evidence.⁵ In philosophy, Bas van der Vossen argues that, since political activism risks biasing research, scholars studying politics have a duty to avoid activism.⁶

Such debates bring needed attention to the dangers that cognitive bias poses to research. This article examines researchers' ethical responsibilities to minimise bias, and specifically the argument that they have a duty to avoid political activism. While sympathetic to the motivations behind this argument, I offer several reasons to reject

a blanket duty to avoid activism: (1) even if it reduced bias, this duty would make unreasonable demands on researchers; (2) this duty could hinder research by limiting viewpoint diversity; (3) this duty wrongly implies that academia offers a relative haven from bias compared to politics; and (4) not all forms of political activism pose an equal risk of bias. None of these objections suggest that researchers should ignore concerns about bias. But a more promising approach lies in pursuing stronger evidence-based strategies to reduce bias in research, which the end of the article discusses.

The Case for Avoiding Political Activism

To start, it is important to specify what is meant by political activism. Here it refers to actions intended to advance political goals, which include contacting public officials and asking them to support a policy; mobilising others to contact public officials; running for public office; championing policies, candidates, and political parties in the public sphere; and volunteering for and donating to political campaigns and organisations. If one takes an especially expansive view of the political sphere, where virtually *all* action (or inaction) has political consequences and is thus political, a much broader range of activities could count as political activism. But here, political activism is understood more narrowly and involves those actions typically associated with it, like donating to a campaign or participating in a protest. For our purposes, political activism remains a category of action that individuals potentially could avoid.

One activity difficult to categorise is voting. Since voting advances political goals, it seems to qualify as political activism. Notably, some journalists and military officers choose not to vote, worried it would compromise the objectivity demanded by their job.⁷ Here, though, I assume political activism does not include voting. That approach avoids saddling the argument for avoiding political activism with the controversial claim that certain professionals should not vote, which many see as a civic duty. To address the argument in its strongest form, I focus on more involved types of activism, which play a more salient role in people's lives and thus are likely to influence other activities (like research).

A recent argument for scholars to avoid activism comes from the aptly titled article 'In Defense of the Ivory Tower' by Bas van der Vossen. Though focused on political philosophers, his argument applies broadly to those researching politics – scholars in 'sociology, political science, economics, gender studies, psychology, and so on'.⁸ In his proposal, scholars focus on seeking truth and producing accurate research, while leaving politics to others.

It is worth sketching this argument to show what makes it compelling. Van der Vossen first introduces what he calls the Principle of Responsible Professionalism (RP) and applies it to political philosophers:

- (1) *Principle of responsible professionalism (RP)*. People who take up a certain role or profession thereby acquire a *prima facie* moral duty to make a reasonable effort to avoid those things that predictably make them worse at their tasks.
- (2) The task of political philosophers is to seek the truth about political issues.

- (3) Therefore, political philosophers have a *prima facie* moral duty to make a reasonable effort to avoid those things that predictably make them worse at seeking the truth about political issues.⁹

This first part of the argument is valid – (3) follows from (1) and (2) – but some question premises (1) and (2), which require explanation and defence.

RP captures the idea that professions come with certain responsibilities. For instance, surgeons should take reasonable steps to avoid activities likely to make them worse at their job, like drinking alcohol before surgery. If RP required professionals to give up their hobbies, never see their families, and spend all their time practicing their craft, it would ask too much. But RP only demands *reasonable* precautions, not perfection.¹⁰

Other qualifications guard against further objections. Most obviously, RP does not apply to morally bankrupt professions.¹¹ If a government asks soldiers to carry out genocide, it is absurd to claim RP applies. Also, RP involves a *prima facie* rather than a categorical duty, which means other moral duties sometimes override it. Normally, it would violate RP if a professional runner took a month off during their most critical training period, but not if they did so to care for a dying parent, since another obligation overrides RP.¹²

These qualifications help clarify RP, but ambiguity remains. In particular, the term ‘reasonable’ does a lot of work in its definition. It is unclear where to draw the line between a reasonable and unreasonable amount of effort in avoiding things that undermine job performance. For instance, professional athletes have demanding practice schedules. Sometimes they want a break. Would skipping an hour of practice a week violate RP? How about five hours? No clear guidelines come with RP for making those determinations.

Despite this ambiguity, it makes sense to accept RP based on a charitable reading of it. Though RP cannot *always* distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable effort, there are *some* clear cases where avoiding an activity harmful to one’s job only requires reasonable effort (e.g. not drinking before surgery). In other words, we can accept RP and apply it in certain cases, even if we do not know how to apply it in all cases. That concession is what van der Vossen needs for his argument. His goal is not to determine the ethical status of all action but a specific category of action – political activism by scholars.

Perhaps more controversial than RP, premise (2) claims that political philosophers’ task is to seek the truth about politics. Some understandably balk at this claim. In politics, experts disagree about a host of normative and factual matters – the nature of justice, the causes of war, money’s influence in elections, and the list goes on. Some question whether there is any truth at all, given the many perspectives from which to view any issue and the fact that even widely accepted scientific theories usually end up being falsified (e.g. Newtonian physics). Anyone claiming to have discovered *the truth* about politics faces an army of sceptics.

Despite these concerns, premise (2) need not imply that scholars will fully grasp the truth anytime soon. Researchers can recognise their incomplete understanding of the world and still work to advance it. It is this commitment to truth that van der Vossen has in mind.¹³ Scholars advance human knowledge, even if the complete truth eludes them.

Understood in this way, premise (2) no longer appears as controversial as it first seems. Still, it faces other objections. Some say the real task of political philosophers is to figure out what justice is and advance it.¹⁴ But even for those who take this view, it is a mistake to completely dismiss premise (2). As van der Vossen points out, making the world more just requires understanding how it works and causal relations within it.¹⁵ Without such knowledge, proposals to advance justice can backfire and exacerbate the very oppression they seek to end.¹⁶ Given that risk, academics committed to advancing justice also should value seeking the truth.

Others may accept that the *overall* goal of research is to seek the truth, but reject it for *individual* researchers. On this view, researchers tenaciously defend their claims so that they gain wide acceptance, not to seek the truth. The strongest argument ultimately rises to the top as each side defends their position as vigorously as possible. That view may seem compelling to those sympathetic to Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber's argumentative theory of reason, which says reason's primary function is rhetorical – that is, developing arguments to persuade others.¹⁷

Even if one accepts that theory, it does not follow that the overall research process advances toward truth when individual researchers abandon this goal. In fact, Mercier and Sperber suggest the opposite. They attribute science's tremendous advances to the demanding standards of the scientific community. If one researcher puts forward biased and mistaken claims, other researchers likely will criticise them. To succeed, researchers must exercise pre-emptive self-criticism by anticipating critiques before they are raised. Their peers' demanding standards thus foster a commitment to seeking truth.¹⁸ If researchers abandon this commitment in favour of rhetorically compelling but faulty claims, there is no guarantee their work will track toward the truth, especially when we consider other contexts with few incentives against introducing faulty claims (e.g. social media).

So there are good reasons to accept the first half of van der Vossen's argument. Scholars' commitment to seek truth and produce accurate work is key to advancing research as well as justice. As part of this commitment, scholars should take reasonable steps to avoid activities that predictably would hinder the accuracy of their research. Van der Vossen concludes his argument by identifying political activism as one such threat:

- (4) Being politically active predictably makes us worse at seeking the truth about political issues.
- (5) Therefore, political philosophers have a *prima facie* moral duty to avoid being politically active.¹⁹

Premise (4) is plausible on its face, but evaluating it and the conclusion requires a closer look at the empirical evidence on the link between politics and cognitive bias, which we turn to next.

Politics and Cognitive Bias

Decades of research make clear the pervasive role of cognitive bias: people regularly violate basic principles of logic and probability in their judgments, fail to update

beliefs in response to new facts, and are influenced in their evaluations by factors they believe should be irrelevant.²⁰

Many such errors result from motivated reasoning. When reasoning, individuals have accuracy goals (arriving at the most accurate conclusion) but also directional goals (arriving at the conclusion matching their beliefs, attitudes, and desires).²¹ Motivated by the latter, people fall victim to confirmation bias, which protects and bolsters their existing views.²²

Such bias often affects political judgments. When encountering studies on the death penalty's deterrent effect or polls on an upcoming election, people find information affirming their views more credible.²³ What they believe or want to believe biases how they process political information.

Partisan identities exacerbate this problem. When people identify with a political party, they often develop an enduring emotional attachment to it.²⁴ This identity leads to favourable views of one's party and intergroup bias,²⁵ a finding in line with research on group identities.²⁶ Party attachment makes individuals vulnerable to motivated reasoning. If they encounter information challenging a policy championed by their party, such information can threaten their identity. In fact, brain imaging shows that partisans have positive emotional reactions to information affirming their identity and negative reactions to information threatening it.²⁷ To protect their identity, partisans often will look for reasons to reject threatening information.²⁸

There is abundant empirical evidence for motivated reasoning by political partisans. When asked factual questions – like if inflation or unemployment went up or down during a president's term – opposing partisans give different responses. For Republican presidencies, Republicans give responses reflecting a more positive assessment of the economy than do Democrats, and the opposite is true for Democratic presidencies.²⁹ Similarly, partisans better remember political facts favourable to their party than facts unfavourable to it.³⁰ Opposing partisans seem to occupy different worlds, as their party identities bias their perceptions of politics.

Unsurprisingly, partisan identities influence more subjective judgments. In experiments where partisans evaluate college applicants, they prefer fellow partisans, even when an applicant of another party has stronger qualifications (e.g. higher grades).³¹ Partisans also judge hypocrisy by opposing party politicians more harshly.³² Party attachments even lead partisans to support policies they normally would reject, as evident from experiments manipulating party endorsement of welfare policies. Party endorsement predicts partisans' preferences better than policy content. If their party endorses it, Democrats favour stringent welfare policies and Republicans favour generous ones – contrary to their ideological views.³³

Some like van der Vossen see such studies as evidence that political activism raises the risk of biased research. Undoubtedly, partisan identity often biases political judgment. Studies regularly find that strong partisans exhibit higher levels of biased and motivated political reasoning than ambivalent partisans or independents.³⁴ That finding, though, fails to count as direct evidence that political activism – which is related to but distinct from partisanship – leads to bias. Most experiments on political reasoning and bias do not assign participants to different levels of activism, and therefore do not directly measure activism's effects on bias. This lack of direct evidence certainly leaves open the possibility that activism causes bias. But it is important to also consider other explanations consistent with the available evidence.

One relevant finding is that strong partisans, in addition to often exhibiting greater bias in political judgments, engage the most in activism.³⁵ Different explanations could account for this link between activism, bias, and partisanship:

- (a) *Politics corrupts*: political activism strengthens individuals' partisanship and makes them more susceptible to bias;
- (b) *Politics attracts biased people*: strong partisans are drawn to political activism, but come to it already more susceptible to bias; or
- (c) *Bias is everywhere*: those with strong group identities exhibit bias in many contexts, and political activism does not pose a unique risk of bias compared to other activities.

These explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, each has some truth to it.

First, political activism likely corrupts and exacerbates bias in many instances. Activism often (though not always) occurs in ideological silos, where individuals primarily interact with fellow partisans in ways that make their partisan identity more salient. When surrounded by like-minded others, people tend to perceive their beliefs as more credible and to dismiss outgroup views, making it difficult to recognise their own blind spots and biases.³⁶ Similarly, experimental evidence suggests that making group identity salient increases intergroup bias, and leads people to find outgroup messages and policies less persuasive.³⁷ By making individuals' party identity salient and surrounding them with others who bolster this identity, political activism can strengthen partisanship and associated biases.

Second, those less influenced by partisan biases appear to participate less in politics. Diana Mutz finds that those in ideologically diverse social networks exhibit greater political tolerance and awareness of the rationales for different political views. These individuals seem less susceptible to forms of intergroup bias associated with strong partisanship, as they are more willing to see merit in and not dismiss different political views. Interestingly, these individuals engage less in politics, suggesting that politics instead attracts people more susceptible to bias.³⁸

Third, cognitive bias's pervasive influence recommends caution in singling out political activism as a unique threat. Cognitive bias is associated with a wide range of activities. Confirmation bias always looms as a risk when defending political positions, whether in activism, conversations with friends, or academic writing. Moreover, activities outside politics – such as religious devotion or even research – can bolster identities and beliefs in ways that bias political judgments.³⁹ Political activism thus loses its distinctiveness and represents part of a larger minefield threatening judgment. Some may conclude from this fact that the duty to avoid political activism also implies giving up many other activities. Yet by implicating *so many* activities, the argument for this duty runs the risk of proving too much.

To summarise, those more susceptible to bias participate more in politics, this participation often exacerbates bias, and so too do activities in many other contexts. Bias ultimately operates in ways more complex than the argument to avoid activism implies, which makes it difficult to defend this duty in blanket form, as the following sections explain.

What Makes a Duty to Avoid Activism Unreasonable

A close look at van der Vossen's argument reveals that its conclusion does not strictly follow from its premises. According to the argument, political philosophers have a moral duty to make a *reasonable* effort to avoid things that predictably make them worse at seeking the truth about politics. But does avoiding political activism only require reasonable effort? A suppressed premise answering yes is necessary to reach van der Vossen's conclusion:

(3) Political philosophers have a *prima facie* moral duty to make a reasonable effort to avoid those things that predictably make them worse at seeking the truth about political issues.

(4) Being politically active predictably makes us worse at seeking the truth about political issues.

Suppressed premise: With reasonable effort, political philosophers can avoid being politically active.

(5) Therefore, political philosophers have a *prima facie* moral duty to avoid being politically active.

From one perspective, this suppressed premise seems obvious and its omission insignificant. Rather than make excessive demands, the duty to avoid activism only requires researchers to stay away from a nonessential activity. Van der Vossen makes this point: 'Many people stay out of political activism and do just fine. Activism is not a necessary ingredient of a good life'.⁴⁰

This explanation proves unsatisfactory, however. To understand why, it is helpful to consider the implications of a duty to avoid activities that raise the risk of biased research. Evidence suggests that religious activity can have biasing effects similar to political activism. Religious identities are associated with intergroup bias, as activities that make these identities salient often strengthen bias.⁴¹ Such bias risks undermining research, since it can lead scholars to portray their religious ingroup as having a more positive impact on politics than religious outgroups. So a duty to avoid political activism seems to also imply a duty to avoid religious activity. In fact, van der Vossen's explanation for why a duty to avoid activism is not too demanding also applies to religion: just as many people avoid politics and do just fine, the same is true for many who are not religious.

Most, though, would be uncomfortable with a duty to avoid religious activity. Religion is a core part of some people's identity. Asking researchers to forsake it would be an onerous requirement, out of line with what professions typically demand. There thus is good reason to reject the demand as unreasonable, even if it minimised bias. Disciplines could offer strategies for minimising bias related to religious identity, but that is different from asking researchers to abandon it altogether.

If a duty to avoid religious activity is unreasonable, it becomes difficult to defend a duty to avoid activism. Political identities, after all, can be just as important to individuals as religious identities. Consider a researcher whose child has a disability and who is active in the disability rights movement. Through this activism, their identity as a disability rights advocate becomes a core part of them. Though many have meaningful

lives without engaging in activism, that's beside the point. For *this* individual, giving up their commitment to a cause they care about would deprive them of a deep source of meaning. In some cases, a duty to avoid political activism makes demands just as onerous and unreasonable as a duty to avoid religious activities.

One could respond that, in cases where researchers have strong political identities, other commitments override their *prima facie* duty to avoid activism, but this duty still applies to others. That defence, though, deprives the duty of all its bite. A duty to avoid political activism that *only* applies to researchers without strong political identities fails to discourage those most tempted by activism, thus undermining the rationale behind it. The duty becomes largely superfluous, only applicable to those least likely to engage in activism.

There is another reason why the duty to avoid political activism proves unreasonable: it threatens researchers' integrity. Sometimes research leads an investigator to change their mind. When that happens, research can – and arguably should – prompt changes in behaviour. Consider a philosopher who, after researching effective altruism, concludes that those well off have an obligation to give much of their salary to effective charities aiding the poor. This conclusion prompts the philosopher not just to publish on the subject, but also to donate more to effective charities. Such action rarely sets off alarm bells. After all, the ideal of integrity carries the expectation that someone championing an ethical principle should also uphold it in their own life.⁴²

If it is permissible to act on research in this instance, it seems that those studying politics should have the same permission. Donating to effective altruism could cause someone to identify more strongly with the cause and raise the risk of biasing their research on it. Consider a similar case where a political scientist donates to effective drug reform efforts after researching the topic. Despite the risk of bias, it is generally recognised in the first case that a scholar should be allowed to incorporate insights from their research into their own life. That approach gives scholars an opportunity to correct gaps between their research findings and personal habits. A blanket duty to avoid activism mistakenly denies that opportunity to those researching politics.⁴³

Activism and Viewpoint Diversity

Another problem with a duty to avoid political activism is that, if universally adopted by scholars, it risks hindering the overall research process. An academy without scholars engaged in politics is one that loses diverse perspectives, which could help advance research. Because activism increases viewpoint diversity, it has the potential to benefit research.

The classic statement on the value of viewpoint diversity comes from *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, which argues for freedom of expression because it exposes people to different views – either truths they had not considered or errors that push them to sharpen their arguments.⁴⁴ Scott Page presents an updated version of this idea by explaining how diversity improves problem solving in various contexts, including research. Page notes that, when engaged in problem-solving tasks, people draw on tools provided by their backgrounds, perspectives, and knowledge. Bringing diverse problem-solvers together creates opportunities for those with different insights and perspectives to build on the discoveries of others, who could not see their full

implications. Diversity thus can propel problem solving forward in ways that a single individual or those with similar perspectives cannot.⁴⁵

Lu Hong and Page develop a formal proof to show that diversity improves problem solving.⁴⁶ Though this evidence is valuable, there are concerns about whether the assumptions of such models hold in the real world.⁴⁷ So in evaluating diversity's impact on problem solving, it is important to examine the empirical evidence. A review of this research does find that diverse groups outperform homogenous groups under certain conditions. Diversity in the areas of skills, expertise, and information proves most effective in improving group performance.⁴⁸

These findings suggest that political activism has the potential to benefit research. Engaging in politics – managing a campaign, lobbying, serving in elected office – often provides individuals with skills, expertise, and information they otherwise would lack. They learn the intricate workings of a campaign, see political challenges overlooked by the media, and develop expertise in how political coalitions function. Activists also face different incentives than academics – like incentives to pass legislation rather than publish peer-reviewed research – which impact what political challenges and issues occupy their attention. Because of their experiences, activists may see aspects of politics differently than how the academic literature portrays them. The point here is not to suggest that the perspectives conferred by activism are *superior* to those conferred by academic work. It is rather to suggest that political activism provides *different* perspectives from those gained in academic work. When those perspectives participate in the research process, they add diversity and have the potential to improve it.

Such diverse perspectives would be lost in a hypothetical academy where the duty to avoid political activism kept out all activists. This state of affairs likely would reduce some of the bias that now affects research, but at a cost. Without contributions from activists, research likely would suffer from certain blind spots and overlook aspects of politics that those directly involved in such work would be more likely to notice.⁴⁹

One response to this criticism is that scholars should gain insights from activists by interviewing them, while upholding a duty to avoid politics.⁵⁰ But this approach proves unsatisfactory given how research works in practice. When scholars embark on research, they often do so with a hypothesis in mind that influences the questions they ask and information they seek. Political experiences can push individuals to ask questions and formulate theories others do not – that is, produce scholarship that would never materialise if they remained outside the research process. A duty for scholars to avoid political activism thus eliminates diverse and potentially valuable perspectives from the research process, which counts as a reason against it.

Illusory Benefits of Retreating to the Academy

A duty to avoid political activism implies that academia offers a relative haven from bias compared to politics. In reality, academia poses risks of bias similar to those found in politics, which undermines the claim that scholars must avoid political engagement because it constitutes a unique threat to research.

Several experiments examine bias in the peer-review process and find scholars often exhibit confirmation bias. Reviewers are more likely to recommend journal submissions that align with their theoretical and ideological views, while seeking reasons to

reject submissions that conflict with them.⁵¹ As one study finds, a paper with the same methodology elicits significantly different reviewer reactions based on whether its results match their views.⁵² In other contexts, such as debates over curriculum content, scholars give biased accounts of their opponents' positions similar to how political opponents mischaracterise each other.⁵³

Such research suggests that scholars regularly fall victim to bias, but leaves unresolved how bias in academia compares with bias in politics. Findings relevant to this question come from forecasting studies, which measure how well individuals predict future political and economic events. When making predictions, forecasters encounter ambiguous information and often exhibit bias when interpreting it. Identifying the most accurate forecasters sheds light on what traits help people avoid bias when gathering and interpreting information. Notably, these studies find little evidence that occupational background or academic credentials impact prediction accuracy. Explaining the results of a large forecasting study of experts in various fields, Philip Tetlock writes: 'It made virtually no difference [in terms of their accuracy] whether participants had doctorates, whether they were economists, political scientists, journalists, or historians, whether they had policy experience or access to classified information, or whether they had logged many or few years of experience in their chosen line of work'.⁵⁴ What matters instead is how individuals think. The most accurate forecasters exhibit actively open-minded thinking: they seek out more information before making decisions, consider rather than dismiss evidence contrary to their beliefs, and revise predictions in light of new information.⁵⁵

Though not conclusive evidence, forecasting studies cast doubt on the idea that academia helps insulate individuals from bias compared to other contexts. That should not come as a surprise given the nature of academic work. Similar to politicians, researchers stake out public positions and vigorously defend them, making them vulnerable to confirmation bias. Scholars cannot fully escape this risk. Instead, their best option is cultivating strategies to navigate this risk effectively, such as actively open-minded thinking.

Academia's lack of political diversity also increases the risk of bias. As discussed above, being surrounded by like-minded others often strengthens partisanship, inter-group bias, and motivated reasoning. One valid concern about political activism is that it exacerbates bias by surrounding individuals with fellow partisans and limiting exposure to opposing views. Similar concerns apply to academia, where scholars tend to be concentrated on the political left.⁵⁶

That finding raises concerns, since political conversations with those of different views happen most often at work. Mutz's research on social networks finds that the workplace facilitates such conversations by bringing politically diverse people together, whereas many other contexts – like places of worship – do not because their membership tends to be politically homogenous.⁵⁷ Due to academia's political makeup, scholars encounter less political diversity in the workplace than many others do. By isolating scholars from certain political perspectives, academia creates an environment suited for strengthening partisan commitments, as well as biases associated with them.

Some might say this concern counts for rather than against a duty to avoid politics. If scholars heeded this duty, certain political identities would not dominate academia and it would be freer from bias. This defence, though, runs into a problem: the case to avoid political activism conveys an individual duty that applies *now*. Van der Vossen

does not argue for a duty that would only apply in a hypothetical future when academia is depoliticised. Regardless of what others do, individual scholars today have an obligation to avoid politics. Yet running to the ivory tower offers little in terms of minimising bias. In fact, it suffers from a problem also associated with political activism – a lack of political diversity, which can exacerbate bias.

It is important to be frank about these shortcomings in academia. If we only focus on bias in politics, the many examples of biased reasoning there make it easy to jump to the conclusion that politics poses a unique threat to research and scholars should avoid it. But when we take a fuller view of how bias operates in both politics and academia, it becomes less clear that scholars who retreat to the latter minimise the risk of bias. As a result, a duty for scholars to avoid politics rests on shaky ground. Rather than avoiding entire spheres of action – with risks similar to spheres that researchers cannot avoid – it seems more prudent to cultivate tools and manners of thinking that help minimise bias across contexts.

Not All Forms of Activism Pose an Equal Risk of Bias

Finally, a blanket duty to avoid political activism fails to distinguish between different types of activism, which can imply that they pose similar risks of bias. That position is implausible, given the many forms activism takes.

Partisan forms of activism often surround individuals with like-minded others, heightening their party identity and exacerbating bias when they interpret political information related to their identity. Given the many positions parties take, partisan activism can impact judgments on a wide range of issues, and thus raises legitimate concerns. But not all activism takes partisan form. Sometimes individuals advocate for a single issue without identifying strongly with a party. Issue advocacy can, of course, increase confirmation bias in the evaluation of information related to the cause championed. But such bias may prove harmless to the research process if what a scholar advocates for (e.g. disability rights) has little relation to what they study (e.g. environmental policy).

Moreover, activism sometimes involves individuals across the political spectrum working together for a common goal, thus exposing them to people of different political persuasions. Examples include conservative and progressive activists partnering to change environmental and criminal justice policy.⁵⁸ Given academia's lack of political diversity, such cross-partisan activism could benefit researchers by helping them escape their ideological silos and come in contact with different political perspectives.

Any suggestions about the comparative effects of different types of activism are necessarily speculative because there is little experimental work directly measuring activism's impact on bias, let alone experimental work comparing various forms of activism. Still, given activism's diverse forms, there is good reason to believe that different political activities impact bias in different ways. When a proposed duty to avoid activism ignores that point, it lacks nuance and is likely too expansive in what it prohibits.

For this reason, those hoping to salvage a duty to avoid activism would be better off adopting a more modest approach – identifying *specific forms* of activism that pose high risks of bias. (In light of concerns raised above, ideally this more limited duty would

not require researchers to abandon core political identities). Right now, it is difficult to formulate such a duty given the lack of empirical studies comparing different forms of activism and their effects on bias. But the critique outlined here leaves open the possibility that future research could identify specific forms of activism that pose particularly serious threats of bias, which scholars reasonably could be asked to avoid.

The Difficult Task of Reducing Bias

The claim that researchers studying politics have a blanket duty to avoid political activism runs into several problems. This duty makes unreasonable demands on researchers, hinders viewpoint diversity, offers illusory benefits for minimising bias, and fails to distinguish between different forms of activism and hazards associated with them. So there is good reason to reject this duty. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss the underlying worry motivating the case for avoiding activism – namely, that bias poses real dangers to research. Cognitive bias *can* undermine the validity of research, which not only puts scholars' credibility in jeopardy, but also hampers their ability to use research to solve real-world problems and improve welfare. Reducing bias's influence on research clearly represents a worthy goal.

Daunting challenges stand in the way of this goal due to the pervasive and deep-rooted nature of cognitive biases. Psychologists have had far more success identifying cognitive biases than in developing strategies to eliminate or reduce them.⁵⁹

But despite such challenges, there has been some progress. Forecasting studies find that probability training and actively open-minded thinking improve prediction accuracy.⁶⁰ Other experiments show that trainings on common types of cognitive bias have debiasing effects that persist months later.⁶¹

Drawing on this research, disciplines could provide researchers with training focused on recognising bias and encouraging actively open-minded thinking. Such training could occur in graduate programs and as continuing education opportunities at academic conferences. There would need to be experimentation and adaptation over time, as we gain a better understanding of which debiasing interventions work best. Effective interventions should be incorporated into the structures that train researchers – graduate programs, professional conferences, and the like.

Experimental research also shows that accountability helps reduce bias by prompting individuals to be more self-critical and consider potential criticisms before presenting their work.⁶² Structures of accountability already exist in academia in the form of peer review and the public dissemination of research. Academia's lack of political diversity, however, can weaken these mechanisms of accountability. Because of confirmation bias, findings congenial to the dominant political views can receive less scrutiny. Such bias in peer review has the effect of exaggerating evidence for the dominant political views while underestimating contrary evidence.

One way to address this problem is fostering political diversity in academia. Some balk at this idea because it brings to mind preferential treatment in hiring for certain political groups. But that proposal proves controversial even among those whom it would benefit,⁶³ and other ideas have a better chance of gaining acceptance. An obvious step is including political affiliation in non-discrimination policies. Though evidence does not suggest that discrimination is the primary reason for the

underrepresentation of certain political groups in academia,⁶⁴ it may have an effect in fields where a number of scholars condone such discrimination.⁶⁵ Beyond non-discrimination policies, other proposals worth consideration include programs to recruit graduate students from underrepresented political groups and increasing the political diversity of editorial boards and reviewer databases.⁶⁶

So there are potential strategies for reducing bias in research. These strategies focus on helping researchers recognise their biases, become more skilled at actively open-minded thinking, and engage diverse points of view. As our understanding of cognitive bias advances, scholars studying politics will need to continually revisit their ethical responsibilities regarding activism and minimising bias. Given the current evidence, a blanket duty on researchers to avoid political activism proves less compelling than some have suggested. Researchers would be better served focusing on stronger evidence-based approaches for reducing bias.

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NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Matthew Manweller (ed.), 'Academics in the arena: Political scientists who have served in elected office', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51,1 (2018): 141–72.
- 2 Philip Tetlock, 'Political psychology or politicised psychology: Is the road to scientific hell paved with good moral intentions?' *Political Psychology* 15,3, (1994): 509–29.
- 3 American Political Science Association, *A Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science*, 2nd edn. (Washington DC: APA, 2012), p. 12, available at: <http://www.apsanet.org/portals/54/Files/Publications/APSAEthicsGuide2012.pdf>.
- 4 American Political Science Association, 'Ethical problems of academic political scientists', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 1,3 (1968): 3–29, at p. 13.
- 5 José Duarte *et al.*, 'Political diversity will improve social psychological science', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 38 (2015): 1–13.
- 6 Bas van der Vossen, 'In defense of the ivory tower: Why philosophers should stay out of politics', *Philosophical Psychology* 28,7 (2015): 1045–63.
- 7 See, for example, Steve Coll, 'The general's dilemma', *The New Yorker* 8 September 2008, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/08/the-generals-dilemma>.
- 8 Van der Vossen *op. cit.*, p. 1046.
- 9 Van der Vossen *op. cit.*, pp. 1047, 1054.
- 10 Van der Vossen *op. cit.*, pp. 1046–8.
- 11 Van der Vossen *op. cit.*, p. 1047.
- 12 A utilitarian might ask how often RP holds in a world filled with suffering. Doesn't the moral duty to alleviate suffering override scholarly responsibilities that do little to reduce suffering? There are grounds

- inside and outside utilitarianism for countering this objection. Bernard Williams argues that utilitarianism's requirement to always improve the world leaves little room for long-term commitments that give life meaning – a dismal conclusion that counts against utilitarianism. See his 'Critique of utilitarianism' in J.J.C. Smart & Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 108–18. For utilitarians, research that does little to directly improve the world still can have indirect moral value by providing income to support effective charities.
- 13 Van der Vossen op. cit., p. 1050.
 - 14 See, for example, Lea Ypi, *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
 - 15 Van der Vossen op. cit., p. 1056.
 - 16 Burke Hendrix, 'Where should we expect social change in non-ideal theory?' *Political Theory* 41,1 (2013): 116–43.
 - 17 Hugo Mercier & Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
 - 18 Mercier & Sperber op. cit., pp. 315–27.
 - 19 Van der Vossen op. cit., p. 1054.
 - 20 See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
 - 21 Ziva Kunda, 'The case for motivated reasoning', *Psychological Bulletin* 108,3 (1990): 480–98.
 - 22 Raymond Nickerson, 'Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises', *Review of General Psychology* 2,2 (1998): 175–220.
 - 23 Charles Lord *et al.*, 'Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37,11 (1979): 2098–109; Ben Tappin *et al.*, 'The heart trumps the head: Desirability bias in political belief revision', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 146,8 (2017): 1143–9.
 - 24 Leonie Huddy & Alexa Bankert, 'Political partisanship as social identity' in W. Thompson (ed.) *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), available at: <http://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-250>.
 - 25 James Fowler & Cindy Kam, 'Beyond the self: Social identity, altruism, and political participation', *Journal of Politics* 69,3 (2007): 813–27; Alan Gerber *et al.*, 'Party affiliation, partisanship, and political beliefs: A field experiment', *American Political Science Review* 104,4 (2010): 720–44.
 - 26 Henri Tajfel & John Turner, 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior' in W.A. & S. Worchel (eds) *The Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1986), pp. 7–24.
 - 27 Drew Westen *et al.*, 'Neural bases of motivated reasoning: An fMRI study of emotional constraints on partisan political judgment in the 2004 U.S. presidential election', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 18,11 (2006): 1947–58.
 - 28 David Redlawsk, 'Hot cognition or cool consideration? Testing the effects of motivated reasoning on political decision making', *Journal of Politics* 64,4 (2002): 1021–44; Dan Kahan, 'Ideology, motivated reasoning, and cognitive reflection', *Judgment and Decision Making* 8,4 (2013): 407–24; Milton Lodge & Charles Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
 - 29 Larry Bartels, 'Beyond the running tally: Partisan bias in political perceptions', *Political Behavior* 24,2 (2002): 117–50.
 - 30 Jennifer Jerit & Jason Barabas, 'Partisan perceptual bias and the information environment', *Journal of Politics* 74,3 (2012): 672–84.
 - 31 Geoffrey Munro *et al.*, 'Political partisan prejudice: Selective distortion and weighing evaluative categories in college admissions applications', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 40,9 (2010): 2434–62; Shanto Iyengar & Sean Westwood, 'Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization', *American Journal of Political Science* 59,3 (2015): 690–707.
 - 32 Yosef Bhatti *et al.*, 'Political hypocrisy: The effect of political scandals on candidate evaluations', *Acta Politica* 48,4 (2013): 408–28.
 - 33 Geoffrey Cohen, 'Party over policy: The dominating impact of group influence on political beliefs', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85,5 (2003): 808–22.
 - 34 Howard Lavine *et al.*, *The Ambivalent Partisan: How Critical Loyalty Promotes Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); James Druckman *et al.*, 'How elite partisan polarization affects public opinion formation', *American Political Science Review* 107,1 (2013): 57–79; Iyengar & Westwood op. cit.
 - 35 Shanto Iyengar *et al.*, 'Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76,3 (2012): 405–31; Leonie Huddy *et al.*, 'Expressive partisanship: Campaign involvement, political emotion, and partisan identity', *American Political Science Review* 109,1 (2015): 1–17.

- 36 Cass Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 37 Craig McGarty *et al.*, 'The effects of salient group memberships on persuasion', *Small Group Research* 25,2 (1994): 267–93; Kerrie Unsworth & Kelly Fielding, 'It's political: How the salience of one's political identity changes climate change beliefs and policy support', *Global Environment Change* 27 (2014): 131–7.
- 38 Diana Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 39 See sections below for evidence regarding this point.
- 40 Van der Vossen *op. cit.*, p. 1055.
- 41 Megan Johnson *et al.*, 'Religiosity and prejudice revisited: In-group favoritism, out-group derogation, or both?' *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4,2 (2012): 154–68; Jordan LaBouff *et al.*, 'Differences in attitude toward outgroups in religious and nonreligious contexts in a multinational sample: A situational context priming study', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 22,1 (2012): 1–9.
- 42 Lynn McFall, 'Integrity', *Ethics* 98,1 (1987): 5–20.
- 43 Some may object saying that another moral obligation (giving to the poor) overrides the philosopher's *prima facie* duty to avoid activities that risk biasing research, but the political scientist has no competing obligation, since there is no duty to engage in politics. That view is problematic because efforts to advance justice require direct aid *and* activism – without the latter, systemic injustices remain in place. See Emily Clough, 'Effective altruism's blind spot', *Boston Review* 14 July 2015, available at: <https://bostonreview.net/world/emily-clough-effective-altruism-ngos>. It thus is more plausible that individuals can fulfil positive duties to others through some combination of direct aid and activism, which provides further reason to permit activism by scholars.
- 44 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in J. Gray (ed.) *On Liberty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 1–128.
- 45 Scott Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
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- 47 Abigail Thompson, 'Does diversity trump ability? An example of the misuse of mathematics in social sciences', *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 61,9 (2014): 1024–30.
- 48 Elizabeth Mannix & Margaret Neale, 'What differences make a difference? The promise and reality of diverse teams in organizations', *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 6,2 (2005): 31–55.
- 49 Van der Vossen's proposal leaves unclear how to treat researchers who previously engaged in activism but no longer do. Perhaps they have a place in academia, which would make perspectives within it more diverse. Activism, though, can cultivate political commitments and biases that endure after it ends, so it seems that retired activists would be less than ideal from van der Vossen's perspective. Also, only allowing those with *past* political experience to contribute to research comes at a cost, given how quickly politics evolves. That approach excludes potential insights from those directly familiar with current political challenges.
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- 54 Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 68.
- 55 Tetlock 2005 *op. cit.*; Barbara Mellers *et al.*, 'The psychology of intelligence analysis: Drivers of prediction accuracy in world politics', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 21,1 (2015): 1–14; Philip Tetlock & Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2015).
- 56 M. R. Nakhaie & Barry Adam, 'The political affiliation of Canadian university professors', *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 33,4 (2008): 873–97; Neil Gross & Solon Simmons (eds) *Professors and their Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
- 57 Mutz *op. cit.*, pp. 27–29.

- 58 David Hess & Kate Brown, 'Green tea: Clean-energy conservatism as a countermovement', *Environmental Sociology* 3,1 (2017): 64–75; David Dagan & Steven Teles, *Prison Break: Why Conservatives Turned Against Mass Incarceration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 59 Scott Lilienfeld *et al.*, 'Giving debiasing away: Can psychological research on correcting cognitive errors promote human welfare?' *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 4,4 (2009): 390–8.
- 60 Mellers *et al.* op. cit.
- 61 Carey Morewedge *et al.*, 'Debiasing decisions: Improved decision making with a single training intervention', *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 2,1 (2015): 129–40.
- 62 Philip Tetlock, 'Accountability and complexity of thought', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45,1 (1983): 74–83; Jennifer Lerner & Philip Tetlock, 'Bridging individual, interpersonal, and institutional approaches to judgment and decision making: The impact of accountability on cognitive bias' in S. Schneider & J. Shanteau (eds) *Emerging Perspectives on Judgment and Decision Research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 431–57.
- 63 Jon Shields & Joshua Dunn, *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 194–9.
- 64 Neil Gross, *Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 159–79.
- 65 In one survey, more than one in three psychologists would discriminate against conservatives in hiring decisions. See Yoel Inbar & Joris Lammers, 'Political diversity in social and personality psychology', *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7,5 (2012): 496–503.
- 66 Duarte *et al.* op. cit., p. 11.