Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis

ISSN: 2325-1204. Journal homepage: https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/jctp/

Volume 10, Issue 1, 2020, Article 7, https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11566

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Abstract

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Recommended Citation

Havey, N.F. (2020). Radicalized on campus? (Un)coded whiteness as campus social movement. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 10(1), Article 7. https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11566

The *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* is published by the Iowa State University Digital Press (https://press.lib.iastate.edu) and the Iowa State University School of Education (https://www.education.iastate.edu)

Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis
2020, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1-19

Radicalized on Campus? (Un)Coded Whiteness as Campus Social Movement

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This paper explores how whiteness is rhetorically employed in the recruitment and organizational strategies of conservative student campus groups. It considers group activity prior to, during, and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle and during the 2020 presidential election cycle. Drawing on both critical whiteness studies and social movements, this study examines how conservative students engage in framing processes designed to convert nonadherents to adherents of a group ideology. It also interrogates how whiteness influences this framing. Through a multi-site case study analysis incorporating observation, interviews, and a critical document analysis of over 100 unique articles and student group artifacts (e.g., flyers, social media posts, student newspaper editorials, etc.), and over 2,000 tweets over two distinct time points, I find that conservative student groups are employing whiteness to recruit new students over shared experiences. Specific effort is focused on "coming out" as conservative, identifying as the more academically and intellectually rigorous side of the campus political debate, and disidentifying with contemporary campus liberalism.

Keywords: Social movements | whiteness | campus political groups

The 2016 presidential election cycle was a watershed moment in American politics. After a huge primary field was narrowed to two party nominees, Donald J. Trump prevailed over Hillary R. Clinton to win the electoral college, but he did not win the popular vote. Both candidates were derided for inflammatory remarks throughout the election cycle. Trump was accused of making racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic remarks, as well as for inciting white supremacist violence. Meanwhile, Clinton was condemned for labeling Trump supporters as "deplorables" (Reilly, 2016). The 2016 election cycle saw intense divisions along racial, ethnic, and class lines. This increased the visibility and mobilization of overtly racist and white supremacist ideologies (Mahler, 2016; Posner & Neiwert, 2016), as well as the assertions that calling out racism was as bad as being racist (Sommers & Norton, 2016). After the 2017 white supremacist violence in Virginia, President Trump frequently remarked that there are good people "on both sides," tacitly endorsing white supremacy (Jacobs & Laughland, 2017). Profiles of Trump voters in major news outlets like *The New York Times* detailed the economic anxiety and fear of demographic change (read: increase in people of color) consistent across rural, "real" America (Hessler, 2017). Although economic anxiety should not be discounted as a rational political motivator, the thinly-veiled white supremacy underlying those fears overpowered all other discourse and became the prevailing narrative of the election (Berger et al., 2016; Mahler, 2016). Both on and off campuses, this narrative leveraged fear and anger as discursive tools to mobilize white Americans, thus bringing white supremacy from the periphery of conservative American political ideology to the core. This exhibited precisely what Bail (2012) referred to as a "fringe effect" (p. 855). The 2016 presidential election cycle and surrounding sociopolitical climate offered white supremacists what Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) referred to as a "crack in the door" (p. 1628), and the political opportunity structure to advance and defend whiteness on the American political right. As I will show, this crack in the door was particularly noticeable on

American college campuses, on which many young Americans eagerly awaited the chance to vote.

On college campuses, many students participated in their first presidential election cycle and participated in the 2016 election cycle. These students were more politically polarized than ever before and more likely to engage in social or political action than their older peers (Eagan et al., 2017). For traditionally-aged students, college is a time to grow, develop political leanings, social interests, and test-drive these opinions in a slightly more forgiving environment than the "real world" (Astin & antonio, 2012; Thelin, 2011). The 2016 presidential election offered students the political and social context to try-on and affirm new identities and act in accordance, but not without consequence. The 2020 presidential election facilitated similar experimentation for a new crop of students, emboldened and motivated on both sides of the aisle by Donald Trump's inflammatory rhetoric.

Throughout the 2016 election and beyond, college student supporters of Trump were labeled as racist, xenophobic, homophobic, misogynistic, and white supremacist (Ambrose, 2016; Foran, 2016). They received media coverage similar to Trump voters profiled across America during and after the election cycle (Hartocollis, 2016; Sales, 2018, Steinmetz, 2018). Smiling, blonde, and in MAGA hats (Sales, 2018), these students and their defenders in the conservative media relied largely upon what I call the "rhetorical devices of whiteness," which include existing terms white innocence, white immunity, ontological expansiveness, and white agility used to rhetorically shape whiteness through conversation, discourse, and physical and emotional moves (Cabrera, 2018; Pierce, 2012). They do so in order to frame themselves as victims of "reverse racism" and decry the "fascist" politics of the left (Goldberg, 2009). These students seem more uncomfortable and fearful of being labeled as racists than they are with actual racism. However, as I will demonstrate, this fear did not stop white anxiety, fear of multiculturalism, and fear of diversity from becoming clear recruitment tools for conservative student campus organizations on college campuses.

Institutions of higher education have long been heralded as marketplaces of ideas where ideological diversity should be welcomed, supported, and encouraged (Birnbaum, 1987; Thelin, 2011). Unfortunately, this means that schools welcome and enable violent ideologies like white supremacy that are often disguised as "good faith" opinion positions, a position identified in the course of this study. This makes schools and academia easy targets for contentious political action, as they are theoretically more open, and thus, vulnerable to delegitimation, disruption, and transformation than the state, local, or federal government (Walker et al., 2008). White supremacy, although a time-honored American ideology indelibly linked to this nation's founding and development, should <u>not</u> be supported or encouraged in our society, nor on our campuses. White supremacy is inextricably tied to violence and is predicated upon the oppression of nonwhite others (Omi & Winant, 2014). White supremacist ideology, and the behavior informed by it, is in inherently bad faith.

Although campuses should continue to be spaces that engender and support ideological diversity, white supremacy, however disguised or reframed, is a violent, hateful ideology that negatively impacts students, staff, and faculty of color, and should be confronted and contested when present (Cabrera, 2014; Gusa, 2010). Unfortunately, whiteness has carved out a protected position for itself in society and has been rendered normative and default; questioning it requires conscious identification and unveiling (Cabrera, 2018; Omi & Winant, 2014). With the rise in "terror from the right" and a president who does not see a rising threat of white nationalism amid a nearly 50% increase in white nationalist hate groups immediately following his election

(Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018, p. 1), confronting white supremacy on campus is more urgent than ever.

This study investigates how conservative student groups framed themselves during and after the 2016 presidential election cycle, as well later during the 2020 presidential election cycle, through a multi-site case study incorporating observation, interviews, and document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2009) of student group social media posts, flyers, and media coverage. Using conservative student groups (College Republicans chapters, as an example) at three separate institutions as cases, this case study investigates how social identities (e.g., identifying as white and male) and interests (e.g., gun rights, anti-abortion activism, religion, etc.), are leveraged by conservative student groups to recruit new members through framing processes. This analysis was guided by the following research question:

1. How do conservative student groups frame themselves during and after the 2016 presidential election cycle and later during the 2020 presidential election cycle?

Literature Review

White supremacy on campus is best characterized by shouts of "you will not replace us" and calls from conservative action groups encouraging students to "take back your campus" (Binder & Wood, 2014; Coyle & Robinson, 2005). While it may seem like white supremacy and xenophobia have surged out of nowhere, Americans and American college students have become more politically polarized over the last several decades (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Eagan et al., 2014; Eagan et al., 2017; Evans, 2003; Pryor et al., 2007). The contemporary conservative movement has rebuilt itself around the idea that white Americans on college campuses and in greater society are being left behind and marginalized by a dangerous, politically correct, and "fascist" liberal movement (Binder & Wood, 2014; Black, 2012; Goldberg, 2009).

Conservative students are in the minority on most campuses nationwide, but that does not make them marginalized (Eagan et al., 2014; Eagan et al., 2017; Pryor et al., 2007). Binder and Wood (2014) interviewed students on one public university campus in the West and on a second elite Eastern campus and found that students on both campuses tended to befriend liberal students but not discuss politics with them for fear of backlash. The students interviewed expressed that having liberal friends was unavoidable, and stressed that conservative student groups were often the only spaces on campus to find like-minded peers who they could interact with without having their beliefs or identities questioned (Binder & Wood, 2014). Racists criticize students of color for engaging in the same ingroup siloing that the conservative students in Binder and Wood's study did as perpetuating divisions and unnecessarily producing segregation. Park (2018) found that the students most likely to engage in campus self-segregation were, in fact, white, Christian, and participated in Greek life. These students also happen to comprise the majority of students identifying as Republican on college campuses (Newport, 2010). Park (2018) found that students of color who similarly pursue homophily on college campuses were able to "recharge their batteries" (p. 25) on campuses where they experience daily microaggressions. However, conservative students are not under constant threat of harassment, discrimination, or physical violence. Conservatism is an invisible identity and being a statistical minority does not erase centuries of enshrined and violently protected systemic and institutional white privilege, nor does it remove the shielding effects of white immunity.

The contemporary framing of conservative college students as oppressed minorities on overwhelmingly liberal campuses echoes the greater efforts by those on the right to reframe

conservatism as the ideology of America's silent majority. This perceived and silent majority is fed up with the liberal bastardization of Republican and, by proxy of whiteness, American tradition (Goldberg, 2010; Gross et al., 2011). Some examples of extramural conservative groups include the Young America's Foundation, the Leadership Institute, Turning Point USA, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, the College Republicans National Committee, the Federalist Society, and the Heritage Foundation. These groups have invested hugely on college campuses to ensure the development of conservative thinkers that will continue to understand themselves as oppressed and ideologically aligned with returning America to its white supremacist roots (Binder & Wood, 2014; Coyle & Robinson, 2005; Goldberg, 2010). Even though conservatives are not unilaterally white, this framing reduces conservative students to embody the ideals of whiteness and leverages racial minorities (e.g., prominent Black conservatives like Stacey Dash, Candace Owens, and Diamond and Silk) as racial fetishes (Matias, 2016a), commodifying differences to defend whiteness. I similarly find that women are commodified in conservative student groups as emblematic of diversity and as a way to indicate a broad spectrum of identities present in groups, which has been a conservative strategy for deflecting criticism for decades (e.g., Ann Coulter, Sarah Palin, Megyn Kelly, etc.).

On campus, this framing of conservatives as marginalized aligns with a long history of conservatives condemning higher education as a bastion of liberalism (Binder & Wood, 2014; Black, 2012; Horowitz, 2009) where conservative ideas are silenced, penalized, and held in low esteem by faculty and students alike (Gross, 2013; Gross & Fosse, 2012; Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006). Conservative students operate under the assumption that their grades will be impacted if they reveal their political stance (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006). Although conservative students may feel potentially marginalized on account of their views in an academic setting, a review of the research reveals that partisan bias has little to no effect on grading (Musgrave & Rom, 2015). Conservative marginalization on college campuses, regardless of perceived and articulated concern about academic mistreatment, is thus largely imaginary.

In this contemporary framing, multiculturalism is the real racism and white victimization comes at the hands of minorities and overly politically-correct liberals (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Cabrera, 2018; Feagin & O'Brien, 2003). This oppression is a "sincere fiction" (Feagin & O'Brien, 2003, p. 1) concocted by whites and is merely the result of demographic shifts and the anxiety associated with movements for racial equity. In this imaginary situation, white victimization is a falsehood that reveals the boundaries, constraints, and reward systems of white nationalism and supremacy, but does not resemble oppression based in any empirical reality (Cabrera, 2018).

This perceived erosion of tradition, however, is simply an erosion of privilege and the benefits reaped from white supremacy. As Cabrera (2018) quotes, "when you're accustomed to privilege, equity feels like oppression" (p. xii). Conservative students on campus, and their counterparts off-campus, have deftly repurposed and appropriated the rhetorical and discursive strategies of the liberal, social justice-oriented students that they condemn. They do this to position themselves as the real victims and shift campus and national political discourse away from legitimate marginalization and towards concocted, imagined racial and political marginalization. In doing this, conservative students employ what I call the "rhetorical devices of whiteness" to justify their perceived marginality and subsequent reactions to it, namely overt exhibitions of white supremacist ideology.

The Rhetorical Devices of Whiteness

Within critical whiteness studies, there are numerous terms for the ways that whiteness manifests and defends itself (Leonardo, 2002). From the most commonly known term "white privilege" to its emergent successor, "white immunity," white people have an arsenal at their disposal carefully crafted to defend whiteness at individual, institutional, and systemic levels. Cabrera's (2018) work on whiteness on campus has largely focused on four reinforcing tenets: white innocence, white immunity, ontological expansiveness, and white agility.

White privilege is the bedrock of critical whiteness studies and the most colloquially cited, understood, and refuted tenet of whiteness. Originally articulated as an invisible knapsack containing unearned benefits accrued due to whiteness (examples included a compass, map, and a firestarter that were all afforded to white people as they made their way through the world; McIntosh, 1989), white privilege has recently been rearticulated as white immunity within the critical whiteness literature (Cabrera, 2017, 2018). Cabrera argues that white privilege encounters some pitfalls in practice, namely that it describes a "semi-charmed life or one that is defined by wealth" (2018, p. 11), and is thus easily defensible by legions of white people willing to assert that they are not wealthy or privileged, they have worked hard to overcome oppression and adverse circumstances, and that their whiteness afforded them no benefits. In his 2018 book *White Guys on Campus*, the white male college students Cabrera interviews attest to this and position themselves as hardworking students who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to succeed within a meritocratic environment. But meritocracy has largely been debunked as ignorant of structural factors that inherently privilege and disadvantage people differently (Guinier, 2015; Liu, 2011). For example, standardized testing, one of the pillars of the meritocracy argument, has been consistently proven to be more of an indicator of students' socioeconomic status than anything else (Guinier, 2015; Park, 2018). White immunity attends to the theoretical pitfalls of white privilege and the fictional meritocracy it exists within by explaining that, rather than benefiting directly from whiteness, white people are simply immune to the harm that nonwhites experience.

A second rhetorical device or tenet of whiteness is ontological expansiveness. Sullivan (2006) describes ontological expansiveness as the way that white people feel entitled to move through and occupy all space unquestioned. Ontological expansiveness is most relevant when analyzing the ways that space is physically structured. On campuses, ontological expansiveness is revealed when whites conflate the presence of spaces coded as nonwhite (a Black Student Union, for example) as intentionally exclusive and thus racist. The white male students that Cabrera (2018) talks to specifically note that they [campus administration/the liberals in control of college campuses] would "never allow a white student union" (p. 81), but fail to reflect on the way the groups they participate in and are involved with are ethnocentric, exclusive, and racist. Viewing students of color as the originators of racial divisions on campus, white students can leverage ontological expansiveness to understand themselves as the real marginalized population and justify their perceptions of "reverse racism."

Within the same imaginary that facilitates the perception of "reverse racism," white students eagerly "race for innocence" (Pierce, 2012), positioning themselves as innocent and distant from the very real and racist white supremacy of past and current generations. Citing that they did not themselves hold slaves and that they have at least one Black friend, white students operate from a position of white innocence that distances themselves from racist, white supremacist acts. At a rhetorical level, this is an almost self-infantilizing move wherein white students suggest that they

could not be responsible for racism or possibly be white supremacists (Cabrera, 2018). White innocence has foundations in epistemologies of ignorance (Mills, 2007; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007), ways of knowing that ignore the reality of racism and allow white people to frame everyday racist acts as innocuous.

All these devices combine and are practiced by white people engaging in white agility (Cabrera, 2018). White agility describes a white proclivity to shift conversations away from racial topics and to reframe them towards conceptualizations of merit, class, and ideological marginality that completely omit race as a relevant factor. White agility allows white people to maintain a positive sense of self and reframe themselves as underprivileged, disadvantaged, or actively marginalized, and discriminated against because of race. The white men Cabrera (2018) interviewed affirm this, frequently commenting that the "only discrimination left is that against white men" (p. 40).

Identifying and contesting white supremacy in discourse is thus necessary, as it has been disguised and repackaged as an ideology under attack and worthy of defense. This study seeks to contribute to the literature focused on explicitly naming white supremacy in institutions of higher education and informing the action intent on dismantling it by explicitly identifying how white supremacy manifests in the ways conservative student groups frame themselves during and after the 2016 presidential election and during the 2020 presidential election cycle.

Theoretical Framework

I approach this study by understanding conservative student groups as social movement organizations engaging in contentious politics on campus (Tarrow, 2011). Conservative student groups on college campuses are usually united around collective challenges (e.g., anti-abortion, gun rights, anti-immigration, etc.) or social solidarity as conservatives. They have the common purpose of advancing their perspective on such challenges or expanding their group to better respond to the challenges the group faces (Binder & Wood, 2014; Tarrow, 2011). I acknowledge that conservatism is a "big tent" and that conservative identity varies; in this paper I specifically review and analyze groups identifying as [Insert College Here] Republicans, local chapters of Turning Point USA, or "American First" [Insert Mascot Here], as they clearly identify with national conservative political groups and movements, which are easier to identify and differentiate. The conservative participants in this study are also increasingly identifying as conservative in contrast to liberals, not so much identifying with conservative ideology as they are disidentifying with and distancing themselves from liberal ideology (and tenets like feminism, concern for climate, affirmative action, etc.).

On college campuses, conservative student groups like the College Republicans engage in sustained interaction with elites or perceived elites (e.g., student government, liberal student groups, etc.), opponents (e.g., the student body), and authorities (e.g., administrators; including campus, local, state, and federal legislative bodies, etc.; Tarrow, 2011). When threats to conservative ideology emerge on campus, student groups are among the social movement organizations (SMOs) available to respond with contentious political action in the form of protest, student organizing, or attempts to resolve concerns through bureaucratic or administrative channels. These repertoires of contention shift across social and political contexts, as some of the targets of contention are more or less vulnerable to protest, for example, than others.

The repertoires of contention employed by social movement organizations are, then, dependent on the target of their contentious actions. Institutions such as the state, corporations, and schools have different vulnerabilities and strengths when it comes to engaging with contentious political actors and social movement organizations (Walker et al., 2008). States may have a greater capacity than schools to meet the demands of contentious political actors but may be less incentivized to do so. Colleges and universities are a unique target for contentious politics, as they are more likely than the state to respond to contentious political action to protect their reputation or prevent impending social movement organization action that could impact their reputation in the future. Schools are also expected to be open to a diversity of ideological stances and have been historically identified as marketplaces of ideas (Birnbaum, 1983; Thelin, 2011). This results in a weakened capacity for repression and a more open environment vulnerable to confrontational tactics, which has been identified and capitalized on by confrontational conservative groups like Turning Point USA (Walker et al., 2008) and more liberal social movements like #ConcernedStudent1950 and #ItsTimeAU, who leveraged social media to garner institutional attention (Douglas et al., 2020; Morgan & Davis, 2019). Binder and Wood (2014) found that students at the public Western university they observed and interviewed were far more likely to engage in protest and confrontational tactics than the students at the Eastern elite university, who preferred more self-described intellectual approaches, but that both student populations noted that their schools were much more receptive to contentious political action than they perceived the state to be. As a result, schools are more vulnerable to confrontational politics and overtly contentious political action than the state, making higher education a logical proxy target (Walker et al., 2008) for conservative political groups and explaining the massive investment in student conservative groups previously described.

In addition to schools being a more vulnerable target for contentious political action, the 2016 presidential election cycle also presented the ideal political opportunity structure (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996) for social movement organizing around whiteness. Political opportunity structures describe how and when contentious politics might occur and whether it is prudent for social movement organizations to act. The 2016 presidential election cycle exhibited a fringe effect (Bail, 2012) where white supremacy as an ideology moved from the periphery of American political discourse to the core; the 2020 presidential election cycle recreated these conditions. With whiteness more centrally located in the political discourse, the political opportunity structure for social movement organization around whiteness and white supremacy as ideology was and is relatively stable and advantageous for conservative groups. This ideological positioning was matched with external support from conservative organizations like the College Republicans National Committee, Turning Point USA, the Young America's Foundation, and the Federalist Society, who have provided conservative student groups with the resources - both monetary and organizational (e.g., flyers, pamphlets, PowerPoint slide decks, access to high profile speakers, etc.) - to mobilize, recruit, and develop new conservative students on campuses for decades (Binder & Wood, 2014). These student groups, and the extramural groups supporting them, leveraged the relative stability and strength of the political opportunity structure created by the 2016 presidential election cycle to engage in framing processes designed to convert nonadherents to adherents (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986); similar tactics appear to have been extended into the 2020 presidential election cycle, particularly with regards to identifying conservative student groups as "safe spaces."

Framing processes are iterative, processual, and a constant part of any social movement organization's practices (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986; Tarrow, 2011). Framing

processes have the general goal of frame alignment: ensuring that the ideologies of the social movement organization and the organization's members are similar enough to facilitate productive group action. Framing processes can engage a social movement organization's potential recruits through multiple mechanisms: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation (Snow et al., 1986).

Frame bridging engages people with unaligned general sentiment or disorganized feelings towards a specific topic or ideology directly and encourages participation in the social movement organization to reconcile this sentiment with appropriate group identification. For conservative student groups, frame bridging might consist of flyers with slogans that emphasize group affiliation ("an American for"), or direct outreach to students whose other interests might align with the conservative student group's interests, like students participating in campus religious groups (Snow et al., 1986). Frame amplification builds upon existing sentiment and works to validate an individual's perspectives on a topic; student groups in general do this well by framing their group as spaces to meet with like-minded peers. Frame extension makes the niche more palatable and offers a hook to reel in nonadherents that would otherwise be disinterested in a social movement organization. Frame extension might be actuated by student groups who invite speakers to campus that can speak to student's interests and connect them to the social movement organization hosting the speaker. Finally, frame transformation seeks to radically reconstitute an individual's perspective. For conservative student groups, micromobilization in the interest of frame transformation might look like identifying and outreaching to students initially identifying as middle-of-the-road or liberal but who feel subsequently victimized by multiculturalism and liberalism and offering conservatism as a response to this victimization (Snow et al., 1986). Given the embeddedness of whiteness within both national and campus conservative groups, white students are potential targets for this micromobilization.

This study seeks to advance the literature on how social movement organizations engage in framing processes and interrogate where the framing processes conservative student groups engage in employ the rhetorical devices of whiteness to combat the ever-growing threat of white supremacy both nationally and on college campuses.

Methods

Overview

This qualitative multi-site case study of conservative student groups and how they frame(d) themselves during the 2016 and 2020 presidential election cycles incorporates observations of conservative student group meetings and events (debates, speakers), semi-structured interviews, and document analysis (undertaken as observation, since semi-structured interviews were not feasible for analysis of the 2016 election cycle). Each case study considered is a conservative student group at multiple sites (Public Selective, Public Nonselective, and Private Selective); I only interviewed students and participated in meetings at Public Selective throughout the 2019-2020 school year. These findings are primarily driven by the document and social media analysis conducted over the course of the 2016 presidential election cycle; the data for the 2020 presidential election cycle were collected as part of a larger, ethnographic project centering conservative students. This data supplements the 2016 findings.

Site Description

Interview participants for the 2020 election cycle were recruited from a large, public university on the west coast (Public Selective; all names are pseudonyms). This site was chosen due to its highly visible and active conservative student group, Public Selective Republicans, and is also one of the site campuses for the 2016 document analysis. The other two sites for document analysis were Public Nonselective and Private Selective and were chosen following Binder and Wood's (2014) analysis of varying institutional types. Each school had an active, visible, and vocal conservative student group. The interviews and site observations conducted in 2020 serve as supplemental data for the 2016 analysis and provide additional context for Public Selective.

Initial Student Group Observations

As part of my participant recruitment, I attended conservative student group meetings for one group: Public Selective Republicans. These observations served two purposes: 1) to provide initial descriptive understanding of the activities of conservative student groups and who comprises these groups (demographically) and 2) to bolster recruitment strategies through direct contact with students identifying as conservative. Participant observation allowed me to build rapport with students, many of whom were closed off and wary of a researcher. I attended meetings for two and a half academic quarters, totaling 25 weeks of interaction with the students (not counting email correspondence during breaks). My weeks of active engagement with the group led to several collegial relationships and a degree of trust that has facilitated productive, purposeful participant recruitment and snowball sampling (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2015). It also facilitated access to their listserv, which provided additional documents for analysis, as well as to the social media accounts of both the club and several officers, which were similarly analyzed.

Semi-Structured Interviews

As part of a larger project, participants were asked to participate in a 90-minute semi-structured interview exploring their experiences as conservatives on campus and their political engagement with the 2020 presidential election cycle. Within the context of this study, five officers of the Public Selective Republicans were interviewed. Three men, two women and all identified as white. These interviews were transcribed verbatim, reviewed, and assigned pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality.

Document Analysis

Due to the historical nature of the 2016 presidential election, analysis of conservative student group framing processes was done via document collection and analysis. I conducted a document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2009) of documents from three site campuses.

Following site selection, I reviewed documents from multiple sources for each campus: conservative student groups social media accounts, websites, and media coverage, including student newspapers. I collected documents across each site by first conducting a preliminary Google search for the school's campus conservative groups (search terms included: campus

republicans and the name of the school, Turning Point USA, and general campus club directories). Next, I identified the websites, social media accounts, and key figures in each conservative organization. For conservative student groups with highly visible leadership (a president consistently quoted in the student newspaper or in national media), I reviewed both the group's social media as well as that student's social media when available. For each site, I also reviewed the archives of the school's student newspaper, focusing on articles flagged by search terms "campus republicans," "conservative students," "student protest," and "2016 election." Several of the students who were active in conservative student groups at my sites also wrote editorials for their campus newspapers about their ideologies. After identifying these students, I reviewed their relevant published pieces in the student newspapers.

Researcher Positionality

As the participants in this study come from a political population that I do not currently identify within but previously did consider (my first voter registration was Republican), I carefully considered my own positionality and political identification in contrast to conservative students. As a white man actively interested in working against white supremacy, my positionality is crucial to understanding other white people's relationships to whiteness and how that manifests in their behavior. My position as a white man can also facilitate access to and rapport with conservative students, who may be less willing to speak to someone who appears more visibly liberal. In effect, my identity as a white cisgender man can facilitate a sort of candidness with participants that researchers of color, as well as queer and trans researchers who do not pass as straight and cis, may not necessarily have the same access to. Participants were far more willing to say racist and homophobic things to me than I imagine they would have said to another nonwhite, nonmale researcher.

Analysis Plan (Interviews, Observations, and Documents)

Following the processing of my observation notes, collection and collation of documents, and transcription of interviews, transcripts were read and reread multiple times (both immediately after interviews and prior to new interviews) and contact summary sheets were created for each participant to describe the major takeaways (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Documents were organized into portfolios and reviewed by site. The observation notes, document portfolios, and transcripts were reviewed initially for preliminary codes and subsequently distilled down into larger and more thematic codes (Bowen, 2009; Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Saldaña, 2015; Yin, 2009). I initially coded for broader experiences (e.g., feeling marginalized as a conservative, why students were participating in student groups, vocalized political stances, etc.) and subsequently pared these down into narrow codes (e.g., having to come out as conservative, conservative student groups as safe spaces, conservative student groups as the only place I can be religious, etc.). I also specifically read for students denouncing white privilege ("I worked hard"), reframing racist perspectives, couching or qualifying their experiences, or distancing themselves from racism or individualizing racism to other, more immediately racist peers (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). My preliminary open coding was crucial to developing key themes and to validate my theoretical approach (Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Saldaña, 2015, Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Throughout my coding I employed a constant comparative technique to ensure that relevant and interesting codes were present across sites and across participants (Glaser, 1965). Constant

comparative analysis compares participant responses and themes to available categories, integrates categories and their properties, and delimits the theory associated with the analysis by providing within case and across case analysis of themes (Jones et al., 2006; Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Seidman, 2019).

Limitations and Considerations

This study is limited in that the population I am considering, conservative students, may be unreliable narrators of their own experiences, particularly as they perceive themselves as oppressed on what they perceive to be as "overwhelmingly liberal campuses." Similarly, the analysis depends on the availability of documents, some of which may have been removed from circulation or destroyed following the end of their relevance (e.g., the election, the academic year), or following controversy. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited the production of campus media coverage and student political group messaging, as students are not actively on campus or holding events. As a result, I have chosen to limit my document analysis of all three sites to 2016 and only incorporated data pertinent to the 2020 election from Public Selective, data from which supplements the 2016 data. Finally, my analysis, although primarily focused on documents, did not include conservatives of color. Public Selective Republicans, which had a handful of members of color throughout my observation, was unilaterally white in terms of leadership and none of the conservatives of color I attempted to recruit were interested in talking to me (this was a total of 3 people, 2 of whom only came to one meeting in 25 weeks). My analysis focusing on whiteness thus focuses exclusively on white perspectives and does not extend to how conservatives of color may be engaging in the same rhetoric of whiteness as their white peers.

Findings

Through my review of over 100 unique documents and 2,000 unique tweets, supplemented by over 25 weeks of observation and 5 participant interviews, I identified three consistent themes: 1) a perception that students must "come out as conservative," 2) a consistent framing of conservative student groups as the intellectual and pro-discourse counterpart to the intolerant and disrespectful left, and 3) that conservative students are marginalized and attacked on campus, but they are NOT victims. These themes are consistent with the framing of the contemporary conservative movement described by Binder and Wood (2014), Black (2012), and Goldberg (2009). Across these three campuses, conservative students framed themselves as both attacked and marginalized on college campuses with a presumption of liberalness with only conservative student groups as a bastion—perhaps a safe space—for their participation in respectful, engaged, intelligent, and articulate political and social discourse. By amplifying existing frames (providing a space for like-minded peers), frame bridging (utilizing language such as "an American for" or a "Christian for"), and engaging in frame extension (inviting speakers of interest to campus, hosting gun-centric or religion-centric events), campus conservative groups identify themselves as safe spaces for students—particularly white, male, religious, and self-identified intellectual students—who feel otherwise left out on what they perceive to be predominantly liberal campuses.

Coming Out as Conservative

The students represented across all three sites were remarkably agile with their whiteness (Cabrera, 2018). In two distinct op-eds, dozens of tweets, and several quotes in student newspapers, conservative students described the dangerous process of "coming out as conservative" on campuses with perceived compulsory liberalness, leveraging the language coined by LGBTQ populations to reveal their sexual orientations or gender identities in a society under compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 2006) and compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2017). One of these similarly echoed Cabrera's (2018) findings that white men on college campuses view themselves as the most marginalized population, noting that "it's hard enough to be a white man these days, let alone a conservative" (Mitch, Public Selective, 2020). At one of their 2019 meetings, the conservative students at Public Selective invited a guest speaker – a Dean of Public Policy at a nearby private institution – who gave a 1-hour talk on "Eggshell Culture," decrying the state of American public education and telling the students in the room that "if you're not a conservative, you're receiving an indoctrination, not an education," while simultaneously bemoaning the insidious and anti-American impact of the "Diversity Industrial Complex." He went on to tell the students that they are learning skills that liberals have not, such as "assimilating and hiding your viewpoints to be successful," the reverse, he assured students, "is not the case." Omar, a conservative student at Public Selective echoed this mentality, criticizing his classes as less than diverse and replete with "Marxist writers." "What about the other side," he asked, telling me that he consistently avoids talking in class because he does not want to be "shouted down" or stigmatized for his conservative beliefs. At another meeting, the club's faculty sponsor criticized the university for forcing conservative faculty members to "exist in shadow networks" or risk punishment when coming up for tenure or promotion, submitting a manuscript for publication, or simply trying to participate in departmental social activities.

In positioning themselves as the real victims of oppression – and using language originally used by marginalized populations – conservative students, and the adults advising them, engage in both white agility and frame amplification. By shifting the conversation away from racism, sexism, and homophobia and onto the plight of the marginalized conservative student in a sea of liberal antagonists, conservative student groups light a beacon for similarly aggrieved students who perceive themselves as needing to hide their political identities (stay in the closet) and offer sanctuary from those who would "hate you just for your views" (Haley, Public Selective, 2016). Conservative faculty members and community partners amplify this.

Ann (2020), a student at public selective, perceived this hostile environment as also personal and told me that "conservatives will be friends with anybody, but liberals really do not like to associate with conservatives." Like Ann, Haley's (Public Selective, 2016) comments were particularly grating, as she, like her peers at other sites (Jack, Private Selective, 2016), understood her political ideology and related behavior as merely thought devoid of impact. In their framing of themselves as marginalized and "in the closet," conservatives across all three sites failed to interrogate how their own views were potentially causing harm to their peers while simultaneously emphasizing and decrying how the opposing liberal ideology conservative students conflict with is intentionally and explicitly hateful.

The Intellectual, Discourse-Driven Political Party

Conservative students on liberal campuses are often faced with the challenge of articulating and arguing perspectives and viewpoints that the bulk of their peers disagree with. On all three campuses I reviewed, conservative students noted that, although they were certainly in the ideological minority, their attention to learning about policy, understanding "the facts," and participating in respectful discourse "frankly made them better than the liberals" (Amanda, Public Nonselective, 2016). Conservative students regularly noted that liberal students do not engage with policy or research in the way that conservatives do (Amanda, Public Nonselective; Haley, Public Selective, both 2016), emphasizing that conservative students understand their liberal peers as both biased and uninformed. Students also repeatedly pointed out that having their viewpoints challenged made them more nimble and prepared debaters, opposed to liberal students who never developed their arguments as a result of "echo chambers and constant praise" (Mike, Public Nonselective, 2016). These students consistently positioned themselves as arbiters of intellectual truths who were engaging in "good faith" (Jack, Private Selective, 2016) debates and discourse, and who did not mean any harm or personal offense to the targets of their ideas. They also regularly framed their liberal peers as actively and intentionally engaging in "identity politics" designed to marginalize and ostracize conservative students (Haley, Public Selective, 2016).

On each campus, conservative student groups focused on presenting a unified front as a positive, friendly, ideologically diverse, and rigorous spaces for intellectual growth, debate, and discourse, while simultaneously framing liberal student groups as intolerant, disrespectful, and divisive. In fact, both Private Selective and Public Selective regularly discussed the Reaganesque "Big Tent" nature of their ideologically diverse conservative student groups and brought up the presence of women as evidence to this diversity (Jack, Private Selective, 2016). Though the students at Private Selective were intent on demonstrating diversity, the only student leaders interviewed by student media and represented in photos were white and male. The students I interviewed in 2020 were unilaterally white, but 2/5 were women; though interestingly, both women indicated they felt they were outliers and tokens. Women were more regularly quoted or interviewed at Public Selective and Public Nonselective, with both Haley (Public Selective, 2016) and Ashley (Public Nonselective, 2016) leveraging their identities as women to distance themselves from contemporary feminism, both suggesting that conservative student groups were often much safer spaces for women than liberal ones, where their bodies were more likely to be policed. Specifically, Haley noted that she "doesn't experience any discrimination" and "has health insurance," exemplifying white immunity while minimizing the experiences of other students.

Conservative students were consistently quoted in their respective student newspapers deriding students upset with the results of the 2016 election as "childish," "immature," and "whiny." Additionally, they noted that protesting the results of the election, or conservative student group events like "Conservative Coming Out Day" or the "Affirmative Action Bake Sale" was both unproductive and, frankly, rude (Haley, Public Selective; Ashley, Public Nonselective, both 2016). Similarly, both students and invited speakers characterized Public Selective as a "good public school" that "shouldn't have protestors who are non-thinking and really just embarrassing" (Ann, Public Selective, 2020). By engaging in both white innocence (i.e., we are not racist, we are just trying to foment debate) and white agility (i.e., it is whining when they do it and discourse when we do it), conservative student groups offer both frame amplification and frame extension to students who identify as intellectual, measured, and are looking for a way to participate in political discourse on their college campus. Similarly, in

presenting themselves as diverse both ideologically and in terms of identity, conservative student groups offer space for students – like Haley and Ann at Public Selective – who have a marginalized identity (woman) but whose identity as white overpowers this less salient identity in a way that facilitates disidentification with umbrella movements like feminism. Across all three sites, conservative students more clearly articulated disidentification with liberal talking points than they did clear commitments to conservative arguments and regularly advocated for the protection of what they perceived to be an attack on spaces allowing for this disidentification.

Fuck Your Safe Spaces, But Fund Ours

Conservatives on all three campuses could agree on one thing: their liberal peers were whiny, entitled brats whose safe spaces were limiting both free speech and academic discourse. According to the same students and the faculty members that supported them, on campuses that *they* perceived as predominantly liberal, the conservative students —and the groups they occupied—are marginalized, attacked, and censored for their political beliefs, including being discriminated against when it comes to institutional and club funding. Unlike their liberal counterparts, however, conservatives do not "whine and cry like liberals" (Haley, Public Selective, 2016) and do not need safe spaces. The same conservative student groups that would both create flyers reading "fuck your safe spaces" and tweet the same tagline at their liberal peers (Public Selective, 2016 and 2020) also regularly protested what they perceived to be professorial misconduct and an abridging of their First Amendment rights (Private Selective, Public Selective).

At Private Selective (2016), Cameron noted that he "had instances in classes where perhaps for a paper I've written something other than I really feel, because I know that perhaps if I wrote what I really feel I may not get the best grade." Sophie (Public Selective, 2020) told me that "people in class do not know my politics because that would be academic and social suicide" and Omar (Public Selective, 2020) agreed, telling me that he "regularly writes essays that contradict his beliefs" to avoid being marked down by "liberal TAs." Though not necessarily grounded in reality, the conservative students who felt they were being graded differently as a result of their political ideologies were quick to engage in white agility, reframing themselves as victims and offering support to other students who felt victimized by the liberal student body and liberal professoriate. Student groups at all three sites derided the pitiful treatment of Milo Yiannopoulos at Berkeley and conservative commentators Dinesh D'Souza and Ann Coulter on their own campuses (Public Selective, Private Selective), claiming that a university's failure to pay security costs for controversial speakers was a violation of their First Amendment rights. Similarly, conservative students like Sophie and Mark (Public Selective, 2020) noted that student government organizations – particularly ones disbursing money to clubs – were "wildly partisan" and "historically liberal," criticizing them as partisan and dismissive of conservative student group needs. Engaging in both frame amplification (you might be a victim of professorial misconduct) and frame extension (inviting speakers to campus), conservative student groups at all three sites were quick to tell liberal students and their institutions to "fuck safe spaces" but eagerly requested funding for theirs.

During both the 2016 and 2020 presidential election cycles, conservative student groups appropriated narratives of marginalization and oppression originated by queer of color groups to recruit and advocate for themselves. Some framing, such as conversations around having to limit class participation or obscure one's political identity to do well academically and socially,

implicitly leveraged the rhetorical devices of whiteness to position conservative students as victims of an oppressive liberal regime. For politically ambivalent students, these framing processes target personally driven, self-worth focused emotions and become quick and easy mechanisms to convert someone who maybe is not very politically active but feels aggrieved by multiculturalism and diversity efforts on their campus. This positioning places the blame on liberals and is amplified by faculty sponsors and external conservative groups, who are doing their part to indoctrinate (not educate, as they might argue) a generation of conservative students into distrust and opposition of societal institutions and a belief system that places sole blame on people of color and the "Diversity Industrial Complex."

Other framing, such as flyers that recruited "Americans for," actively invited students with an interest in guns to a shooting range, or more explicitly leveraged the rhetorical devices of whiteness to recruit and advocate for conservative student groups. Similarly, fear has been leveraged as a mobilization tactic to recruit for conservative student groups and mobilize them for action. At Public Selective, the Public Selective Republicans took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to call for an immigration ban on occupied land, actively denigrating and calling for the suspension of the rights of others, reflecting a coalition of students agile enough to prioritize their own well-being over the physical, mental, emotional, and legal rights of others by virtue of nationality, ethnicity, and race. The increasing radicalization of conservative student groups and the consolidation of confrontational and violent conservatism – what Mark (Public Selective, 2020) described to me as Turning Point USA's "priority" – is a cause for immediate concern both at public selective and campuses nationwide.

Discussion

My findings align well with the prior literature and theory, indicating that whiteness is readily evident and has escalated in intensity in conservative student group recruitment strategies from 2016 to 2020. Conservative student groups on all three site campuses were quick to articulate negative experiences with diversity and multiculturalism (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000), seemed to target students with similar feelings, and leveraged the experiences into active anti-liberal action. In framing their experiences with diversity as negative, conservative students rely upon the "rhetorical devices of whiteness" I have previously described to position themselves as the victims of a liberal, multicultural, and politically-correct front on their campuses. My analysis indicates that conservative students and the student groups that they represent are eager to identify themselves as victims while loudly deriding victimization culture, paint campuses as an unsafe space for conservative students, and leverage this perceived marginalization for social movement mobilization and group recruitment.

My findings contribute to the existing literature on conservative students, their groups, and the presence of white supremacy on college campuses. As conservatism becomes increasingly and inextricably linked with white supremacy, it is crucial to identify and name the tactics of mobilization of white supremacy on campus to prevent the harm that its presence wreaks on students, staff, and faculty of color. Understanding both who is conservative and is becoming conservative, and how student political groups are recruiting and targeting students for nonadherent conversion, is key to stemming white supremacist incursions on campus. Similarly, understanding more about students' communicative styles, feelings, and positions with relation to their political peers might offer insight necessary to open conversations for growth, acknowledging that students that are labeled as racists may inevitably become more engrained in

racist behavior and ideologies. My findings suggest that there is a marked lack of racial literacy on college campuses, particularly within conservative spheres, and that efforts to debunk criticisms of what many perceive to be overly liberal campuses (partisan grading, conservative marginalization) should be paired with educational and programming efforts that discourage indoctrination into dangerous sincere fictions, encourage growth conversations, and shake students from states of "racial arrested development" (Cabrera et al., 2016). Finally, conservative faculty and staff need to step up to advise, mentor, and guide conservative students away from xenophobic, racist, and ultimately problematic radicalization, and towards what Shields and Dunn (2016) argue is a decreasingly conservative conservative movement.

Conclusion, Future Research, and Implications

As conservatism is increasingly harmful to people of color in the United States and abroad, identifying ways to mitigate student radicalization is one step to deterring potentially harmful student behavior towards peers, staff, and faculty, as well as potential harmful behavior once students leave campus. Colleges and universities could consider the ramifications of this study and future research on the administration of student clubs and organizations, the distribution of student fees to student organizations, and the ways of which certain student organizations are tacitly allowed to harm other students in the name of free speech. Although this should not result in active and illegal discrimination (e.g., restricting funds to clubs, prohibiting clubs on the basis of political ideology, etc.), student affairs professionals overseeing student organizations should consider changes to faculty sponsorship that encourage more active sponsor involvement and oversight. Further, conservative faculty and staff should find it incumbent to take on greater service roles in advising these students and groups. Similarly, these findings should inform ongoing intergroup dialogue programming, bipartisan political cross-club interaction (campus debates), and efforts to promote racial literacy and encourage racial development on college campuses. At a practice level, this may even look like adding a syllabus item that discusses political ideology and open discourse in relevant classes, or including programming at campus orientations that promotes racial literacy in an attempt to mitigate the creation of "sincere fictions" and the construction of white racial imaginaries that allow white students to perceive themselves as victims of systemic racial violence they are simply immune to.

Future research should consider incorporating quantitative analyses of student political ideology and shifts in that ideology, particularly across election years, to identify the key predictors in becoming conservative over the course of a student's college career. Similarly, future research should qualitatively investigate why certain students (white, male, religious) gravitate towards conservative student groups. It is possible that students are being identified and targeted for recruitment to radical conservative student groups, or just that some student experiences will inherently predict participation in these radical conservative student groups or adherence to their political ideologies. Finally, future research should consider focusing on specific subsections of conservative students, including conservatives of color and queer conservatives.

Author Note

Nicholas Havey is a doctoral student at the University of California, Los Angeles. His work focuses on the impact of politics on campus and political fragmentation and discourse.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this study. I also extend my gratitude to the JCTP editorial team members and copyeditor who provided constant support throughout the publication process. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nicholas Havey.

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