

Issue Brief #4 (15 July 2021)

*The Partisan Imbalance of Campaign Donations from Faculty
and Staff at Major Public Universities in Oregon*

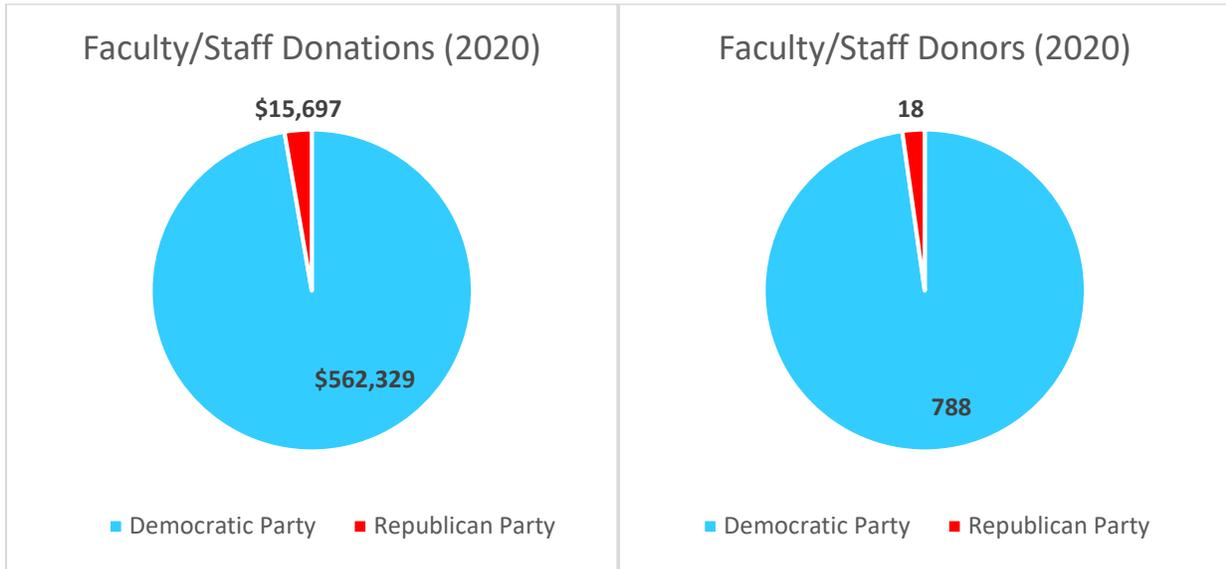


The Issue

Political donations to each major political party in the United States from donors who identify themselves as faculty or staff at major public universities can provide important insights into the balance of political viewpoints in higher education. Compared to party membership data, campaign donations may reveal more active and more intense levels of commitment to the political programs of the recipient parties. In some cases, the data may raise concerns about the constitutional requirements for political neutrality where the donors hold senior administrative positions with the ability to censor or punish members of the academic community whose viewpoints deviate from the majority.

Data released today by the Oregon Association of Scholars shows that the partisan imbalance in donations to major political parties by individuals who identify themselves as members of faculty or staff at the three major public universities in Oregon has reached alarming levels: somewhere between 96% and 99% of donated monies go to the Democratic Party. Moreover, this trend worsened in the two years from 2018 to 2020. Based on this data, there has been a near-extinction of faculty or staff at Oregon public universities who identify with the Republican Party.

“A university campus in Oregon today feels like Democratic Party summer camp,” said Dr. Bruce Gilley, professor of political science at Portland State University and president of the Oregon Association of Scholars. “The statistics we are releasing today bespeak a deadening intellectual monoculture where there is no longer even a possibility of an exchange of ideas at Oregon universities.”



In the 2020 U.S. House of Representatives elections in Oregon, 42% of votes were cast for Republican Party candidates, a proportion that is consistent with other state-wide electoral competitions. The new findings about Oregon universities will be of concern to taxpayers as well as parents and the educated public for whom a robust intellectual and political diversity on campus are the most important features of a scholarly community. They may also explain why in the course of just a few years, the senior administrators and faculty leaders at these universities have veered sharply in the direction of declaring that ideological campaigns, rather than open debate and the search for truth, are the central purpose of their universities.

“If a statistical anomaly of these proportions reared its head in any other industry, or market-sector, scholars and academic elites would be the first to criticize the lack of intellectual diversity and inequity,” noted Oregon state senator Dennis Linthicum, commenting on the OAS report. “Unfortunately, Oregon’s colleges and universities find themselves in a conceptual straight jacket of one-party rule that should be ridiculed as biased, belittling and unbearable.”

During the 2020 calendar year, the share of donations to the two major political parties in Oregon by donors who identified themselves as affiliated with the University of Oregon, Oregon State University, or Portland State University was vastly skewed in favor of the Democratic Party. Overall, the proportion given to Democratic Party candidates or funds was 97%, little changed from the 98% in 2018.

The number of unique donors also continued to be vastly imbalanced. In 2020, there were 788 unique donors to the Democratic Party from members of the three universities compared to just 18 to the Republican Party (a ratio of 44 to 1). That compares to 235 to 8 (a ratio of 29 to 1) in 2018.

“A speech and debate tournament that featured 44 debaters on one team, and just one on the other team would be laughed out of the accreditation organization,” noted Gilley.

While Republicans tend to be widely distributed across all walks of life in the United States, Democrats are concentrated in certain professions and geographic areas. “A key role of higher education is to prepare young people to succeed in American society, which is impossible if the university is a protective bubble of progressive viewpoints,” Gilley said. “The donations data in Oregon suggest that the problem has long surpassed levels that should alarm policy makers.”

Added Senator Linthicum: “I fear that these statistics highlight decades of unhealthy polarization, intolerance, and little or no true dialogue which is the death-knell to Oregon’s higher education program.”

The large representation of senior administrative staff charged with upholding academic freedom provisions is particularly worrying, Gilley noted. For instance, PSU’s diversity office issues a constant stream of talking points aligned with Democratic Party policy as well as explicit attacks on Republicans. Its associate vice president, Julie Caron, made 42 separate donations worth \$1,850 to Democratic Party candidates in 2018. During the 2020 cycle, Caron made 34 separate donations to Democratic Party causes worth \$1,990 (although the name of the university was misspelled in her official disclosures). The University of Oregon’s diversity office assistant vice president Lesley-Anne Pittard was also a frequent Democratic Party donor in 2020.

“When senior administrative officials with the power to punish university members for ill-defined violations such as ‘bias’ and ‘discrimination’ are frequent donors to one political party, it raises obvious concerns about political bias in the administration of campus policies,” Gilley noted.

Recommended Actions

The partisan makeup of donations and donors to the two major political parties from faculty and staff affiliated with Oregon’s three major public universities is one way to measure the degree of intellectual pluralism at these institutions. Based on this data, there is close to no intellectual pluralism remaining. Policy-makers should use this evidence as the basis on which to press the universities to take seriously viewpoint diversity, which appears to suffer in direct proportion as they emphasize identity diversity.

Concrete steps for policy-makers to consider include:

- (1) the introduction of an intellectual freedom charter for Oregon public universities modelled on those passed in other states

(2) an inquiry into transparency with respect to donations by senior administrative staff

(3) and the introduction of hiring and retention initiatives for faculty on the basis of their expected contributions to academic freedom and viewpoint diversity on campus.

Further Information

- Stephen Bainbridge, “Political Contributions by UCLA School of Law Faculty and Staff go 92.67% to Democrats/Liberal Groups,” *ProfessorBainbridge.com*.
- James Freeman, “Yale Prof Estimates Faculty Political Diversity at ‘0%’: Pressure to join the “herd groupthink” in New Haven,” *Wall Street Journal*, 9 December 2019.
- Mitchell Langbert and Sean Stevens, “Partisan Registration and Contributions of Faculty in Flagship Colleges,” www.nas.org/blogs/article/partisan-registration-and-contributions-of-faculty-in-flagship-colleges
- Andrew Gillen, “The Impact of the Left’s Takeover of Academia on the Quality of Higher Education,” *Aero Magazine*, 29 April 2020.

Raw Data

Bulk data from the Center for Responsive Politics was used to filter out donations to political parties or candidates. Only currently-employed faculty or staff of the universities are included. Donations to PACS, independent candidates, or third parties are not included.

Amount of Donations from Faculty and Staff

	Year	Democratic Party	Republican Party	% Democratic
<i>University of Oregon</i>	2020	\$209,929	\$5,991	97%
	2018	\$65,751	\$186	99%
<i>Oregon State University</i>	2020	\$169,008	\$8,906	95%
	2018	\$50,442	\$1,670	97%
<i>Portland State University</i>	2020	\$183,392	\$800	99%
	2018	\$84,639	\$2,274	97%
3 UNIVERSITY TOTALS	2020	\$562,329	\$15,697	97%
	2018	\$200,832	\$4,130	98%

Number of Unique Faculty and Staff Donors

	Year	Democratic Party	Republican Party	% Democratic
<i>University of Oregon</i>	2020	338	4	99%
	2018	95	2	98%
<i>Oregon State University</i>	2020	269	12	96%
	2018	85	5	94%
<i>Portland State University</i>	2020	181	2	99%
	2018	55	1	98%
3 UNIVERSITY TOTALS	2020	788	18	98%
	2018	235	8	97%

Data Source: Center for Responsible Politics, www.opensecrets.org/bulk-data/

The Oregon Association of Scholars is the Oregon affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education. Membership in NAS is open to all who share a commitment to these broad principles. NAS publishes a journal and has state and regional affiliates. Visit NAS at www.nas.org, and OAS at www.oregonscholars.org. Contact: Dr. Bruce Gilley, OAS President, info@oregonscholars.org