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2012

Unfair and Imbalanced, a Book Review by  
David R. Henderson of *Left Turn: How the  
Liberal Media Bias Distorts the American Mind*  
by Tim Grosecose

Henderson, David R.

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Regulation, Spring 2012, pp. 57-59  
<https://hdl.handle.net/10945/46116>

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payments, it is also often difficult or impossible to gauge the true costs of regulations that restrict land uses.

To his credit, Miceli anticipates this objection. He suggests that it is overstated because courts often make similar judgments in tort cases when determining what qualifies as negligent behavior. However, evaluating the efficiency of a regulatory regime that restricts thousands of landowners is a far more difficult task than evaluating the risks posed by a single individual's or firm's discrete decision—the sorts of questions decided by courts in most run-of-the-mill tort cases. When tort suits do address broad policy questions—as in mass tort cases involving the production practices of major industries—the judiciary's work has come in for heavy criticism by economists and legal scholars.

It would be a mistake to reject Miceli's idea out of hand. But the theory would

be more persuasive if it were coupled with a better explanation of how courts can engage in the task of judging efficiency.

Miceli's argument also runs into an important legal and moral objection. The U.S. Constitution requires “just compensation” for *all* takings, not just inefficient ones. As a matter of distributional fairness, we may want to compensate property owners even for efficient restrictions of their property, so that the cost of regulations that benefit the entire community will not be imposed arbitrarily on one small group.

**Conclusion** | Miceli's *Economic Theory of Eminent Domain* is an excellent account of the major issues in its field and is likely to become a standard reference for scholars. But not all of its arguments are fully convincing. The debate over eminent domain that heated up after *Kelo* is likely to continue. R

arians' and voters' place on the “liberal”/conservative spectrum. (I put “liberal” in quotation marks because so-called liberals are not liberal at all, but actually social democrats. As a libertarian, *I'm* a liberal.) He does it based on how politicians voted—and how you, as a prospective politician, would have voted—on 10 issues that the left-wing organization Americans for Democratic Action highlighted. If you voted the ADA's way on everything, you would earn a PQ of 100. If you voted against the ADA on everything, you would get a zero.

Groseclose shows that the average voter has a score of 50.4. Rep. Michele Bachmann (R, Minn.), the Tea Party darling, earns a -4.1 and, on the other end, Democratic Reps. Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), Barney Frank (Mass.), and Ron Dellums (Calif.) all score over 100. How could they go outside the expected 0–100 range? The reason, Groseclose explained in an interview, is that he needed to norm the data to make it comparable across time periods, and the result was some politicians with scores outside the 0–100 range.

I took his test and scored a 20, receiving a “liberal” 10 points for voting to close down the Guantanamo Bay prison and another 10 points for voting for the Dorgan Amendment to allow Americans to buy prescription drugs from Canadian pharmacies. (I should note that Groseclose's description of the Dorgan Amendment in his survey was incomplete. While he did explain that the legislation would have allowed imports from foreign pharmacies, he didn't explain that it would also have restricted drug companies' ability to limit sales to Canada. That second provision would have been a clear-cut attack on firms' economic freedom. Had Groseclose stated the issue accurately, I would have voted no and my net PQ would have been 10.) On a more comprehensive 40-question survey on his website, [timgroseclose.com](http://timgroseclose.com), I earned a 4.2.

Once he computes PQs for various politicians, Groseclose then goes on to compute a slant quotient (SQ) for the media. He does so by measuring the frequency with which media articles (not editorials) quote various

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## Unfair and Imbalanced

REVIEWED BY DAVID R. HENDERSON

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### Left Turn: How Liberal Media Bias Distorts the American Mind

By Tim Groseclose

292 pages; St. Martin's Press, 2011

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Virtually all of us who identify ourselves as libertarians or conservatives (I'm the former) have believed, for as long as we have been paying attention, that the mainstream media, whether print or electronic, have a left-wing bias. The late columnist Edith Efron, in her 1971 book *The News Twisters*, documented that bias among the three major television networks of the time—ABC, CBS, and NBC. Now, University of California, Los Angeles political scientist Tim Groseclose has actually *measured* the bias, not

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just of the three traditional networks, but also their present-day network competitors and major newspapers.

Most of his findings will probably not surprise most readers of this publication.

Groseclose concludes that, indeed, the mainstream media do tilt left. Why then do I review a book that tells us what we already “know”? There are four reasons: First, most of us don't know it to the extent Groseclose knows it—his argument is an empirical tour de force. Second, he is so numerate that he makes clear with the data just how extreme the left-wing bias is. Third, there are some surprises in the data, particularly about the *Fox News Channel* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Fourth and finally, Groseclose shows that the biased information people get causes them to vote to the left of their true positions.

**Measuring bias** | He introduces the idea of a political quotient (PQ) to measure politi-



think tanks. The result, which I expected, is that the media are distinctly slanted to the left. The SQ for the *New York Times*, for example, is 74, about the same as that of Sen. Joe Lieberman (I, Conn.). A full 18 of 20 news outlets examined were to the political left of the average American voter, who, as noted above, was at about 50. Only two outlets were to the right: Fox News Channel's *Special Report with Brit Hume*, which scored an almost-moderate 39.7, and the *Washington Times*, with a 35.4. The *Jim Lehrer Newshour*, somewhat surprisingly, had only a mildly left SQ of 55.8.

One number that will surprise many people is the *Wall Street Journal's* SQ of

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**Currently, the average U.S. voter has the same political quotient as the average Iowa voter. But with no media bias, the average U.S. voter would, instead, be like the average voter in Kentucky or Texas.**

85.1, making it the furthest-left of all the media outlets Groseclose evaluates. I was surprised at how far left it was but, as a regular *Journal* reader for almost 40 years, I was only a little surprised.

The bias shouldn't be surprising given the political views of reporters. Surveys show that Washington correspondents vote for the Democratic candidate at a rate of 85 percent or more, Groseclose notes. Studies of contributions to presidential campaigns have found that more than 90 percent, and as many as 98.9 percent, of journalists who contribute to a presidential campaign give to the Democratic candidate. These overwhelming numbers mean, Groseclose says, that residents of left-wing academic communities like Cambridge, Mass. and Berkeley, Calif. are, on average, much more conservative than Washington media correspondents.

**An example** | Groseclose examines a few issues to show the bias at work. The first item he discusses is a *Los Angeles Times* article on the number of black students at UCLA. Groseclose dissects the story to

show that the reporter, Rebecca Trounson, presents the data and reports interviews in a biased way. For instance, to buttress her case that the UCLA admissions process discriminates against black people, she cites six people, five of whom are on the political left, and only one of whom is conservative. Moreover, she pulls a favorite trick of left-wing reporters: identifying the ideology only of the conservative. Trounson's *L.A. Times* colleague, Ralph Vartabedian pulled the same trick on me—although, unlike Vartabedian, Trounson at least got the ideology right. (Vartabedian described me as a conservative. See my August 18, 2010 blog post, “Media Bias and the *L.A. Times*” for more.)

I should note that the UCLA admissions process *is* racist. As Groseclose notes, UCLA discriminates, probably illegally, in favor of black applicants. One problem he identifies with Trounson's approach is that she missed the big story: the rising percentage of Asians at UCLA and the falling percentage of whites.

Groseclose had the guts to question Trounson, asking whether her political views affect the topics she writes about. She answered, “I don't know. Give me an example of a conservative topic.”

So he gives the reader some great examples. One is a shocking story about how New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin refused a company's offer to haul away all the cars ruined by Hurricane Katrina within 15 weeks and pay \$100 per car, or about \$5 million, to the city coffers. Nagin turned down the offer and *spent* \$23 million over six months to have the city government do the same job. Only one of the 20 media outlets covered the story: *Special Report with Brit Hume*.

Groseclose also tells of Katherine Kersten, a conservative reporter whom the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* hired as part of “an experiment.” (The fact that hiring a conservative is an “experiment” in itself speaks volumes.) After six Muslim imams had acted suspiciously on a US Airways flight out of Minneapolis

in 2006, some passengers complained and US Airways removed the imams. They sued. Kersten uncovered the fact, which no one else had reported, that the imams sued not only the airline, but also the complaining passengers. Much of the conservative media then took up the issue; the left-wing media pretty much missed it. The result was that Congress passed a law to protect the freedom of speech of the complaining passengers. (The dishonest way that Democrats in Congress tried to kill the law is worth reading about also.)

**Effects of bias** | But does the bias matter? On this issue, Groseclose shows himself to be a true academic in the best sense of that word: the data changed his mind. Early in his research, Groseclose believed that the media had no effect. But three studies that he cites convinced him otherwise: the left-wing bias of the media, he writes, affects how people vote. In one of the studies, Alan Gerber, Dean Karlan, and Daniel Bergan of Yale University sent out free 10-week newspaper subscriptions to randomly chosen households. Some got the left-leaning *Washington Post*; others got the right-leaning *Washington Times*. In the subsequent race for governor, those who got the *Post* voted 3.8 percentage points higher for the Democrat than those who got the *Times*. Information—whether biased or not—matters.

Interestingly, one person who believes the media have an effect is President Obama. In 2008, notes Groseclose, then-candidate Barack Obama told a reporter, “I am convinced that if there were no Fox News, I might be two or three points higher in the polls.” This is actually about four times the effect that one of the studies cited by Groseclose finds.

He combines the three studies to find the net effect, not just of Fox News and other conservative outlets, but of all the media, including the left-wing media. The result is astonishing. Using basic algebra, he calculates that if the media had the same political quotient as voters, the average American voter would be more conservative because the media would not have tugged him or her to the left. How much more conservative? He illustrates with the 2008 presidential election. Rather than electing

Obama with a vote of 53 percent to John McCain's 46 percent, U.S. voters would have elected McCain with a vote of 56 percent to Obama's 42 percent. Can you say landslide?

In an interview with the Hoover Institution's Peter Robinson, Groseclose explained it another way: Currently, the average U.S. voter has the same political quotient as the average Iowa voter. But with no media bias, the average U.S. voter would, instead, be like the average voter in Kentucky or Texas.

To his credit, Groseclose believes in freedom of speech and of the press, and so does not advocate censorship to correct the bias. Instead, he suggests that reporters spend some time with average people in Kentucky or Texas. But don't look for that to happen soon.

Another of his proposals might have more traction. Groseclose advocates that various news outlets do what only *Slate* and talk radio have been willing to do: reveal the political leanings of their news people and other writers. He thinks this would start a healthy competition that would put pressure on more and more news organizations to reduce their bias. He could be right.

*Left Turn's* message is powerful, compelling, and—most important—based on empirical data. I do, though, have two small criticisms of the book:

First, I think Groseclose should have given credit to Efron for the fairly sophisticated method she developed over 40 years ago for doing content analysis of bias. It was much harder then, when the Internet didn't exist.

Second, he makes passing remarks that I think he would have trouble justifying. Two such lines particularly caught my attention: One was his quote from political scientist Keith Poole that pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan could spell "the end of Western civilization." According to Poole, if you "just read Bernard Lewis," you'll realize what's at stake. The other is his statement at the book's end that it was Ronald Reagan who ended communism in Europe. Consider me strongly skeptical of both those claims.

These small negatives do not undercut the power and importance of his message. I highly recommend *Left Turn*.

# The Need for Disability Insurance Reform

REVIEWED BY GEORGE LEEF

## The Declining Work and Welfare of People with Disabilities

By Richard V. Burkhauser and Mary C. Daly  
American Enterprise Institute, 2011

This book focuses on two of the components of America's "safety net," Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Both are supposed to help disabled people, but their costs are growing far more rapidly than is the population of disabled Americans. The authors (Richard Burkhauser is the Sarah Gibson Blanding Professor of Public Policy at Cornell University; Mary Daly is the head of microeconomic research at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco) conclude that SSDI and SSI costs are rising at an unsustainable rate and that the programs are drawing many people who could work into the dead end of living on government disability checks.

Burkhauser and Daly have identified a serious problem, but I don't think their solution is sufficiently radical. Let's go through their diagnosis first.

**The problem** | SSDI is a social insurance program that was established to provide cash benefits to men and women of working age who become disabled—that is, unable to perform "any substantial gainful activity." The amounts paid to them depend on their past labor earnings and funds to pay those benefits come from a flat-rate tax levied on employers and employees. The SSDI program is distinct from SSI, which is a mean-tested welfare program that pays benefits to adults and children who are disabled. The funds for SSI come from general tax revenues.

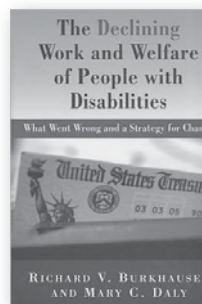
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Disability caseloads as a percentage of the population have been rising steadily for decades in both programs. That increase would make sense if it were true that disabilities are becoming more prevalent in society, but the authors show that they are not. The rising percentage of Americans receiving disability benefits is not due to increasing incidence of disability, but is instead due to changes in the administration of the programs—caused in part by a U.S. Supreme Court decision—that made it easier for people to get on and stay on them.

That, of course, is bad news for taxpayers, but Burkhauser and Daly argue that these trends have also been harmful to the disabled themselves. Over the last 30 years, the relative position of those on disability benefits has declined with respect to the rest of society. Easy money has been luring many people who might work into the disability world. However, disabled workers often find many opportunities for improving their circumstances if they stay in the ranks of the employed. What seems to be "compassionate" is often detrimental; SSDI and SSI are proof of that.

A telling piece of evidence in this regard is the fact that claims of disability filed under the categories most difficult to disprove—mental conditions and musculoskeletal problems—have been increasing the most rapidly. Apparently more and more Americans are discovering that they can get disability checks by claiming that they are suffering from, e.g., back problems or depression that keeps them from holding down a job. The system allows many who are not incapacitated to get away with it.

The situation with regard to disabled children under SSI is at least as disturbing. The rationale for SSI was that it would give



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