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Biased Judgment of Political Bias: Perceived Ideological Distance Increases Perceptions of Political Bias

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Abstract Accusations of political bias in the mass media, academia, the courts and various other institutions are common in many democracies. However, despite the prevalence of these accusations and the public attention they have received, research on the effects of perceived ideological distance on perceptions of political bias is lacking. Focusing on perceptions of political bias in academia, and drawing on a survey of 1,257 students in social science and law faculties in five Israeli universities, we show that the perceived ideological distance between a student and her set of professors increases perceptions of politically biased behavior of professors, and that the effects of 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' ideological distances are not symmetric. Possible implications and directions for further research are then suggested.

Keywords Political bias · Perceptions · Ideological distance · Motivated reasoning · Higher education

Allegations of political bias are prevalent in many democracies. In such countries, individuals working in various institutions (e.g., the courts, mass media, academia, the military) are accused of being biased in favor of a certain ideological

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orientation. In the United States, for example, such public accusations are often leveled against the media (e.g., Watts et al. 1999, pp. 144–145) and the academy (e.g., Horowitz 2006).[1]

Perceptions of political bias appear to engender negative consequences. Such perceptions regarding the media result in lower trust in the media (e.g., Tsfati and Cohen 2005), and students who perceive bias in their professors censor their own political views in class in order to preserve their grades (e.g., Kashti 2009; Linvill and Havice 2011). Understanding the determinants of perceived political bias could therefore help both individuals accused of political bias in different institutions and decision makers to design and implement policies aimed at reducing such perceptions, whereby possibly increasing the public legitimacy of these institutions (see also Smith et al. 2008, chapter 8). Indeed, much research is devoted to understanding the determinants of perceived political bias, mainly concerning the media (e.g., Vallone et al. 1985; Eveland and Shah 2003; Lee 2005).

However, despite robust findings in social psychology that people tend to attribute bias to others with whom they disagree, especially in value-laden domains (e.g., Ross and Ward 1996; Pronin et al. 2004), there are almost no studies that have investigated the effects of perceived ideological distances and disagreements on perceptions of political bias in social institutions, with only a few notable exceptions, focusing on bias in the media (Gunther et al. 2001; Turner 2007; Feldman 2011). Yet these studies examined such effects only with regard to perceived bias in media coverage of specific issues or specific news channels, whereas perceived political bias in the media in general could be more important in shaping viewers' attitudes towards the media (see D'Alession and Allen 2000, p. 137).

In this study we directly address this issue by focusing on the formation of judgments of political bias in academia—one of the least explored, yet intensely debated institutional settings of this phenomenon. We draw on a survey of 1,257 students in social sciences and law faculties in five Israeli universities. Our findings show that perceived ideological distance between a student and her set of professors substantially increases perceptions of political bias, constituting bias in the judgment of political bias. However, this effect is manifested only when the student evaluates her professors to be more left-leaning than herself. One inherent limitation of our study is that in the absence of an objective measure of the actual level of professors' bias, we cannot determine whether students who are ideologically proximate to their professors underestimate the true politically biased behavior of their professors, or whether students who are ideologically distant overestimate this behavior. Still, the study importantly shows that students are affected by their perceived ideological distance from their professors in making these judgments.

The paper proceeds as follows: we begin by defining political bias; next we focus on the case of the academy and consider the ways in which political bias is manifested in the classrooms of academic institutions. In the third section, we present a theoretical justification for our hypotheses regarding the determinants of perceived political bias. The fourth section discusses the method and measures used

[1] Similarly, in Israel there are allegations of political bias in the media (e.g., Gur 2010), the academy (e.g., Im Tirzu 2011; Shamir 2012) and the Supreme Court (e.g., Lis 2011).

in the analyses, followed by a presentation of the main findings. Finally, we discuss the possible implications of our findings and suggest directions for further research.

What is Political Bias?

Despite the frequent use of the term political bias, a clear and accepted definition of this concept is surprisingly absent. For the purpose of this study, we consider "political bias" as denoting the *effects of political preferences on judgment and behavior, where such effects are considered irrelevant and/or inappropriate*. Political bias, like other mental biases, may occur both consciously and unconsciously. People may well fail to disregard their political preferences in their decisions and actions, even when they consciously accept that these preferences should not play a role.[2]

Our definition admittedly entails a normative and subjective judgment (see also Wilson and Brekke 1994, p. 120). There are many instances in which political preferences are not deemed irrelevant or inappropriate to choice and behavior, and thus will not be considered as bias. Obviously, citizens' choices at the ballot box are legitimately guided by their political preferences, as are public expressions made by individuals in demonstrations, blogs etc. Many people, however, would deem inappropriate the effect of such political and ideological preferences on the conduct of people working in different institutions such as the courts, the media and the academy, since such people are expected to strive for objectivity and to act impartially (e.g., Lee 2005, p. 45; General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure (1915), cited at ACTA 2005, p. 15).

In this study we focus on the formation of *perceptions* of political bias in higher education. While public allegations regarding political bias of academy professors are prevalent (Bauerlein 2004), and are considered a "serious problem" by a large proportion of the US population (Gross and Simmons 2006, p. 11), the existing study of political bias has almost entirely focused on other institutions, such as the mass media and the courts. Like media organizations and courts, academic institutions have their own unique features, requiring us to design our research in a way that takes these into account. Our aim is thus twofold: to generate conclusions regarding the *nature of perceptions of political bias* that are generalizable beyond the particular setting of the academy; and to provide insights into this political-psychological phenomenon in the context of the academy, with the hope of contributing systematic data and understandings to the intense, yet often poorly evidenced debate over this issue.

Political Bias in the Academy

Recent years have seen numerous accusations regarding political bias in academy classrooms, in a number of democracies. These accusations, originating mostly on

[2] For a review on the unconsciousness of many mental biases, see Wilson and Brekke (1994).

the political right, allege that professors, typically from social sciences and humanities faculties, present left-leaning perspectives in the classroom, castigate students who express opposite views, give higher grades to students who express liberal views, and try to indoctrinate their students (e.g., Horowitz 2006; Detroit Local 2012).[3] Some scholars have suggested that students react to such political bias by self-censoring their political views, and attempt to incorporate their professors' positions in their written assignments (Kashti 2009; Linvill and Havice 2011), and Dixon and McCabe (2006) show that students positively evaluate professors whom they perceive as presenting "balanced" views and inviting criticism of their ideas. Moreover, others warn that such perceptions of political bias "could hurt public higher education" as they could cause a reduction in public spending for higher education (Smith et al. 2008, p. 161).

Yet, despite the attention this issue has attracted, we know rather little about the determinants that may shape these subjective experiences, beyond the actual conduct of their professors. A few recent studies have examined the causes of students' perceptions of political bias in class. These have shown that some of the specific psychological attributes of students account for their perceptions of their professors as biased (Linvill 2011; Linvill and Mazer 2013). These studies, however, have relied on relatively small and unrepresentative samples, and have not attempted to study the possible role of perceived ideological distance on perceived political bias.

It should be noted that in this paper we do not attempt to examine whether and to what extent there *is* political bias in academy classrooms. Rather, we seek to study students' perceptions of political bias in their professors' teaching activity. As Machina (1987, p. 20) argues, students' perceptions are "not necessarily accurate representations of the objective facts, but they nevertheless constitute […] the *entirety* of the student end of the teaching process" (emphasis in original). In other words, perceptions, however subjective, matter considerably (see also Ross and Ward 1996).

Determinants of Perceived Political Bias in the Academy

Students' Political Bias in Judging Professors' Political Bias

An important element of perceived political bias is the fact that it is a subjective judgment made by students, and as such, this judgment may *itself* be biased (Vallone et al. 1985; Gunther 1992). In general, people tend to attribute bias to individuals and institutions with whom they perceive disagreement (e.g., Ross and Ward 1996; Pronin et al. 2004; Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2006). According to "naïve realism" theory (Ross and Ward 1996), people believe that they see the world in an objective and rational manner, and they tend to attribute bias and irrationality to others who see the world differently and who disagree with them (Robinson et al. 1995; Frantz 2006; Kennedy and Pronin 2008).[4] Moreover, the greater the disagreement, especially on value-laden issues, the more bias and lack of objectiveness people attribute to disagreeing others

[3] For similar claims in Israel, see Kashti (2009), Im Tirzu (2011), Halutz (2012), and Shamir (2012).

[4] For a review, see Pronin et al. (2004).

(Cohen 2003; Pronin et al. 2004, pp. 789–790). Other studies have shown that people tend to attribute negative motives (selfish, egocentric) to others holding opposing viewpoints (Reeder et al. 2005).

Relying on these findings, we expect perceived political bias to be affected by the perceived ideological distance between the evaluating student and her set of professors such that the greater this perceived ideological distance, the more the student will attribute bias to her professors. This expectation is also congruent with findings in the motivated reasoning literature, which suggest that when exposed to information or attitudes that contradict their views and opinions, people tend to examine the contradicting information or attitude more rigorously and thoroughly, to counter-argue and discount it, and to derogate the source of contradicting information. In contrast, like-minded information or attitudes typically lead to effortless agreement, and positive source appraisal (Lord et al. 1979; Lapinski and Bolster 2001; Taber and Lodge 2006; Nir 2011). Accordingly, we expect that upon encountering information and views that contradict, question, or even merely fail to sustain her own opinions, the student will become motivated to maintain her preexisting beliefs and to rebut contradicting views and information communicated by the professors in class, by perceiving their messages and conduct as biased (Eagly et al. 2000; Lapinski and Bolster 2001; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006, pp. 495–496). We therefore hypothesize that:

H1 The greater the perceived ideological distance between a student and her professors, the higher the perceived political bias she reports.

This hypothesis posits that the judgment of political bias in the classroom is in itself politically biased, since the ideological distance is prima facie irrelevant to the judgment of professors' bias. However, one inherent limitation in identifying such a bias stems from the lack of an objective measure of the actual level of professors' political bias. Under such conditions, we cannot determine whether students who are ideological proximate to their professors underestimate the true politically biased behavior of their professors, or whether students who are ideologically distant overestimate this behavior. Still, identifying that students are affected by perceived ideological distance from their professors in making these judgments indicates the existence of a bias, notwithstanding our inability to identify its origin. Such "relative bias" (Stanig 2013, p. 732) is prevalent in studies of social biases where, in the absence of an objective reference response, researchers can only detect overall effects of presumably irrelevant considerations on judgments or behaviors, but not who was more or less affected by these considerations (e.g., Gazal-Ayal and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2010; Bar and Zussman 2012).

In this study we chose to ask students about their professors as a group, rather than about individual professors. This choice follows the conception of perceptions of political bias as a structural experience (see also Linvill and Havice 2011, p. 490). During their studies, students are taught by several professors who behave and teach differently, and students' evaluations of one professor are likely to be affected by the behaviors and teachings of others. Accordingly, we believe that one should investigate students' evaluations of their group of professors in order to gather a more complete and representative understanding of the perceptions of political bias.

Several studies have shown that people with stronger attitudes tend to defend them more and to exert more cognitive effort in doing so compared with people with weaker attitudes (Eagly et al. 2000; Taber and Lodge 2006; see also Reeder et al. 2005). Thus, we expect that students who perceive ideological differences between themselves and their professors, and who are also interested in politics, will tend to perceive their professors as more biased compared with students who perceive similar ideological differences but are less interested in politics. In other words, we hypothesize that the effect of the perceived ideological distance between a student and her professors on her judgment of perceived political bias will be moderated by her level of political interest:

H2 The effect of the perceived ideological distance on perceived political bias will be stronger when political interest is high, and weaker when political interest is low.

Method

To test these hypotheses we rely on an original survey which was administered in mandatory undergraduate courses in five Israeli universities. The survey was fielded during the second half of the spring semester, in order to allow students enough time to form impressions regarding all their professors. The survey was presented to students as addressing the quality of teaching in the specific department, as part of a wider study taking place in several universities. Students were not offered any reward in return for (voluntarily) completing the questionnaire.

Sample

Our survey draws on a sample of 1,257 undergraduates, surveyed in May and June of 2012, from Political Science, Sociology, Communications and Law Departments in five universities in Israel.[5] These academic departments were selected since many of their courses include value-laden and political topics (see also Dixon and McCabe 2006, p. 112). Undergraduates were chosen because they constitute a larger population than graduate students, and since accusations of political bias in the academy are directed mainly at professors teaching undergraduates (Losco and Deollos 2007, p. 255).

Respondents were recruited by sending requests to professors who taught mandatory courses in the relevant departments, asking their permission to distribute the questionnaire in their classes. Mandatory courses were chosen in order to reduce the potential for self-selection of students into particular courses. Additionally, such courses include practically all the students in a *cohort* (defined by the university, department, and year).[6] In total, we received agreement to distribute the questionnaire in 32 out of 49 cohorts, a response rate of 65.3 %. One cohort was not surveyed due to unrelated logistic reasons, resulting in 31 cohorts surveyed.

[5] These were all the universities in Israel which had such departments at the time: Bar-Ilan University, Ben-Gurion University, Haifa University, Hebrew University, and Tel-Aviv University.

[6] There were four cases in which there were two cohorts at a certain department in the same year. In these cases we treated each as a distinct cohort.

Such a response rate is rather high, but the threat of selection bias remains, as professors whose perceived behavior is in question are also in a position to determine the inclusion of cohorts in the survey. However, the sampling method uniquely enables us to assess the potential effect of the selection on our estimates, by identifying cohorts with different probabilities of inclusion in the survey $P(CI)$. The 31 cohorts that were surveyed included 9 for which we did not obtain an agreement from one professor (teaching one course), but later received an agreement from another. These 9 cohorts—identified as 'partial refusal' cohorts—are assumed to have a lower inclusion probability than other surveyed cohorts.[7] By including a dummy variable for 'partial refusal' identifying these cohorts in the regression analyses, we are able to allow the dependent variable to vary across the two levels of inclusion probability, and to assess whether our main coefficient estimates are affected by the selection process.

Overall, owing to the fact that we handed out questionnaires in mandatory courses only, our sample consists mainly of first-year students (63.8 % of the sample),[8] but the median age of the sample, like the sample's proportion of women, is very similar to that of the population of students in the social sciences and law faculties, as of 2009.[9] However, the proportion of Arab students in our sample (3.1 %) is much less than that in the student population (11.5 %; $Z = -9.24$, $p < .001$).

Research Variables

Our theoretical and empirical approach to the study of perceived political bias is premised on the assumption that a student's experience of political bias is constructed by her combined exposure to a set of professors. Accordingly, our measurements address perceptions of each student regarding the entire set of her professors, as detailed below.

Perceived Political Bias

Relying mainly on the works of Tollini (2009, 2010), our perceived political bias measure includes seven items reporting the incidence of experiencing each of seven behaviors.[10] For each item the students were asked to rate the degree or frequency of a certain behavior on a 5-point scale (1—"not at all", 5—"very often"). Students

[7] The theoretical relative probabilities of inclusion are thus as follows: $P(CI|\overline{Refusal}) > P(CI|partial\_refusal) > P(CI|Refusal)$.

[8] Of the remainder, 25.8 % are second-year students, 9.5 % are third-year students, and fourth- or fifth-year students compromise 1 percent of the sample.

[9] The median age of the sample is 24, whereas the real population's median age was 24.5. The sample's proportion of women (61.4 %) is insignificantly different from the real population's proportion of women (59.4 %; $Z = 1.43$, $p < .15$). Data on the student population of 2009, the most recent data available for Israeli university students, was taken from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2013).

[10] The wording of all seven questions composing the Perceived Political Bias variable is shown in Appendix 1. We note that the construction of these seven items, in particular our sixth item, was complemented by the items suggested by Linvill and Havice (2011).

were instructed to address their answers only to professors who taught them in their specific department and in the current academic year. The seven items were found to be highly correlated ($\alpha = .80$) and exploratory factor analysis on these items yielded one factor with eigenvalue > 1 (proportion of variance explained: 94 %), indicating a good construct validity. We therefore constructed a perceived political bias score for each student by averaging her scores on all seven items. The resulting scale was adjusted to vary between 0 and 1.

Perceived Ideological Distance

Since our measure of perceived ideological distance refers to a student and her *set* of professors, we constructed a novel measure that amasses this distance across the entire set. This measure is based on three items in the questionnaire. First, each student was asked to write down the total number of the professors who taught her in the current academic year in the relevant department. In the second item, each student was asked to identify how many of these professors occupy each cell on a 7-point left–right ideological scale.[11] Students were also able to designate the number of professors whose ideological position they could not determine.[12] The third and final item was a standard question of self-placement on a similar 7-point left–right scale.

In order to calculate the perceived ideological distance between a student and her professors we adapted a simple mean squared difference equation. For each student we calculated the mean squared differences between her political position and the perceived political positions of the professors whose political position she reported. As noted above, it is quite possible that students have also encountered professors whose political position they could not determine. Since it is reasonable to expect that such ideologically "unidentified" professors will not contribute to the overall perceived ideological distance between the student and her set of professors as they most likely did not express their political views in class, we divided the sum of squared differences by the number of *all* the professors that taught the student, whether their political position was determined or not.[13]

[11] It should be noted that while in most countries the policy content of principal axes of competition is the classical left–right, in Israel (and Turkey) the main policy dimension is the hawk vs. dove approach to regional conflicts and security (Benoit and Laver 2006). Still, comparative studies have shown that ideology in the Israeli context has similar psychological determinants (Jost et al. 2003) and political implications (e.g., vote choice: Bargsted and Kedar 2009; and policy preference formation: Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Halperin 2013) as in other countries.

[12] The first item was intended to extract from the student's memory the total number of her professors, and in the second item the student could rely on her previous answer in verifying that she actually assigned all of her professors to the eight possible cells.

[13] We note that by doing so, we treat these ideologically unidentified professors as professors whom the students perceived as ideologically proximate. However, we suggest that perceptions of political bias in one's professors are a structural experience (see above), in which *all* the professors the student is exposed to influence her learning experience. Therefore, since we asked students to evaluate the behaviors of all their professors, omitting these ideologically unidentified professors from our measure of perceived ideological distance could result in an incomprehensive measure of ideological distance. Nonetheless, in order to assess the robustness of our findings to this specification choice, a measure of perceived ideological distance in which the denominator was composed of the number of ideologically identified

However, this measure is not independent from another quality of the set of professors—namely their ideological variance. The more ideologically varied they are perceived to be by the student, the bigger will be the minimal value of the perceived ideological distance (for a similar analysis in a different context, see Achen 1978, pp. 487–488).[14] In order to attain a measure of perceived ideological distance that is independent from the perceived ideological variance of professors, we subtract the standard deviation of this measure from the basic measure as follows:

$$\text{Perceived ideological distance} = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n_p}\left(I_s - I_{p_i}\right)^2}{N_p}} - \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n_p}\left(\overline{I_p} - I_{p_i}\right)^2}{N_p}}$$

where n_p is the number of ideologically identified professors, I_s is the self-reported student's ideology, I_{p_i} is the perceived ideology of the student's ith professor, $\overline{I}_p$ is the mean professors' ideology, and N_p is the total number of professors who had taught the student (including ideologically unidentified professors). This quantity estimates the mean squared perceived ideological distance between a student and the mean ideology of her set of professors, and we use this measure as our perceived ideological distance measure.

Control Variables

Given that our interest is in students' perceptions of political bias, we naturally control for the student's own ideological position (*ideological position)*. For this purpose we use the standard left–right self-placement question, with a 7-point scale (1—extreme right, and 7—extreme left). An additional utility of this variable is as a proxy for prior beliefs in political bias in the academy. Media bias research in the US has shown that the tendency to identify political bias is often asymmetric, with right-wing supporters more often reporting media bias (Eveland and Shah 2003; Lee 2005). Moreover, that literature has also shown that people already believing the media is biased, tend to report more bias than others when assessing specific media content (e.g., Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994). In the Israeli context, accusations of

Footnote 13 continued
professors was included in our robustness tests. Our substantive findings were not found to be sensitive to this measurement choice. We also note that 104 out of 1,257 students did not assign a political position to *any* of their professors, and thus we could not calculate a Perceived Ideological Distance score for these students and they were excluded from our multivariate analyses. While this could somewhat bias our results, these students, as could have been expected, had much lower Perceived Political Bias scores ($M = .12$, $SD = .10$) than students who evaluated the ideological position of at least one of their professors ($M = .27$, $SD = .17$), ($t(1{,}118) = 9.07$, $p < .001$), and this, to a certain degree, supports our first hypothesis.

[14] For a simple intuitive demonstration consider a set of professors with no variation among their ideological positions, and assume that the student's ideological position is identical. In this case the Perceived Ideological Distance measure will be zero. However, if the mean ideological position of the professors remains the same (and equal to that of the student) but their variance increases, the Perceived Ideological Distance will necessarily equal the professors' ideological variance.

political bias in universities have originated almost entirely from the political right (e.g., Im Tirzu 2011). Thus, a student's ideology potentially controls for her prior beliefs regarding the existence and extent of political bias in the academy (see also Lee 2005, pp. 47–48).

Earlier we noted that forming an impression about the existence of political bias can be thought of as a structural experience. Behaviors associated with political bias are characterized by favoring particular opinions and attitudes and by denigration of others. Such behaviors are expected to create selectively auspicious conditions for conforming attitudes to thrive in, while opposing views are likely to be excluded or silenced. Thus, students who encounter homogeneous expressions of political views across their set of professors are more likely to infer political bias, in a sort of backward induction, while those who come across diverse political views are less likely to attribute political bias to their diverse set of professors.

In order to assess the student's perceived ideological diversity among her set of professors (*perceived professors' ideological diversity*), we once again used the 7-point left–right scale (joined by the "ideologically unidentified professors" cell) in which each student indicated how many of her professors occupy each cell. To construct the diversity measure we counted the number of non-empty cells in this scale for each student, resulting in a count variable that ranges from 1 to 8, where higher scores indicate more diversity.

Some students may encounter very few professors who address issues with political connotations, while some may encounter more. Accordingly, we also control for the number of professors whose political position the student chose to estimate (*number of ideologically identified professors*). Additionally, in line with Lee (2005), who suggests that low levels of generalized or social trust are associated with perceptions of bias, we control for the student's level of *generalized trust*, relying on a 5-point scale standard generalized trust question. In addition, we asked students questions tapping their level of interest in politics as well as questions on various demographic attributes.

As noted above, our sample includes 9 cohorts for which we obtained 'partial refusal' to include in the survey (see section "Method" above). By including a dummy variable for 'partial refusal' (*partial refusal cohort*) identifying these cohorts in the regression analyses, we allow the dependent variable to vary across the two levels of inclusion probability, and we can assess whether our main coefficient estimates are affected by the selection process.[15] In the robustness tests we conducted separate analyses for the two groups of cohorts in order to assess the sensitivity of our findings to this source of selection bias.

Instructional Manipulation Check

Survey research requires respondents to pay attention to questions and instructions, but often they do not. To address this concern, our questionnaire included an instructional manipulation check (IMC) (Oppenheimer et al. 2009)—a single-item

[15] Students in these 9 cohorts amounted to one quarter of the sample (316 out of 1,257), and they did not significantly differ from the other students in any of the demographic variables.

tool for detecting respondents who are not following textual instructions, or satisfice in reading and answering survey questions. Overall, 656 out of 1,257 students (52.2 %) passed the IMC. Later we show that omitting students who failed in the IMC from the multivariate regression models considerably increases the models' goodness-of-fit.

Results

Section 1 in the Online Resource reports summary statistics for all dependent and independent variables. Overall, the average perceived political bias score is rather low, albeit not substantively insignificant: 0.25 on a 0–1 scale, i.e., perceptions of politically biased behavior of professors were reported, but they are rather modest. These results are similar to the levels of perceive political bias found in a few studies in the United States (Smith et al. 2008, chapter 8; Dixon and McCabe 2006). There were, however, differences in the reported means of certain behaviors, from as low as 0.1 (professors were unwilling to hear political opinions which did not match their own) to 0.44 (professors expressed their personal political opinions during classes). In addition, the distribution of the perceived political bias score is skewed to the left (median = 0.21) with only a few observations in the right tail of the distribution.

Determinants of Perceived Political Bias

What causes students to perceive their professors as behaving in a politically biased manner? Table 1 presents a set of OLS regression models with perceived political bias as dependent variable.[16] First, in order to assess the utility of the IMC screener, Model 1 relies on the entire sample, whereas Model 2 includes only students who cleared the IMC screener. Results in the two models are rather similar, but excluding students who failed the IMC resulted in a much higher goodness-of-fit. Our subsequent analyses are therefore based on this more reliable sample.

Examining the results of Model 2 we can see that as hypothesized, the coefficient of perceived ideological distance variable is positive and statistically significant. Holding all other variables in Model 2 at their means, a perceived ideological distance score of one standard deviation below the mean yields a perceived political bias score of 0.20, whereas a perceived ideological distance score of one standard deviation above the mean yields a perceived political bias score of 0.32. Perceived ideological distance is also by far the most important predictor of perceived political bias, with a standardized coefficient of .39, while the next biggest standardized coefficient for any of the other regressors in Model 2 is .15. These results provide

[16] All regression models in this paper were run with dummy variables for the different departments and universities, to account for the specific effect of each department and university on the dependent variables. In addition, in our questionnaire we also asked the students several other questions regarding their learning experience, and we varied the question order in our questionnaires, creating four questionnaire versions (see fn. 19 below). In order to account for the possible effect of the questionnaire versions, we also ran the models with dummy variables for each version but one.

Table 1 Determinants of perceived political bias in the classroom

	Model 1—entire sample	Model 2—IMC approved sample	Model 3	Model 4
Perceived ideological distance	.041 (.006)***	.058 (.008)***	.022 (.022)	.078 (.010)***
Age	.007 (.003)*	.011 (.004)*	.011 (.004)**	.010 (.004)*
Gender (female)	.027 (.016)	.026 (.021)	.026 (.021)	.020 (.021)
Socio-economic status	−.001 (.005)	.007 (.007)	.006 (.007)	.006 (.007)
Religiosity	−.001 (.007)	.008 (.010)	.007 (.010)	.008 (.010)
Generalized trust	−.009 (.005)†	.005 (.006)	.004 (.006)	.002 (.006)
Political interest	.012 (.005)*	.014 (.007)†	.003 (.009)	.015 (.007)*
Ideological position	−.011 (.005)*	−.009 (.007)	−.008 (.006)	.008 (.010)
Perceived professors' ideological diversity	.007(.005)	.003 (.008)	.004 (.008)	.009 (.008)
Number of ideologically identified professors	.012 (.003)***	.013 (.004)***	.012 (.004)**	.013 (.003)***
Partial refusal cohort	.037 (.016)*	.052 (.023)*	.052 (.022)*	.048 (.021)*
Perceived ideological distance × political interest			.010 (.006)	
Right-gap				.013 (.019)
Right-gap × perceived ideological distance				−.107 (.022)***
Constant	−.070 (.096)	−.281 (.129)*	−.238 (.127)	−.346 (.125)**
N	949	530	530	530
Model's *F* statistic	16.84***	15.67***	25.19***	21.04***
Adjusted R^2	.19	.26	.26	.29

Standard errors clustered by cohorts in parentheses. All models control for the different departments, universities and questionnaire versions

† $p \leq .1$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed test)

support for Hypothesis 1. Looking at Model 2 we can also see that Age and Number of Ideologically Identified Professors are positively associated with perceived political bias. The positive association with the Number of Ideologically Identified Professors supports our theoretical expectation, and the merit of controlling for it in this analysis.

The coefficient for the student's ideological position is in the expected direction, as students from the political left report less perceived political bias, but it is statistically insignificant,[17] as is the coefficient for the Perceived Professors' Ideological Diversity. Therefore, students' perception of political bias in their professors is much more affected by perceived ideological distances than by any ideological position of the student, where the latter can also be thought of as the

[17] Perceived Ideological Distance and Ideological Position are correlated ($r = -.56$) but multicollinearity does not constitute a problem in this model as the variance inflation factor (VIF) of any regressor in the model is lower than 2.2.

expectation to encounter politically biased behaviors in class. Finally, the partial refusal cohort dummy is positive and statistically significant, which indicates that in those cohorts for whom partial refusals were obtained, the level of perceived political bias is slightly higher. In an additional analysis we assessed the effect of selection on the estimated relationship between perceived ideological distance and perceived political bias by adding an interaction term of perceived ideological distance × partial refusal cohort to Model 2. The coefficient of this interaction term is small ($b = -.007$) and statistically insignificant ($p = .66$), suggesting no indication for selection bias.

In Model 3 we test Hypothesis 2, expecting the effect of perceived ideological distance to be moderated by the student's interest in politics. Results indicate that, indeed, the interaction term of perceived ideological distance and Political Interest is positive but it only borders on statistical significance ($p = .102$). Thus, the perceived ideological distance effect is somewhat amplified when the student is interested in politics, but this finding is not statistically significant at the conventional threshold.

Assessing Reverse Causality

While we hypothesize that perceived ideological distance between a student and her professors increases perceived political bias, one might argue that the reverse causal relationship is also possible: a student's perception that her professors are biased might result in the student assigning them political positions further away from her own, perhaps as to distance herself from those professors.[18] In order to assess the possibility of reverse causality we employed instrumental variable estimation (reported in detail in Sect. 3 of the Online Resource). Our questionnaire had four versions, each with a different order of three sets of questions,[19] in order to attain estimates of perceived political bias that are robust to question order. For the purpose of this analysis we are interested in the effect of a particular question order, namely, the effect of prompting students to report their fear to express political opinions, prior to reporting perceived political bias. We expected these two versions of the questionnaire to prime the students' awareness of fear to express opinions in class, and thus impact their reported levels of perceived political bias. Importantly, the four versions were randomly assigned to the students, and a set of randomization checks confirmed that the four groups were adequately balanced.[20]

Our results indeed indicate that the perceived political bias score following questions about students' fear to express opinions was significantly higher ($M = .29$, $SD = .16$) than in the reversed order ($M = .24$, $SD = .17$) ($t(560) = 3.32$, $p = .001$). This 'fear priming' effect offers an instrumental variable to assess the (reversed) causal effect of perceived political bias on perceived political distance. We created a dummy variable, *fear prime*, with the value of 1 where perceived political

[18] On this possible "projection" problem, see Malhotra and Jessee (2013).

[19] One tapping perceived political bias; another set tapping students' fear to express political opinions in their professors' presence; and a set of questions about students' evaluations of their professors. Question order in the four versions is detailed in Sect. 2 of the Online Resource.

[20] Details on the randomization checks are available in Sect. 2 of the Online Resource.

bias items followed questions about students' fear to express opinions, and 0 otherwise. Since the four versions of the questionnaire were randomly assigned, this variable is unrelated to unmeasured causes of the dependent variable. Moreover, items measuring perceived ideological distance are located after both sets of items gauging fear to express opinions and perceived political bias in all the questionnaire versions; thus our instrumental variable (Fear Prime) is not expected to have a direct effect on perceived ideological distance. These criteria satisfy the preliminary conditions for instrumental variable estimation (Sovey and Green 2011).

Next we ran a two-stage least squares (2SLS) regression using Fear Prime as an instrument for perceived political bias.[21] The first stage equation indicates that Fear Prime has a significant positive effect on perceived political bias ($t = 4.16$, $p < .001$), and is sufficiently strong ($F(1, 30) = 16.76$, $p < .001$) (Sovey and Green 2011, p. 190). Instrumenting for perceived political bias in the second equation resulted in an insignificant coefficient ($p = .3$). This result indicates no causal effect of perceived political bias on perceived ideological distance. This null result allows us to reject the possibility of reversed causality in our data, and lends further support for Hypothesis 1.

The Direction of Perceived Ideological Distance

After establishing that perceived ideological distance is a strong predictor of perceptions of political bias, a more nuanced question is whether this effect of the ideological distance is *symmetric*. In other words, does an ideological distance to the left (when a student's ideological position is to the right of her professors) yield the same consequences for perceived political bias as an equal ideological distance to the right (when a student's ideological position is to the left of her professors)? For this purpose we divided our sample into two groups: students who perceived their professors to be overall more left-leaning than themselves (henceforth "left-gap" group; $N = 367$); and students who perceived their overall professors' ideological average position to be similar or more right-leaning than themselves ("right-gap" group; $N = 163$).[22]

Overall, professors in our sample were mostly seen as leftists, as the mean ideological position of professors was 5.4 on a 1–7 right-left scale ($SD = 1.3$). This is consistent with typical portrayals of Israeli university professors (e.g., Shamir 2012). Note, however, that the left-gap group consists not only of right-wing students: Students from the political center compose 20 %, and another 25 % are leftist students. In the right-gap group 85 % of students are indeed from the political left.

In order to gauge the effect of perceived ideological distance on perceived political bias in these groups, we added both a dummy variable for the right-gap group (*right-gap*) and an interaction term between right-gap and perceived ideological distance to Model 4. As can be seen, this interaction term is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that the difference between the effects of

[21] The detailed analysis is provided in Sect. 3 of the Online Resource.

[22] There were 51 students who perceived their overall professors' ideological average position to be identical to their own ideological position. Omitting them from the right-gap group did not affect the result of the interaction term between Right-Gap and Perceived Ideological Distance in Model 4.

perceived ideological distance on perceived political bias under right-gap and left-gap conditions is statistically significant. The coefficient for the association between perceived ideological distance and perceived political bias in the left-gap group is $b = .078$ ($p < .001$), while this coefficient in the right-gap group is $b = -.028$ (ns). This finding suggests that perceived ideological distance's effect on perceived political bias is asymmetric, and, to a certain degree, challenges the generality of our first hypothesis. In other words, it is mostly students in the left-gap group (who are not just right-wing students) who exhibit a "relative bias" (Stanig 2013, p. 732) in evaluating the extent of their professors' political bias. In the discussion below we provide a possible explanation for these results.

Robustness Tests

Overall, the results so far are in line with our first research hypothesis; for most students, perceived ideological distance between themselves and their professors causes higher perceived political bias. Results hold when we control for other possible predictors of our dependent variable, but we nevertheless conducted a series of robustness tests in order to investigate whether the results are robust to variations in model specifications, measurements, and model estimations.[23]

First, we treated Model 2 in Table 1 as our baseline model and re-ran it, each time separately adding to the model one of the following variables: self-reported grade average; self-reported level of class participation; dummy variables for second-year and third-year students; dummy variables for non-Jewish students and for non-Hebrew native speakers; students' ideological strength; and the number of students in class. Adding any of these variables did not significantly change the results of the baseline model. Additional robustness tests address the potential competing explanations that our findings are due to the mean professors' (perceived) ideological position or due to perceptions of these professors as ideologically *radicals* (rather than ideologically distant).[24] Further models were fitted to gauge the sensitivity of our findings to variations in the measure of perceived political bias, and for examining our baseline model separately on each of the seven perceived political bias items. Overall, these additional tests confirm our main finding that perceived ideological distance between a student and her professor's results in higher levels of perceived political bias.

Discussion

Despite the many accusations of political bias aimed at academy professors, news reporters, judges and others, only a few studies have examined the effect of perceived ideological distance on perceptions of political bias (Gunther et al. 2001; Turner 2007; Feldman 2011). These studies focused only on perceived political bias in media coverage of specific issues or specific news channels, rather than on a more general perception of political bias regarding an agent or institution. In this study we examined the hypothesis that perceived ideological distance shapes overall

[23] Full results are available in Sect. 4 of the Online Resource.

[24] We thank two of the reviewers for suggesting these possibilities.

perceptions of political bias in the context of higher education, by inquiring whether a perceived ideological distance between a student and her set of professors increases her perception that her professors are politically biased.

The empirical results support this hypothesis. Drawing on a survey of students from social sciences and law faculties in five Israeli universities, our results show that the perceived ideological distance between a student and her set of professors substantially increases perceived political bias. Overall, the finding that perceived ideological distance is the most dominant predictor of perceived political bias is important with regard to several theoretical frameworks and research agendas. First, this finding is congruent with studies on perceptions of bias which show that the judgment of bias in others is, to a certain degree, in itself biased (e.g., Gunther 1992; Feldman 2011). A student's ideological disagreement with her professors was found to affect her judgment of her professors' behavior, although this factor is prima facie irrelevant to this judgment. Second, this study's findings emphasize the importance of studying *subjective* perceptions (see also Ross and Ward 1996; Bartels and Johnson 2013), as our measure of perceived ideological distance helps us understand students' comprehension and evaluation of their professors' behavior in class.

But perhaps most importantly, this finding supports the notion that attributions of bias are "born in perceptions of disagreement" (Pronin et al. 2004, p. 789); that is, people tend to perceive others with whom they disagree, especially on issues involving ideological matters and core values, as more biased (Ross and Ward 1996; Pronin et al. 2004; Kennedy and Pronin 2008; Feldman 2011). Accordingly, our results attest to the strong effect of perceived ideological distance, a factor that thus far has been mostly absent in the study of perceptions of political bias in many institutions. Future research aimed at explaining perceived political bias could substantiate our results—in the academy and perhaps also in other institutions.

A number of scholars have recently suggested that perceived political bias in the academic context is the result of certain attributes of students (Fisler and Foubert 2006; Linvill 2011). The findings of this study suggest that the experience of political bias could be the result of an interaction between both psychological and dispositional factors, and situational factors. On the one hand, the effect of perceived ideological distance on perceived political bias was found to overshadow those of a considerable set of individual-level attributes, including ideological position and political interest, which could suggest that the role of situational factors in shaping perceived political bias in the classroom is at least as important as dispositional factors. This conclusion conforms with findings that perceptions of media bias are more affected by situational or relational factors than by dispositional ones (Gunther 1992).

Moreover, our findings suggest that perceived ideological distance tends to bias perceptions of political bias only when the student perceives her professors' views as more left leaning than her own.[25] Our point of departure for a tentative explanation for this asymmetric effect of ideological distance is the dominance of left ideological views among academic professors (e.g., Gross and Fosse 2012). Under such dominance one can expect that professors' expression of views that are

[25] Note that this asymmetry does not refer to the difference between right-wing and left-wing *students*, but rather between students who are exposed to views to the right of their positions, or to the left.

left of the evaluating student's ideological position carries an additional load of reflecting the left-wing dominance, beyond its informative message, which professors' expression of views to the right of the student's position do not hold. Experiencing such relatively left-wing views is therefore expected to elicit greater motivation to rebut the message by portraying it as biased, compared with relatively right-wing views.

This possible interpretation draws on studies of racial relations in racially-mixed schools which suggest that black students in such environments are less receptive to critical feedback from their white teachers, as critical feedback is threatening to these students, raising the prospect that they have been judged in light of a negative stereotype (Cohen et al. 1999, p. 1302; Cohen 2012, p. 396). This possible explanation for the asymmetry in the effect of perceived ideological distance on perceived political bias requires additional research in order to assess its potential validity, in the academia as well as in other institutions.

Moving from empirical findings to policy recommendations should always be done carefully, and any policy that ignores the direct and indirect costs of employing or avoiding a seemingly influential measure is likely to be misguided. Policy should rely on comprehensive cost-effectiveness analysis; accordingly, even if our findings suggest that the expression of political views by professors may cause some students to experience more political bias, this should not immediately lead us to conclude that expressing such views should be avoided, as such a policy also carries costs such as derogating the quality of teaching of some topics, limiting freedom of speech etc.[26]

Having said that, we tentatively suggest that understanding that the experience of political bias is at least partly the result of perceived ideological distance should make professors more aware of the potential consequences of what they say and do in class. Indeed, we believe that the suggestions offered by Fisler and Foubert (2006) for dealing with the issue of political bias in class—in particular the engagement of faculty members in self-reflection with regard to their behavior in class,[27] and the need to strive for transparency, openness and mutual trust between students and professors—merit consideration, and could hopefully reduce perceived political bias, or at least mitigate its effects. Such tentative suggestions could also prove beneficial in other domains in which people are accused of being politically biased.

On the other hand, some commentators have suggested that ideologically diversifying the academy could help expose students to various ideological positions and different worldviews (e.g., Redding 2001). While ideological diversification may be a good idea for various reasons (e.g., Haidt 2011), our findings do not support the notion that ideologically diversifying the academy would reduce perceived political bias. Further research in other domains could help confirm whether this conclusion is relevant beyond the academy.

This research is not without limitations. Most obviously, we investigated the effect of perceived ideological distance on perceived political bias in only one type of institution in only one country, and inferring from the results to broader domains

[26] For a broader discussion, see Smith et al. (2008, chapter 8). See also Hickey and Brecher (1990).

[27] Albeit correction of mental biases is for the most part an effortful process (Wilson and Brekke 1994).

should be done carefully. Additionally, some deviations from a perfectly representative sample leave some doubts regarding external validity of our findings. Notwithstanding these concerns, we believe that the demonstrated robustness of our results provide sufficient evidence to support our main conclusion, that perceived ideological distance influences students' perceptions of political bias.

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Ethical standards The authors declare that this study complied with the current laws of the country in which it was performed.

Appendix 1: The Wording of the Seven Perceived Political Bias Questions

In your opinion, to what extent have the following statements been true about your studies this year in the *Political Science Department*? (1—Not at all; 2—To a small extent; 3—To a certain extent; 4—To a great extent; 5—To a very great extent)

1) Lecturers presented the learning material neutrally, appropriately relating to various political positions relating to the materials studied (reversed coded).
2) Lecturers expressed their personal political opinions on various political issues during the lessons.
3) As a course requirement, lecturers demanded reading of materials which presented only one political position.
4) Lecturers tried to convince students in classes they were teaching that a certain political position was more correct.
5) Lecturers were unwilling to hear political opinions which did not match their own.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1—Definitely do not agree; 2—Do not agree; 3—Neutral; 4—Agree; 5—Definitely agree)

6) The lecturers with whom I studied in the Political Science Department tend to underestimate students who express different political attitudes than theirs during the lesson, in a paper or on a test.
7) The lecturers with whom I studied this year in the Political Science Department give lower marks to students who express different political attitudes than theirs during the lesson, in a paper or on a test.

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