
Most Economists Welcome Ideological Openness

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DANIEL B. KLEIN, WILLIAM L. DAVIS,
BOB G. FIGGINS, AND DAVID HEDENGREN

With Adam Smith, political economy emerged as part of moral philosophy. From the early 1800s, however, writers have considered whether economics as a science can be demarcated from morals and politics. Can economics be value free? Even if it can be, should it be? During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were strong movements toward demarcation and separation of economics from moral, cultural, and political judgment.

Someone who moves in the world of academic economics now is likely to detect something of an official orthodoxy that economic science should be “positive” and not “normative.” In this view, economists should be factual, analytical, and “objective,” and they should keep their value judgments out of the research.

In March 2010, we conducted a major survey of economics professors in the United States.¹ We asked the respondents whether, when reading or listening to an economist, they welcomed his disclosure of his ideological proclivities. We anticipated that most economists would say they do not like it. The survey was completed by

Daniel B. Klein is a professor of economics at George Mason University and a fellow of the Ratio Institute; **William L. Davis** is a professor of economics at the University of Tennessee at Martin; **Bob G. Figgins** is a professor of economics at the University of Tennessee at Martin; **David Hedengren** is a Ph.D. student in economics at George Mason University.

1. At the survey homepage (<http://surveyofeconomists.blogspot.com>), you can download the survey instrument (<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/6776620/SurveyPPA/Davis-Kleinsurvey5.pdf>); the cover letter that accompanied the survey (<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/6776620/SurveyPPA/letter.pdf>); the follow-up postcard (<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/6776620/SurveyPPA/card.pdf>); and the listing of three hundred economics departments (<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/6776620/SurveyPPA/EconDepts5.xls>). The data for this note are available on request.

The Independent Review, v. 17, n. 2, Fall 2012, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2012, pp. 227-231.

Table 1
Attitudes toward Ideological Openness in Economics

Which response best represents your attitude toward an economist's disclosing his own ideological proclivities in his work?	Percentage	N
A. I welcome it.	62.9	188
B. I am indifferent.	20.1	60
C. I dislike it.	10.0	30
D. I'm not sure.	6.0	18
[No answer]	1.0	3
Total	100.0	299

299 economics professors in the United States, yielding a response rate of 15.2 percent. The results surprised us.

The survey, which was mailed with a postage-paid return envelope, contained a wide range of questions.² The results for questions about favorite economists, journals, and blogs are reported in Davis et al. 2011, which also details the survey method. We refrain from repeating the methodology, noting only that despite the lackluster response rate of 15.2 percent, the 299 respondents' sex ratio is quite close to that of the survey group, which itself is a random sample of economics professors, and their political-party ratios are well aligned to what we know for economists generally (Davis et al. 2011, 128).

Question 4 of the survey appeared as follows:

Some economists, such as Frank D. Graham and Gunnar Myrdal, have suggested that when an economist addresses major social issues, he or she ought to disclose his or her own ideological proclivities, or where he/she "is coming from."

Suppose you are reading or listening to an economist, and he discloses his own ideological proclivities. Which best represents your attitude toward his doing so:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A. I welcome it. | <input type="checkbox"/> C. I dislike it. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> B. I am indifferent. | <input type="checkbox"/> D. I'm not sure. |

One might argue that the preliminary sentence, mentioning Graham and Myrdal, commits the foul of leading the respondent. That may be, but it does not seem to us that it would be very influential. At any rate, the results are shown in table 1. Not only did a clear majority say they welcome ideological disclosure, but only 10 percent said they dislike it!

2. The survey instrument is at <http://surveyofeconomists.blogspot.com>.

We have noted the possibility that the preliminary sentence led the respondent. Another possible reason to discount our findings is the suspicion that a preference for natural discourse makes one both more likely to favor ideological openness *and to complete and return a survey*. We have no gauge of this possible response bias. Our intuition is that there may well be something to it. But we also think it unlikely that the two possible biases are significant enough to undo the broad conclusion that a large portion, if not “most,” economics professors welcome ideological openness.

A follow-on question was directed to those who said they welcome disclosure: “If you chose A, please check any of the following reasons for why you welcome it.” Table 2 shows that of the 188 respondents who said they welcome disclosure, 72.3 percent marked that it “alerts the reader to possible author bias.” The respondent was permitted to check multiple reasons, and the next two reasons listed in the table also gained the allegiance of a clear majority of respondents who welcome disclosure: self-disclosure “helps one understand how the author sees the matter,” and it “gives the discourse a more candid and open ethic.”

These reasons are very much aligned with the main reasons Gunnar Myrdal developed. As a wunderkind social democratic economist in Sweden, Myrdal published in 1930 a work later translated as *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory* (Myrdal 1953), arguing that orthodox economics works from an implicit liberal or laissez-faire worldview and that economists should take care to distinguish and declare their value judgments as distinct from their scientific claims. But by 1953, when an English translation was published with a new preface, Myrdal had gone further, maintaining that the very matter of separating value judgments and scientific claims is fraught with problems (vii–viii; see also Carlson and Jonung 2006, 535–37). Myrdal went on to write *Objectivity in Social Research* (1969), in which he calls vigorously for ideological openness in social research (pithy excerpts appear in Klein 2006, 182–84). This book is to our knowledge the most elaborate case for ideological openness, but others have also advocated this position, including Frank D. Graham (1942, xix–xx), Daniel Klein (2006, 2011), and Peter Lewin (2007, 516).

Table 2
Reasons for Welcoming Ideological Openness in Economics

Reasons	Percentage*	N
Ideological self-disclosure alerts the reader to possible author bias.	72.3	136
Ideological self-disclosure helps one understand how the author sees the matter.	69.7	131
Ideological self-disclosure gives the discourse a more candid and open ethic.	62.2	117
Other [please specify]:	5.3	10

* Percentage of the 188 respondents who marked A in response to the question given in table 1.

Table 3
Reasons for Disliking Ideological Openness in Economics

Reasons	Percentage*	N
Ideological self-disclosure tends to encumber the matter with ideological considerations best kept separate.	60.0	18
Ideological self-disclosure is irrelevant and hence distracting.	20.0	6
Ideological self-disclosure is unscientific.	23.3	7
Other [please specify]:	16.7	5

* Percentage of the 30 respondents who marked C in response to the question in table 1.

A follow-on question was directed to those who said they dislike disclosure: “If you chose C, please check any of the following reasons for why you dislike it.” Table 3 shows that of the thirty respondents who said they dislike disclosure, 60.0 percent marked that it “tends to encumber the matter with ideological considerations best kept separate.” Again, the respondent was permitted to check multiple reasons. Starting as we do with only thirty “dislike” respondents, these results should be read with caution.

The caveats notwithstanding, our results suggest that economists are in fact more favorable to openness than many might think regarding others in their field. Our impression is that most economists would refrain from ideological openness when writing a paper for submission to a professional journal because they believe that the editor would frown on such openness. Our evidence might inform editors that if they wish to satisfy the preferences of economists at large, they might want to reconsider their posture toward ideological openness.

At any rate, Adam Smith would likely welcome the news: “Frankness and openness conciliate confidence. We trust the man who seems willing to trust us. We see clearly, we think, the road by which he means to conduct us, and we abandon ourselves with pleasure to his guidance and direction. Reserve and concealment, on the contrary, call forth diffidence” ([1790] 1976, 337).

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Acknowledgments: For funding of the survey, we thank the College of Business and Global Affairs at the University of Tennessee at Martin. For helpful comments, we thank Tyler Cowen.

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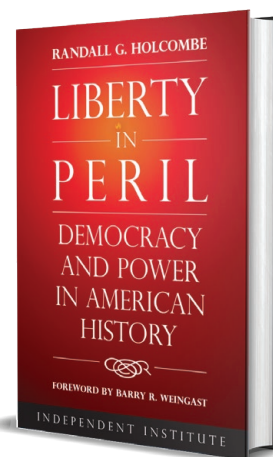
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