CSPI

Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Political Discrimination, and Self-Censorship

Eric Kaufmann[*]

Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology

Executive Report

March 1, 2021

[*] Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London; Research Fellow, Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology.

CSPI

Main Findings

- This study is the first of its kind to investigate authoritarianism and political discrimination in academia, relying on survey responses from both the perpetrators and targets of discrimination.

- Across three Anglophone countries, a significant portion of academics discriminate against conservatives in hiring, promotion, grants, and publications. Over 4 in 10 US and Canadian academics would not hire a Trump supporter, and 1 in 3 British academics would not hire a Brexit supporter.

- Gender-critical feminist scholars appear to experience even more discrimination than conservatives. Only 28% of American and Canadian academics would feel comfortable having lunch with someone who opposes the idea of transwomen accessing women's shelters.

- Most professors do not back cancel culture in its most authoritarian forms. Only 1 in 10 academics support firing controversial professors. Nonetheless, while most do not back cancellation, many are not opposed to it, remaining non-committal.

- Right-leaning academics experience a high level of institutional authoritarianism and peer pressure. In the US, over a third of conservative academics and PhD students have been threatened with disciplinary action for their views, while 70% of conservative academics report a hostile departmental climate for their beliefs.

- In the social sciences and humanities, over 9 in 10 Trump-supporting academics and 8 in 10 Brexit-supporting academics say they would not feel comfortable expressing their views to a colleague. More than half of North American and British conservative academics admit self-censoring in research and teaching.

- Younger academics and PhD students, especially in the United States, are significantly more willing than older academics to support dismissing controversial

scholars from their posts, indicating that the problem of progressive authoritarianism is likely to get worse in the coming years.

- A hostile climate plays a part in deterring conservative graduate students from pursuing careers in academia. Conservative and liberal graduate students differ far more in their perceptions of whether their politics fit academia than they do on questions related to how well academia pays, the isolating nature of the work, and other aspects of the profession.

- One policy option is for government to proactively apply the law to universities, instituting fines for institutions that repeatedly breach individuals' academic freedom while opening up a means for plaintiffs to appeal around their universities to a regulatory ombudsman. While this report makes no policy recommendations, this approach has been largely adopted by the British government.

To read the entire report, click here.

High-profile incidents of campus illiberalism are often brushed off as spirited exceptions to the rule that academic freedom is safe. Recent examples include the mob violence directed against Charles Murray at Middlebury College and Bret Weinstein at Evergreen State University. Progressive critics view the free speech debate – on campus and more generally – as overblown, a moral panic concocted by the right.[1] In universities, many don't experience a threat to their ability to teach and research, so they wonder what the problem is.

This report seeks to cut away from the headlines to explore large-scale survey data for the US, Canada, and the UK. Its unique contribution is providing robust quantitative analysis that reveals the nature and extent of punishment for speech and political discrimination *from the perspectives of both perpetrators and victims*. Few academics favor dismissal campaigns, but a significant minority admit to discriminating against conservatives, and a near majority seem to do so when a "list method," designed to get around social desirability bias, is used to elicit responses. From the perspective of the small minority of right-leaning academics, we see the consequences of this behavior, with most saying they experience a hostile climate in their departments and that they self-censor in their teaching and research. According to our surveys, over a third of conservative academics and PhD students in the United States say they have been threatened with disciplinary action for their beliefs.

While even one episode of intolerance of free speech should raise concern, it is important in science to be able to generalize findings to a wider population. This report begins with high-profile deplatformings and dismissals. But it soon moves beneath the surface to expose what are far more pervasive threats to academic freedom stemming from fears of a) cancellation – threats to one's job or reputation – and b) political discrimination. These I dichotomize as hard and soft authoritarianism.

Support for Hard Authoritarianism in Academia

Hard authoritarianism entails no-platforming, dismissal campaigns, social media mob attacks, open letters, formal complaints, and disciplinary action, and stems mainly from a subgroup of illiberal far-left activist staff and students. I find that only a small minority of academic staff are protagonists. Figure 1 shows support for cancellation across five surveys and five hypothetical scenarios involving controversial academics. Across most questions, support for dismissal among academics is under 10%, though it is somewhat higher among PhD students.

CSPI

Support Campaign to Oust Dissenting Academic
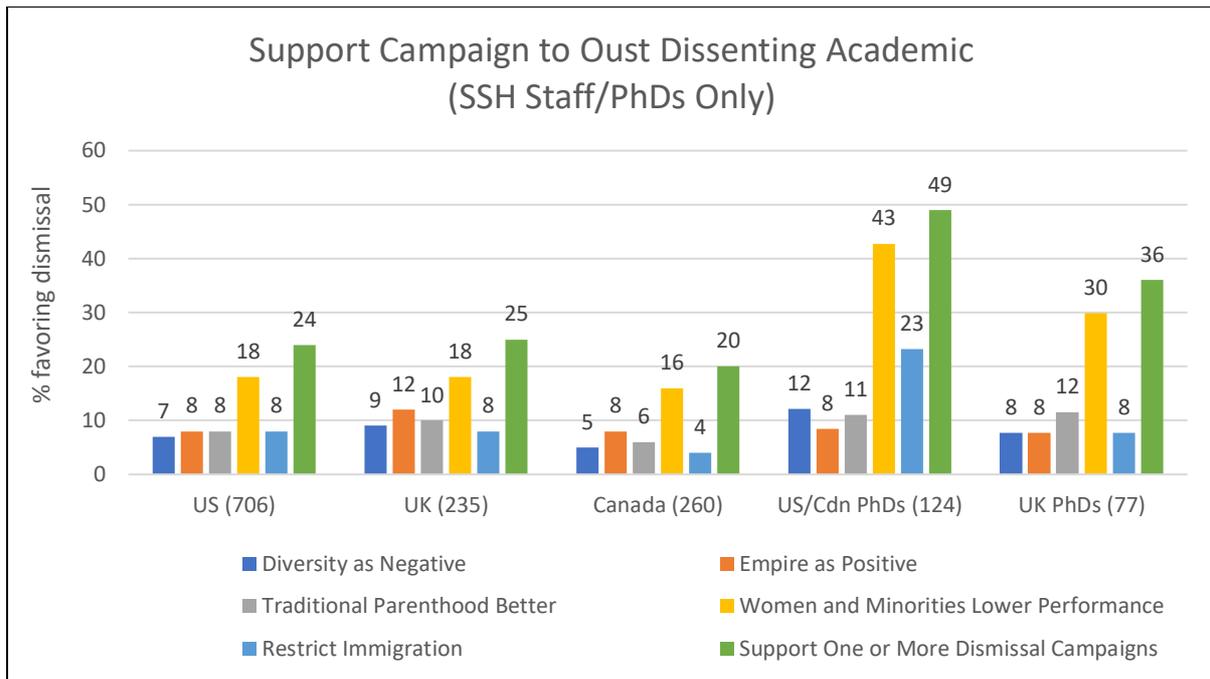### (SSH Staff/PhDs Only)

Figure 1. Note: Excludes STEM academics. Labels refer to hypothetical scenarios in which respondents are asked whether they would support a campaign to dismiss a staff member who found the respective conclusions in their research. Brackets denote sample size.

Though few academics endorse cancellation, a larger group are cross-pressured between their left and liberal commitments and thus unwilling to speak out against those who seek to silence free expression. In terms of those targeted, a significant minority of right-leaning academics and doctoral students have experienced hard authoritarianism.

Soft Authoritarianism: Self-Censorship and Discrimination

Soft authoritarianism involves a quieter but still insidious form of illiberalism that punishes those with conservative or otherwise nonconforming views in more mundane ways, damaging their careers and quality of workplace life. Those with dissenting views suffer from discrimination in terms of hiring, promotion, grant applications, publishing, the allocation of teaching and research tasks, workplace civility, and social inclusion. This report includes surveys from both the potential perpetrators and victims of soft authoritarianism. These surveys establish the share of academics who prioritize progressive values over academic freedom (a figure that varies depending on the nature of the question), and how conservative scholars perceive their experiences and the academic climate in their departments.

I find that left and right, academics and non-academics, discriminate against each other at similar rates. The big difference on campus is the heavy leftward skew among staff at virtually all universities, and among students – especially at elite institutions. Political discrimination against conservatives and other intellectual minorities, such as gender-critical feminists (who accept a biological definition of sex), implicates between a third and a half of academics. Perpetrators of discrimination include not only a near majority on the far left but also some center-left and even centrist staff. Using a concealed list technique reveals that 1 in 3 British academics would discriminate against a known Brexit supporter while 40% of American academics and 45% of Canadian academics would discriminate against a known Trump supporter.

The share who openly admit to political discrimination is only about a third to half the revealed (actual) total, but even limiting ourselves to unabashed discrimination, as Figure 2 does, indicates that over 20% of academics and around 30% of doctoral students openly admit that they would discriminate against a right-leaning grant bid. If we account for concealment, this means that between a third and half of assessors are politically biased, resulting in an open conservative facing an at least 80% chance of being discriminated against on a four-person panel chosen at random. By contrast, discrimination against left-leaning bids, papers, or promotions is largely counterbalanced by political discrimination in favor of them.

Openly Admitted Discrimination against Right-Leaning Papers, Grants, and Promotions

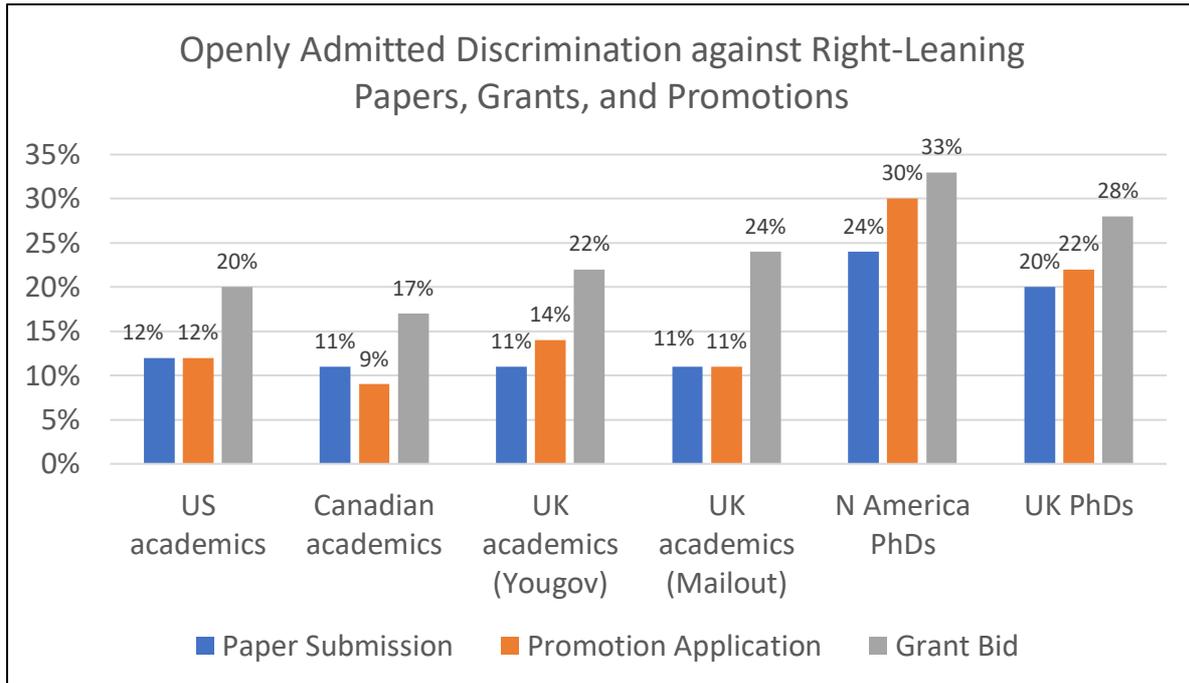| Category	Paper Submission	Promotion Application	Grant Bid
US academics	12%	12%	20%
Canadian academics	11%	9%	17%
UK academics (Yougov)	11%	14%	22%
UK academics (Mailout)	11%	11%	24%
N America PhDs	24%	30%	33%
UK PhDs	20%	22%	28%

Figure 2. Note: Includes STEM academics. Based on a direct question rather than a concealed list technique.

Unsurprisingly, right-leaning academics understand that they are part of a minority that faces structural barriers. Cancellation and political discrimination are leading a majority of them to report that their departments are hostile climates for their political beliefs, as seen in Figure 3.

CSPI

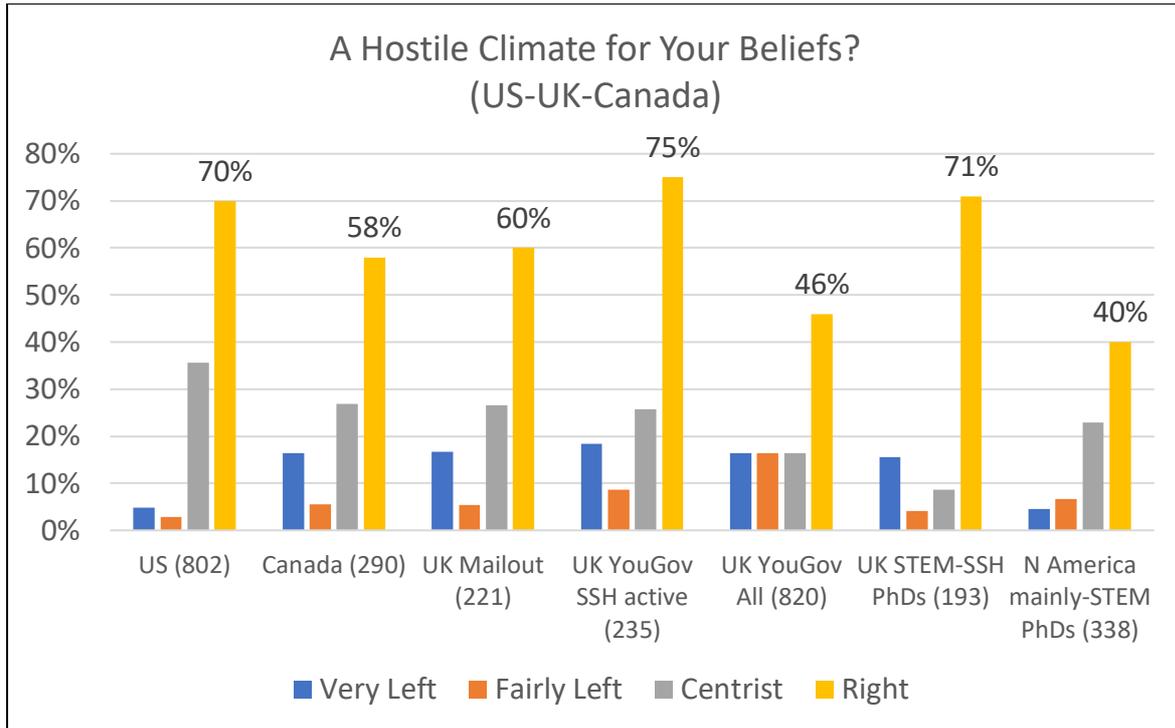A Hostile Climate for Your Beliefs?
(US-UK-Canada)

Figure 3. Note: SSH refers to social sciences and humanities. Sample size in brackets. STEM share of survey responses: US and Canada academic: 10%; UK mailout: zero; UK YouGov SSH active: zero; UK YouGov all: 53%; UK PhDs: 55%; North American PhDs: 63%.

Most conservative social sciences and humanities (SSH) academics self-censor in their teaching or research, as Figure 4 reveals, with the problem worse among Americans. This has the effect of narrowing the range of questions that may be asked, and answers that may be given, in the social sciences and humanities. Censorship is especially pronounced in fields touching on the sacred progressive categories of race, gender, and sexuality.
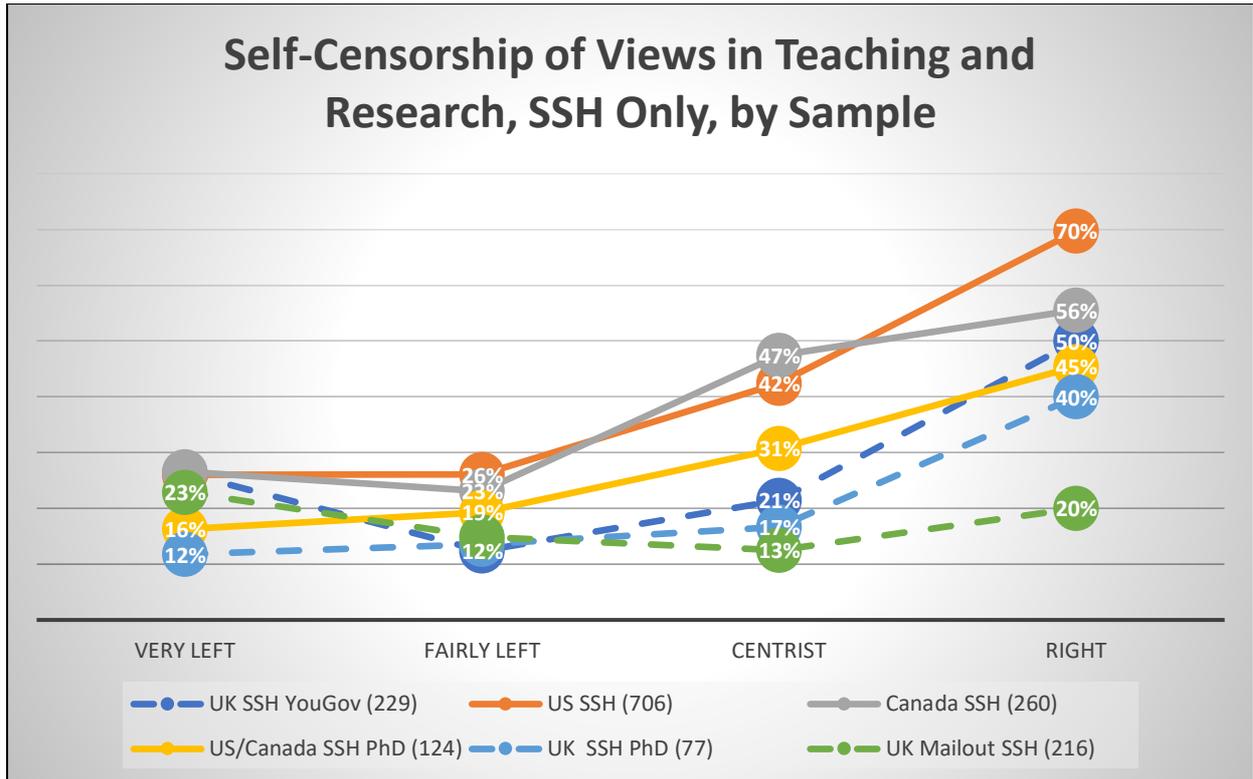
CSPI

Figure 4. Note: UK surveys in dashed lines, North American in solid. SSH refers to social sciences and humanities, as STEM respondents excluded from this analysis. Sample size in brackets.

The lack of viewpoint diversity among faculty underpins both hard and soft authoritarianism. It produces hard authoritarianism because, as this report shows, pro-cancellation sentiment is concentrated among far-left academics (even though most on the far left are not hard authoritarians); and because those on the left are more likely to be cross-pressured between their progressive and liberal value commitments, muting their opposition to hard authoritarianism in a way much less true of conservative academics. The significant minority of far leftists and relatively small share of non-leftists in SSH departments thus increases the supply of hard authoritarianism while reducing resistance to it.

A Radical Minority, Disproportionately Young, Supports Cancellation

Worryingly, younger academics are significantly more authoritarian than those who are older. Among American and Canadian academics from the Millennial generation, the share who would back at least one dismissal campaign is between a third and a half. With other factors held constant, a 30-year-old far-left academic has a 50% chance of endorsing at least 1 of 4 hypothetical dismissal campaigns involving politically incorrect research findings, whereas a 70-year-old far leftist has a 35% chance of doing so. PhD students, who represent the future of academia, are 10-20 points more in favor of cancellation than academic staff. Unless these trends are capturing a life cycle effect that people mature out of, this portends rising support for illiberalism in the future. On the other hand, a 60% majority of academics in their 20s and 30s continues to reject cancellation, and young academics are 10 to 20 points more supportive of academic freedom than PhD students the same age.

While few support firing campaigns, these results do not confirm the notion that there is an overwhelming

"silent majority" of academics who oppose cancellation but are too fearful to speak out. For most of the hypothetical cancel campaigns, I find around half of academics oppose dismissal. In the US, as Figure 5 shows, 76% oppose firing an academic who espouses lower immigration levels. Yet in the most controversial case, that of an academic whose research finds that diverse organizations perform worse than less diverse ones, the share of US

SSH faculty opposed to cancellation falls to just 31%. Across the four hypothetical controversial professors in Figure 5, setting aside the immigration question, between 40% and 51% of academics neither support nor oppose dismissal (i.e., say they are unsure). That is, they find themselves cross-pressured between progressive and liberal value commitments.
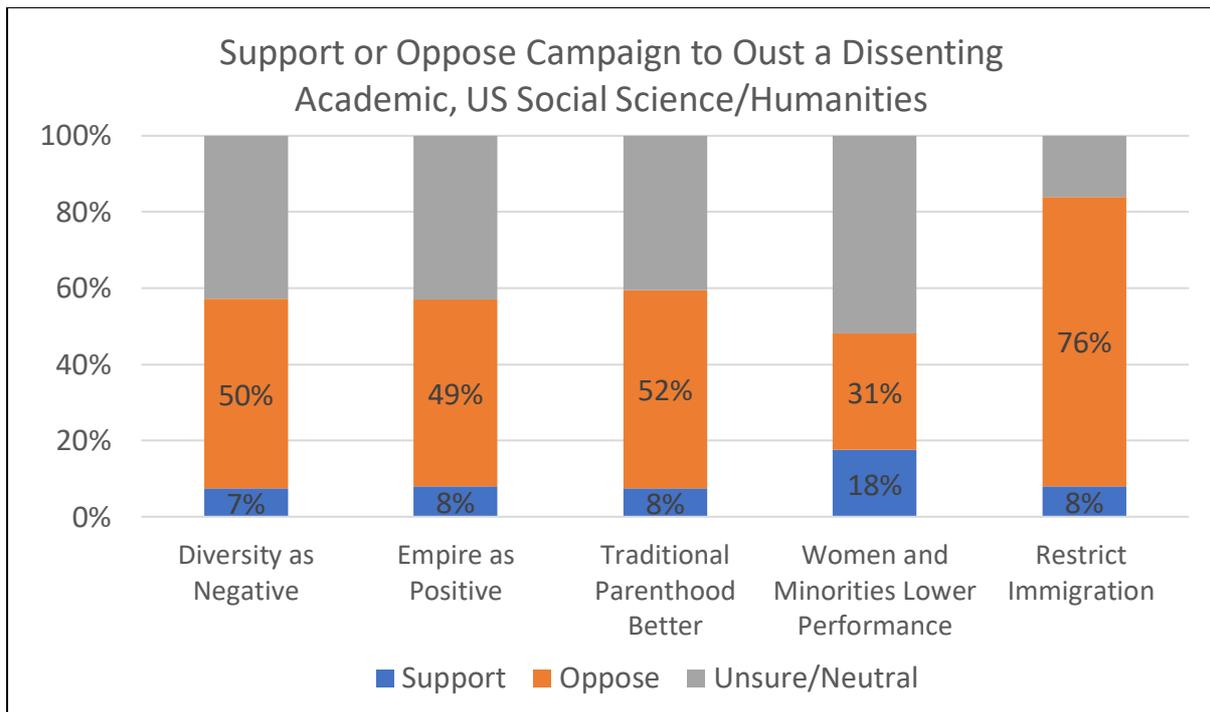
Figure 5. Source: Online mailout survey, August 2020. N=706.

This means that even if fear of reputational, social, or career consequences were not at stake, the fact that most academics do not endorse dismissal nevertheless does not mean most oppose it. Cross-pressured value commitments result in an indeterminate stance for many, reflecting a pronounced cultural-left value orientation among SSH academics compared to the wider public. Only among the small number of

conservatives is there majority opposition. We see the prioritization of progressivism over liberalism on the abstract and seemingly unobtrusive question of support for political correctness, where Figure 6 shows that 76% of SSH academics believe that the protective benefits of political correctness outweigh its threat to free speech, while just 41% of the British public agrees.

CSPI

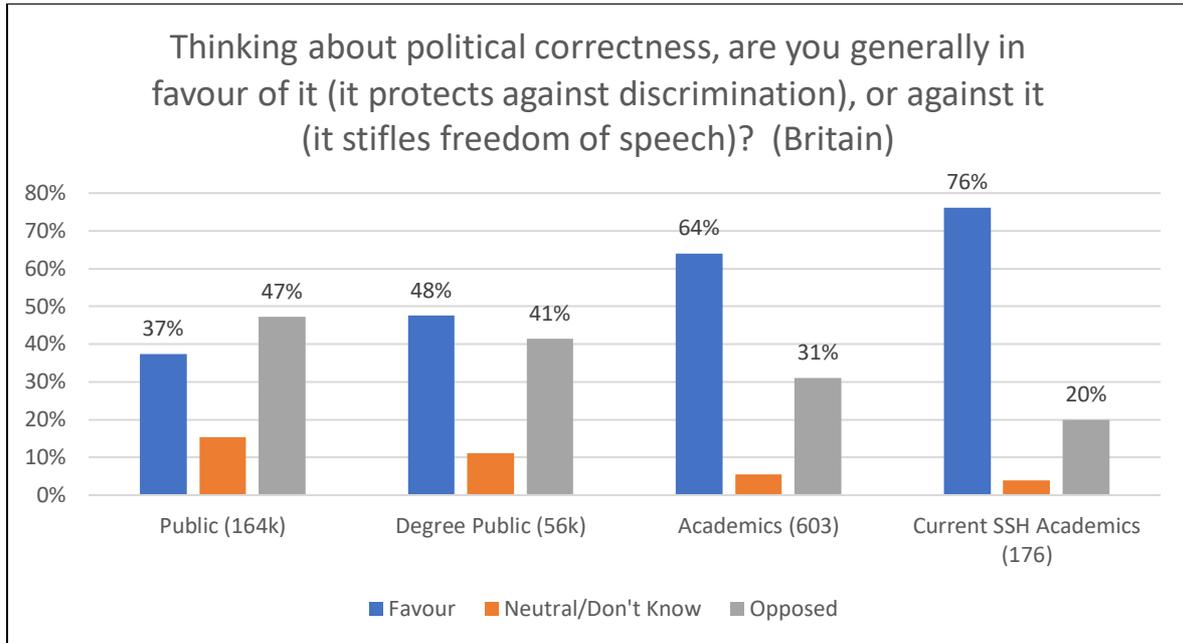Figure 6. Source: UK YouGov Profiles data, accessed April 19, 2020; own YouGov survey matched to Profiles data. Note that only 603 of 820 in my sample could be matched. Sample size in brackets.

In the US, 44% of academics, and 70% of PhD students, would back a reading list quota of at least 30% women and 20% people of color, while only a third of academics and 14% of PhD students oppose it. Very similar patterns turned up in Canada and Britain. While many favor quotas, the share of American academics who advocate firing an academic who refuses to comply with the quotas is in single digits. Here we find that a large minority support progressive aims that clash with academic freedom, but do not endorse the authoritarian implications of their stance. Younger academics are, however, more willing to follow through: they are more likely to endorse dismissing dissenters or compelling them to cancel their courses. The wider point is that academic freedom is not only about emboldening a silent liberal majority, but also involves pointing out the illiberal implications of progressive initiatives to the liberal left. This means engaging in a substantive battle for hearts and minds when academic freedom collides with cherished progressive aims.

The leftward skew of the social sciences and humanities professoriate in Britain and North America, with 70-80% of staff on the left and 5-10% on the right, undergirds a climate of soft authoritarianism. Why? Political discrimination is considered acceptable by many in the wider society but, as my non-academic comparator survey shows, it is typically checked by the non-political nature of most forms of work and the more politically-diverse composition of most professional workplaces.[2] However, where political views are manifest in people's work and there is a lopsided political skew, as in the social sciences and humanities departments of universities, or in the arts sector, the result is a discriminatory effect against conservatives and other intellectual minorities.

A Hostile Climate Deters Conservatives from Going into Academia

The origins of academia's left orientation lie partly in recruitment. Historic data show that SSH fields have shifted from approximately 2 leftists for every conservative in the 1960s to a ratio of approximately 10 to 1 today – slightly more in top US and Canadian universities

and a bit less in the UK.[3] In surveys in the early 1970s, younger academics were as much as 30 points more left-wing than their elders. That age gap is non-existent today, so we should not expect conservative academics to go extinct. Nevertheless, I find evidence that a hostile environment for conservatives in SSH departments is actively discouraging them from pursuing academic careers. Generally speaking, 70% to 80% of right-leaning academics and doctoral students say their departments are hostile environments for their political beliefs.

Figure 7 shows that, when asked about considerations that might affect their decision to pursue an academic career, concern that their political views will make life difficult in academia is significantly higher among conservative graduate students. Note that these data include both STEM and SSH students.
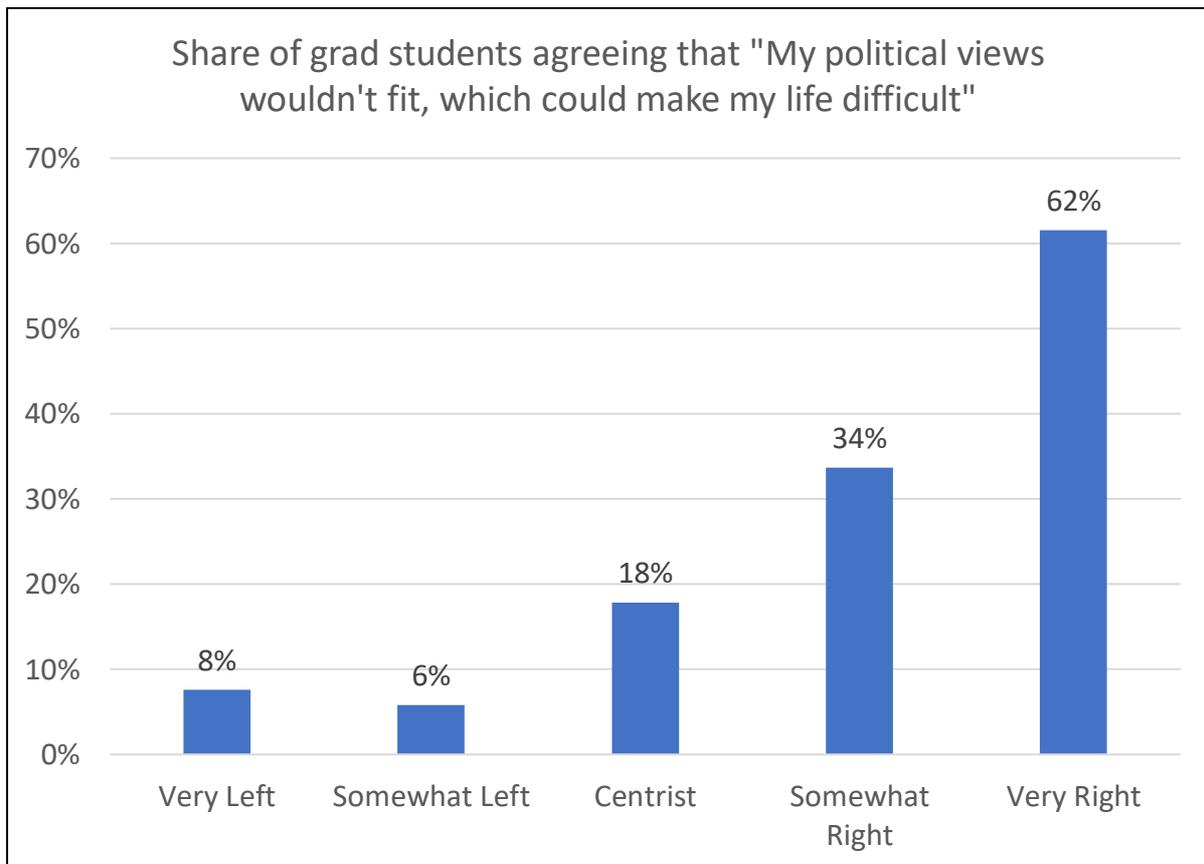
Figure 7. N= 843, with 95 "Somewhat Right" and 26 "Very Right." Includes master's and PhD students, STEM and SSH students. National breakdown is 434 UK, 368 USA, 41 Canada.

This predicts lower interest in pursuing an academic career among right-leaning SSH master's students. At the same time, conservatives who worry about their political fit but who progress to the doctoral stage appear no less interested in pursuing academic careers than others. The data do not back the contention that conservative grad students are more motivated by money and thus uninterested in an academic career because it does not pay as well as the private sector. But results do suggest that the difficulty of getting an academic job in a particular location may discourage conservative graduate students more than others from proceeding down an academic track.

I also present evidence of a significantly higher share of right-leaners among academics who retire early,

suggesting that selection effects work to both limit entry and hasten the exit of conservatives. While, as I show, political discrimination is rife among the professoriate, it is unclear whether chilling effects, stereotypes about academia, the limited breadth of interests represented by academic staff or active discrimination best explains the political composition of SSH academia. The relatively progressive views of many professionals outside academia, and of STEM academics inside it, explain much, but far from all, of the political homogeneity of the social sciences and the humanities.

Cancellations as the Tip of the Iceberg

Injustice and discrimination are typically not experienced by the leftist political majority, making it possible to imagine there is no problem. "How can you expect a man who's warm to understand one who's cold?" remarked Alexander Solzhenitsyn. In the pre-Civil Rights American South, discrimination passed white Americans by. Likewise, today, discrimination is concentrated within a minority of perhaps 5-10% of scholars, who happen to be conservative or gender-critical feminist researchers.[4] Furthermore, it is those working in the social sciences and humanities who are disproportionately victimized, again reducing the number affected. From the point of view of this small minority, illiberalism and discrimination are massive problems, but these can be invisible to the left-wing majority in the academy.

We can think of the threats to academic freedom using the metaphor of an iceberg, with items that make the news – such as deplatformings and dismissals – as the visible symptoms of a much deeper problem. Figure 8 displays a breakdown of key findings from this report from the perspective of the victims. No-platforming and dismissal are, as critics point out, very rare. While we don't have figures on all such cases, I estimate not much more than 0.03% of all staff have experienced no-platforming or dismissal.[5] However, the share expands rapidly when we move below the dashed "waterline" to consider other forms of illiberalism. From the chart, we can see that between a quarter and half of right-wing American academics have experienced hard authoritarianism, in the form of disciplinary action for speech (23%), bullying (36%), or psychological pressure (50%) for their beliefs.

Softer forms of authoritarianism are related to political discrimination, including perceiving a hostile climate for one's political beliefs in a person's department (70%), self-censoring one's views in teaching or research (70%), or being unwilling to share one's political beliefs with colleagues (82% of British Leave voters teaching in the social sciences and humanities and an astounding 91% of all Trump-supporting American academics).[6] It's time to broaden the conversation on academic freedom from high-profile incidents to the superstructure of attitudes and behaviors that sustains these violations of academic liberty.

CSPI

"Iceberg" of Threats to Academic Freedom (Victim's View)

No-platforming or Dismissal Incidents	0.03%
Threatened by Disciplinary Action for Speech, UK/EU (Mainly left sample)	6%
Threatened by Disciplinary Action for Speech (US NAS academics)	23%
Share of US NAS Academics Reporting Bullying for Beliefs	36%
Share of US NAS Academics Reporting Psychological Pressure for Beliefs	50%
Share of UK Right or Leave SSH Academics Reporting Hostile Climate for Beliefs	50%
Share of UK Academics Saying Leavers Uncomfortable Expressing Beliefs, or Unsure	57%
Share of UK SSH Academics Saying Leavers Uncomfortable Expressing Beliefs to Colleagues	64%
Share of Right-Leaning US Academics Reporting Hostile Climate for Beliefs	70%
Share of Right-Leaning US Soc Science/Humanities (SSH) Academics Self-Censoring	70%
Share of UK Leave SSH Academics Saying Leavers Uncomfortable Expressing Beliefs, or Unsure	82%
Share of US Academics Saying Trump Supporter Would not Express Views, or Unsure	86%
Share of US pro-Trump Academics Saying Trump Supporter Would not Express Views, or Unsure	91%

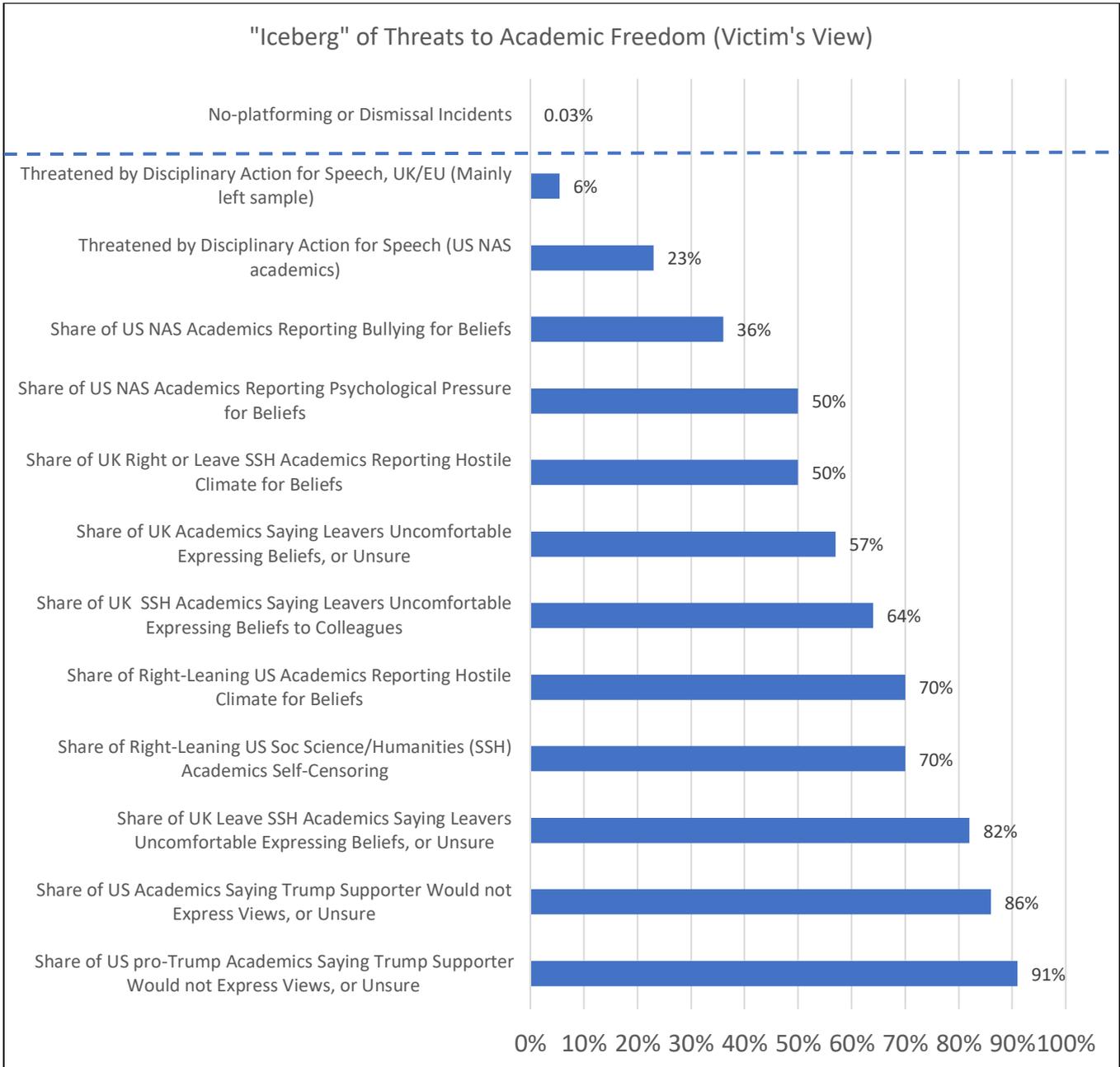0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Figure 8

Although most academics and doctoral students are members of the political majority and thus not represented in the victims' chart above, many are complicit in the academic freedom problem in their role as perpetrators. Figure 9 thus outlines a similar iceberg of problems from the perpetrator perspective, beginning with those in the news and expanding to encompass more pervasive forms of hard and soft authoritarianism. In terms of hard authoritarianism, under 1 in 10 academics would endorse a given

dismissal campaign, which is good news. However, when it comes to backing any one of four hypothetical campaigns, this increases to 1 in 4. And among American doctoral students, 43% would endorse a campaign to dismiss a hypothetical scholar who found that racial and gender diversity reduces the effectiveness of an organization.

Political discrimination results in what I term soft authoritarianism, though its effects are anything but trivial. Being denied a job, promotion, publication, or

grant funding can be a crushing impediment to a conservative or gender-critical academic trying to make a career. In common with previous research, I find pervasive political discrimination. 1 in 3 British academics wouldn't hire a Leave supporter and over 4 in 10 would discriminate against a right-leaning grant proposal. 4 in 10 American academics would not hire a Trump supporter and 57% would be uncomfortable or unsure about sitting next to a Trump-supporting academic at lunch. American graduate students are even more discriminatory, with 65% saying they would hire a Sanders supporter over a Trump supporter rather than remain neutral between them, and 82% discriminating against a conservative or Trump supporter in at least 1 of 6 dimensions probed in my questionnaire. 2 in 3 left-wing American academics would discriminate against a conservative or Trump supporter in at least 1 of 6 scenarios.

While most academics and PhD students – even on the left – are not complicit in hard authoritarianism, these findings implicate up to half of academics and graduate students in political discrimination. This produces the chilling effect and self-censorship that form the tissue of soft authoritarianism, a form of Mill's "despotism of custom" that inhibits freedom, truth, and viewpoint diversity.[7]

CSPI

"Iceberg" of Threats to Academic Freedom (Perpetrator's View)

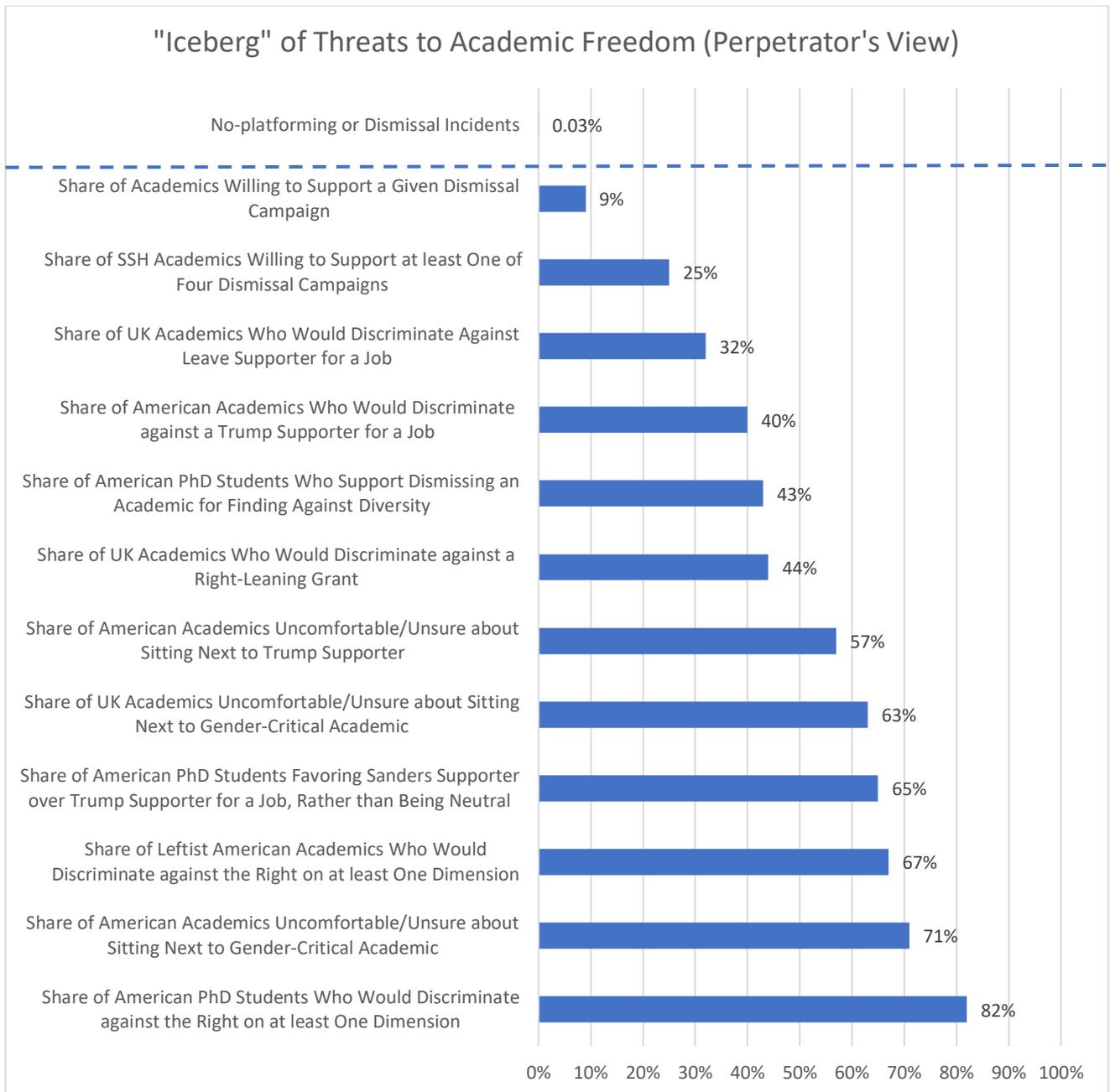| Category	Value
No-platforming or Dismissal Incidents	0.03%
Share of Academics Willing to Support a Given Dismissal Campaign	9%
Share of SSH Academics Willing to Support at least One of Four Dismissal Campaigns	25%
Share of UK Academics Who Would Discriminate Against Leave Supporter for a Job	32%
Share of American Academics Who Would Discriminate against a Trump Supporter for a Job	40%
Share of American PhD Students Who Support Dismissing an Academic for Finding Against Diversity	43%
Share of UK Academics Who Would Discriminate against a Right-Leaning Grant	44%
Share of American Academics Uncomfortable/Unsure about Sitting Next to Trump Supporter	57%
Share of UK Academics Uncomfortable/Unsure about Sitting Next to Gender-Critical Academic	63%
Share of American PhD Students Favoring Sanders Supporter over Trump Supporter for a Job, Rather than Being Neutral	65%
Share of Leftist American Academics Who Would Discriminate against the Right on at least One Dimension	67%
Share of American Academics Uncomfortable/Unsure about Sitting Next to Gender-Critical Academic	71%
Share of American PhD Students Who Would Discriminate against the Right on at least One Dimension	82%

Figure 9

The main report is divided into three sections. Part I considers hard authoritarianism from both the victim and perpetrator perspectives, encompassing experiences of the university disciplinary system and people's willingness to endorse the dismissal of controversial scholars. Part II examines soft authoritarianism, also from the victim and perpetrator perspectives. It can be subdivided into three subsections, the first on the ideological composition of the professoriate, the second on chilling effects and self-censorship, and the third on political discrimination. Finally, Part III compares academia to other professional workplaces, and briefly discusses the pros and cons of different policy recommendations that might be used to address the issues highlighted in the report. I co-authored a previous report that recommended a proactive approach to

guarding academic freedom in the UK, and its recommendations have been largely adopted by the Johnson administration. The American legal situation may not be directly analogous, and the author takes no position in this report on US or Canadian policy, only noting that a hands-off approach is unlikely to change university practices given the distribution of opinion within the academy.[8] Though the evidence in this report is mainly quantitative, based on surveys, there are also extensive qualitative sections based on comment boxes that respondents filled out. Those who are mainly interested in quantitative findings may bypass these sections.

For the full report, click here.

---

[1] Davies, Will. 2018. "The Free Speech Panic: How the Right Concocted a Crisis." *The Guardian*. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/26/the-free-speech-panic-censorship-how-the-right-concocted-a-crisis; Sachs, Jeffrey A. 2018. "There is no Campus Free Speech Crisis: The Right's New Moral Panic is Largely Imaginary." *Salon*. Available at https://www.salon.com/2018/05/01/there-is-no-campus-free-speech-crisis-the-rights-new-moral-panic-is-largely-imaginary/.

[2] See Part III of the report.

[3] Ellis, John M. 2020. *The Breakdown of Higher Education: How It Happened, the Damage It Does, and What Can Be Done*. Encounter Books: pp. 26-36.

[4] Gender-critical feminists are those who believe that individuals who have transitioned from male to female should not be able to automatically gain access to women-only spaces.

[5] Based on the total number of incidents recorded by US and UK databases (FIRE, AFAM) divided by the number of academics employed. See report for details on sources.

[6] UK sample of 22 active Leave-supporting SSH academics; US sample of 127 Trump-supporting academics across mailout and National Association of Scholars (NAS) surveys. For these, the share of Trump academics who are uncomfortable is 97% and 84% respectively (89% including unsure).

[7] Mill, John Stuart. 1966. *On Liberty*: *A Selection of His Works*. Springer: ch. 3.

[8] Adekoya, Remi, Eric Kaufmann and Tom Simpson. 2020. "Academic Freedom in the UK." *Policy Exchange*. Available at https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/academic-freedom-in-the-uk-2/; "Higher education: free speech and academic freedom." Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-free-speech-and-academic-freedom.