



## The New Right: Conservative Student Political Repertoires and Intragroup Conflict

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**Abstract:** This qualitative single-site case study explores how students identifying as conservative position themselves within the discursive field of their campus, how they understand their rhetorical and discursive development in relation to their more liberal peers, and what increasing political polarization means for college campuses. I find that the differences within the conservative student group studied are stronger and more concerning than how they describe differing from their liberal peers, particularly as the conservative student group I analyzed radicalized and became overtly racist and nationalistic. This is worrisome, as my participants noted this was not “a local problem” and mentioned that this was happening at a state and national level. This reality was evidenced by the recent insurrection at the Capitol.

**Keywords:** student politics; conservative students; political repertoires; student groups

### La Nueva Derecha: Repertorios políticos estudiantiles conservadores y conflicto intragrupal

**Resumen:** Este estudio de caso cualitativo de un solo sitio explora cómo los estudiantes que se identifican como conservadores se posicionan dentro del campo discursivo de su

campus, cómo entienden su desarrollo retórico y discursivo en relación con sus pares más liberales, y qué significa la creciente polarización política para los campus universitarios. . Encuentro que las diferencias dentro del grupo estudiantil conservador estudiado son más fuertes y más preocupantes que la forma en que describen que difieren de sus pares liberales, particularmente cuando el grupo estudiantil conservador que analicé se radicalizó y se volvió abiertamente racista y nacionalista. Esto es preocupante, ya que mis participantes señalaron que esto no era “un problema local” y mencionaron que esto estaba sucediendo a nivel estatal y nacional. Esta realidad fue evidenciada por la reciente insurrección en el Capitol.

**Palabras-chave:** política estudiantil; estudiantes conservadores; repertorios políticos; grupos de estudiantes

### **A Nova Direita: Repertórios políticos estudantis conservadores e conflito intragrupal**

**Resumo:** Este estudo de caso qualitativo em um único local explora como os alunos se identificam como posições conservadoras dentro do campo discursivo de seu campus, como eles entendem seu desenvolvimento retórico e discursivo em relação a seus colegas mais liberais e o que o aumento da polarização política significa para os campi universitários. Acho que as diferenças dentro do grupo estudiantil conservador estudado são mais fortes e preocupantes do que como eles descrevem a diferença de seus colegas liberais, particularmente porque o grupo estudiantil conservador que analisei se radicalizou e se tornou abertamente racista e nacionalista. Isso é preocupante, pois meus participantes observaram que não era “um problema local” e mencionaram que isso estava acontecendo em nível estadual e nacional. Esta realidade foi evidenciada pela recente insurreição na Capitol.

**Palavras-chave:** política estudiantil; alunos conservadores; repertórios políticos; grupos de estudantes

## **The New Right: Conservative Student Political Repertoires and Intragroup Conflict**

Colleges and universities are often conceptualized as “marketplaces of ideas” where ideological diversity is encouraged and developed (Birnbaum, 1987; Thelin, 2011). U.S. campuses are also consistently framed as overtly liberal, liberalizing, dangerous, and marginalizing for students, staff, and faculty who do not fall on the “right”—well, left—side of the political spectrum (Black, 2012; Binder & Wood, 2014; Goldberg, 2009; Gross, 2013). For many college students, political orientation may be a reflexive result of parental and familial influence, partisan media consumption, and homogenous pre-college environments (Binder & Wood, 2014). Students’ time on campus may offer early encounters with ideological difference, particularly if they identify as right of center, and an opportunity to engage, interact, and develop their political ideologies, as well as the discursive and rhetorical styles they utilize to engage with political issues on their campuses (Astin & Antonio, 2011; Binder & Wood, 2014).

Though most college students enter college self-identifying as middle-of-the-road (this is the operationalization of centrist political ideology per the Higher Education Research Institute; Eagan, et al. 2017; Eagan et al., 2014), college student populations are becoming increasingly polarized along partisan lines (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Eagan et al., 2017; Evans, 2003; Pryor et al., 2007). This polarization has been well-documented in research and the press, with conservative talking-heads

and conservative faculty members making careers out of criticizing the liberal academy and external organizations cropping up to ensure the continued development and active political engagement of conservative students through active support and an abundance of funding (Black, 2012; Binder & Wood, 2014; Coyle & Robinson, 2005; d'Souza, 1991; Goldberg, 2009, 2010, 2013; Horowitz, 2009). Further, this polarization has resulted in a conservative appropriation of liberal talking points around marginalization and a subsequent framing of campus political discourse as between academically and intellectually rigorous conservative students and a liberal majority that leverages its numerical advantage to suppress oppositional discourse and resist intellectual and rhetorical development (Binder & Wood, 2014; Havey, 2020a). As the opposition within a liberal “echo chamber” (Havey, 2020a, p. 19), conservatives argue that the constant and often combative political engagement required of them by the liberal majority on their campuses facilitates intellectual development, argument refinement, and a pursuit of discursive and rhetorical skill not required of liberal students (Black, 2012; Binder & Wood, 2014; Goldberg, 2009; Havey, 2020a; Horowitz, 2009). Further, Binder and Wood (2014) have identified that institutional characteristics and students’ understanding of the institution as a target for political mobilization (Walker et al., 2008) have produced varied political repertoires from provocation to highbrow commentary across campus types. These repertoires, which function as toolkits packed with individual actions such as fact-finding, attention-getting events, legislative activism, and on-the-ground organizing, offer groups the ability to make their issues and demands known to broader audiences. Understanding political repertoires is thus crucial to differentiating groups and ascertaining their goals and motivation.

From highbrow commentary—like penning a satirical editorial in the campus newspaper of record or an alternative magazine—or more blatant provocation like an affirmative action bake sale (Binder & Wood, 2014), speakers series involving nationally inflammatory personalities, or individual-level heckling, understanding and interrogating the political repertoires students employ is crucial to identifying and problematizing the contours of campus political discourse. This is specifically relevant given the polarized and dichotomous taxonomy of rhetorical engagement presented by both ends of the political spectrum but emphatically pushed by campus conservatives and their supporters off campus, like Tomi Lahren and Ben Shapiro, who label liberal students “snowflakes” and push the idea that “facts don’t care about your feelings” (Black, 2012; Binder & Wood, 2014; Coyle & Robinson, 2005; d'Souza, 1991; Goldberg, 2009, 2010, 2013; Havey, 2020a; Horowitz, 2009). Further, this is particularly important as campus political polarization persists and becomes increasingly tied to divisive, and at times hateful, national contentious political discourse and identification with the conservative movement becomes more defined by contrast, disgust, and disidentification with liberalism than by clear commitment and investment in a coherent conservative ideology (Havey, 2020a).

### **Problem Statement**

While these repertoires vary, conservatives both on and off campus almost unilaterally frame their discursive engagement with political issues on campus as far more academically rigorous and rhetorically developed than their liberal peers’ repertoires (Binder & Wood, 2014), noting that their engagement with policy information and learning “the facts” of a political issue “frankly make them better than the liberals” (Havey, 2020a, p. 23). This positioning of conservatives as the intellectually driven political pole is simultaneously paired with the positioning of conservatives as numerically, socially, academically, and rhetorically marginalized on campus (Binder & Wood, 2014). Though this perceived marginalization has been well-documented, attention to student political and social mobilization, as well as communication styles, has been less documented (Bennett, 2012; Binder & Wood, 2014). As I will show, paying attention to these styles is crucial as stylistic and argumentative differences drove a wedge into the conservative student group I studied, resulting in radicalization,

defection, and an increase in the aggressiveness of the group's messaging and style. This radicalization also comes at a time where truth seems to matter less and less and is more subject to populist consensus than empirical reality (Havey, 2020b). Understanding the repertoires that students engage in to socially and politically mobilize on their campuses is crucial for developing a clearer picture of the political fields present in American higher education. As these fields have become exceedingly polarized, the potential for partisan social and political harm is exacerbated and the ideological rift between political poles widens. Without a clear and student-driven understanding of how students engage in contentious politics on their campuses and understand themselves as both political and discursive participants, remedying potential organizational, representational, and social disparities—like those perceived and criticized by conservative students, student groups, and external organizations—and mitigating the social and political harm that can result, becomes exceedingly difficult.

This qualitative single-site case study 1) seeks to understand how students who identify as politically conservative specifically understand themselves as participants in campus political discourse; 2) explore how they engage with campus politics and develop and employ political and stylistic repertoires; and 3) investigate how they understand their position and development as rhetorical and discursive actors in their campus political environment. I also hope to illustrate the importance of understanding differences in student political engagement and the consequences these differences can have for individual students, student groups, and campuses. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do students who self-identify as conservative view campus and national political discourse?
- 2) How do students who self-identify as conservative participate in campus and national political discourse?
- 3) How do differences in political styles impact individual students and the groups they participate in?

What follows is a review of the relevant literature on conservative students and conservative student groups, a discussion of the conceptual foundation of this paper, contentious social movements and political repertoires, presentation of the case (the Western Republicans conservative student group), findings which resulted from weeks of observation and interviews, and a discussion of these findings.

## **Literature Review**

Conservative students are in the numerical minority on most college campuses nationwide, but any marginalization, specifically comparisons to having to hide political orientation out of fear and experiencing potential academic and social repercussions based on political orientation, is largely perceived or imagined rather than empirically identified and validated (Binder & Wood, 2014; Eagan et al., 2014; Eagan et al., 2017; Pryor et al., 2007). Though lacking evidence of social, academic, or economic marginalization—Musgrave and Rom (2015) found that, though conservative students felt academically punished for their political beliefs (Binder & Wood, 2014; Havey, 2020a; Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006), there was minimal partisan bias in grading at the undergraduate level—conservatives have had no trouble framing themselves as victims of “reverse racism” and calling out the “fascist” politics of the left (Binder & Wood, 2014; Coyle & Robinson, 2005; Cabrera, 2018; Goldberg, 2009; Havey, 2020a) while identifying their own methods of political engagement as objective, appropriate, thoughtful, and informed (Binder & Wood, 2014; Havey, 2020a).

## **Conservative Student Political Repertoires**

In their 2014 study of conservative students across two campuses (one public selective, one private elite), Binder and Wood identified a variety of moves that comprised conservative students' political repertoires ranging from blatant provocation (individual heckling, intentionally and explicitly inflammatory events) to highbrow commentary and satire (political opining in the student newspaper or adjacent publications). The key theme across conservative student political repertoires was that, regardless of the level of confrontation associated, conservative students framed their methods of political engagement as appropriate and respectful when they did it (Binder & Wood, 2014) and "childish," "immature," "whiny," rude, and unproductive when liberal students engaged in the same practices (Havey, 2020a, p. 20). These students also often conflated these practices as stifling academic and political discourse and, at times, suppressing free speech (Binder & Wood, 2014; Havey, 2020a). They found support for these troubled interactions in conservative student groups.

## **Conservative Student Groups as Safe Spaces**

Many conservative students express fear of ridicule when sharing their political beliefs and locate conservative student groups as space safes from liberal persecution (Binder & Wood, 2014; Havey, 2020a). Binder and Wood's (2014) study of conservative students on two campuses (one public in the West and one elite in the East) found that students tended to befriend liberal students but limit their political discussions for fear of backlash. These students indicated that having liberal friends was inescapable on their campuses, and often stressed that conservative student groups were the only spaces safe on their overly liberal campuses. Havey (2020a) found that conservative student groups were framed similarly in his case study analysis of one site (public selective) and review of conservative student group documents across three campuses (one private selective, one public selective, and one public nonselective). Consistent with prior research (Binder & Wood, 2014; Black, 2012; Goldberg, 2009), Havey (2020a) found that conservative students often identified as marginalized and attacked on campus, but not as victims like their liberal counterparts. The students' voices captured in interviews, organization meetings, and the documents reviewed described their campuses as having a presumption of liberalness and identified conservative student groups as the only spaces left for respectful, engaged, intellectual, and informed social and political discourse where conservative students did not have to fear those who would "hate you just for your views" (Havey, 2020a, p. 18). This fear has resulted in conservative students self-censoring, or more accurately, self-editing, their political beliefs in social and academic settings and even "coming out" as conservative, appropriating the language of marginalized groups to describe imagined marginalization (Havey, 2020a).

## **Coming Out as Conservative**

Across opinion pieces in student newspapers, dozens of tweets, and several quotes in student newspaper articles, conservative students discussed the difficult process of "coming out as conservative" on their campuses (Havey, 2020a). In leveraging the language of actually-marginalized populations, conservative students positioned themselves as the real victims of campus oppression and reinforced the importance of conservative student groups as safe spaces for open, inclusive, and rigorous academic discussion.

## **The Intellectually Rigorous Political Pole**

In constructing themselves as oppressed and marginalized, conservative students have also positioned themselves in a place of rhetorical and intellectual superiority (Binder & Wood, 2014; Havey, 2020a). By repeatedly indicating that having their viewpoints challenged sharpened their arguments and made them better and more prepared debaters, particularly in contrast to their liberal peers who exist within “echo chambers” and with “constant praise” (Havey, 2020a, p. 19) and who conservative faculty members consider indoctrinated, conservative students continue to promote a narrative that conservatism is the academically and intellectually rigorous pole of the partisan political spectrum. Additionally, these students argued that they were both arbiters of informed, intellectual truths and simply engaging in “good faith” (Havey, 2020a, p. 19) discourse that was not designed to harm anyone.

### **Summary**

The conservative movement argues that the consistent contestation of their ideas and beliefs encourages argumentative refinement and the development of rhetorical skills that liberal students, enabled by pursuing ideological homophily, do not engage in (Black, 2012; Binder & Wood, 2014; Goldberg, 2009; Havey, 2020a; Horowitz, 2009). These students and their supporters off campus note that conservatives often shout into an echo chamber that fails to reverberate with support for their beliefs in the way it does for liberals and conservative students across geographic regions and institutional types nearly unilaterally subscribe to this perception of marginalization (Binder & Wood, 2014; Havey, 2020a). Interrogating the veracity of this framing and understanding the ways that conservative students engage in political discourse is thus crucial, as their rigor, objectivity, and distance from bias are often offered as fact. In a national political climate that affords tremendous power to fact, truth, and the narratives of conservative, particularly white, people who feel victimized by a multicultural, liberal environment, we cannot simply take claims of objectivity at face value.

### **Conceptual Approach**

I approach this study by understanding conservative students, and students more generally, as individual actors participating in personalized politics on campuses that directly influence and facilitate the development of their social movement and political repertoires centered around a particular collective interest or common purpose (Binder & Wood, 2014; Tarrow, 2011). While students start with their own localized repertoires (a daily news practice, writing a column in the student newspaper, an active social media presence, etc.), their exposure to others who share their interests can expand these repertoires. I contextualize this influence on individual repertoires by locating institutions of higher education as specific targets of social movement action that have different strengths or vulnerabilities based on their relationships to local actors (Walker et al., 2008). Specifically, I view universities as particularly vulnerable targets to confrontational or protest tactics, as they are more susceptible to delegitimation—or responsive to political demands that may impact their reputation—than the state, which may respond by repressing political protest and mobilization (Walker et al., 2008). This is evident in Binder and Wood’s (2014) existing conceptualization of student group discursive styles as diffuse but occupying a spectrum with civilized discourse and provocative confrontation at either end, depending on the characteristics of the institution. This adaptability is an example of organizations engaging in strategic capacity and leveraging unique discursive and confrontational styles to compensate for a lack of access or resources (Ganz, 2000), particularly when these organizations feel they “have to make a scene.”

As localized actors within larger political fields (institutions of higher education), I understand students' repertoires are informed by, but not explicitly dependent on, decentralized social movement organizations that reflect their ideological positions (Bennett, 2012) and the associated organizational scripts and histories embedded within the institutions and organizations these students occupy. Specifically, I understand conservative students as part of the larger social movement organizations present on their campuses and within the larger higher education landscape. Similarly, I view students as engaging with the micro, meso, and macro level political fields on their college campuses, with the macro encompassing the greater national sociopolitical landscape, the meso comprising local and campus political conversations, and the micro describing their small group and individual level political interactions (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Within this larger social landscape, individual student repertoires comprise a tactically diffuse collection of social repertoires available to the movements they identify with (conservative student groups; Wang & Soule, 2012) and represent organizational adaptability to varying institutional types (Clemens, 1993). As Binder and Wood (2014) have shown, students engage in different political styles across campus and institutional types, with students at more elite colleges preferring civilized discourse to their public counterparts' provocative confrontational style. This is consistent with the observation that conservative student groups across geographic regions, varying racial, gender, and socioeconomic compositions, and institutional types largely subscribed to the same framing processes as their peers on other like campuses (Havey, 2020a).

I draw upon the social movements and contentious politics literature to understand how contemporary student participation in campus political discourse has become dispersed, decentralized, loosely coordinated, and often individually framed but simultaneously dependent on institutional context. What follows is a response to Binder and Wood's (2014) and Bennett's (2012) imperative to analyze the communication styles of personal politics.

## Methods

### Overview

This qualitative single-site case study of conservative student political engagement and rhetorical styles incorporates observations of conservative student group meetings and events (over 15 weeks), informal conversations with participants before, during, and after meetings, a brief questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews (5 total participants with follow-up debriefing and member-checking) to understand and interrogate how conservative students are engaging with campus political discourse and how they understand themselves as political and rhetorical actors both separate from, and in comparison to, their more liberal peers. Additionally, personal communication with select participants (emails, Twitter messages) are considered when relevant (providing context for an event, explaining a position, etc.). As I engaged with participants in a variety of environments, I have marked the data that follows when it was relayed via personal communication.

### Site Description and Case Identification

The case at the heart of this study is the Western Republicans conservative student group located at Western University. Participants were recruited from a large, public university on the west coast (all names are pseudonyms). This site was chosen due to its comparably high diversity of political ideology, location in a racially and ethnically diverse state and city, and history and persistent evidence of lively campus political discourse, student engagement in politics, and protest. The case was chosen as it was the only active conservative student group at the site. The Western Republicans had good attendance (around 40 when I started attending, which dropped to between 10-15

following events described in the findings). This case was also specifically relevant due to the high degree of Western Republican participation in local and national conservative organizations, such as CPAC and Turning Point USA.

### **Participant Recruitment**

I recruited participants through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2015). I targeted students specifically identifying as conservative using posted flyers that I distributed through relevant student and student organization listservs and through direct contact at Western Republicans meetings, where I conducted weekly initial observations. Snowball sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2015) was employed, and several of my participants referred me to other potential student participants who I would not have met otherwise, mostly because they did not attend every meeting. The data that follows comes exclusively from participants who were explicitly informed of the study and consented to participation (all students were informed of my observations).

### **Initial Student Group Observations**

As part of my participant recruitment, I attended conservative student group meetings for one group: Western Campus Republicans. I initially planned to attend the meetings of other groups, but this was the sole operating conservative group on the campus at the time of data collection (which I will explain later). These observations served two purposes: 1) to provide initial descriptive understanding of the activities of conservative student groups and who comprises these groups and 2) to bolster recruitment strategies through direct contact with students identifying as conservative. Each meeting lasted one hour, and I consistently arrived fifteen minutes prior and stayed fifteen minutes after the close of the meeting to talk to students (informal interviews, recorded via notes). Participant observation allowed me to build rapport with students, many of whom were closed off and wary of a researcher, which was explained as I continued to attend meetings—Western Republicans were inherently distrustful of researchers and scholars, who they considered to be almost unilaterally liberal. My 15 weeks of active engagement with the group led to several collegial relationships and a degree of trust that facilitated productive and fruitful snowball sampling. After recruitment, interview participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire.

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

The brief questionnaire covered demographic information and included questions about political ideology and frequency of cross-ideology interactions. The questionnaire was predominantly used for interview protocol adaptation. Upon completing the questionnaire, participants were contacted for participation in a 90-minute, semi-structured interview.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Participants were asked to participate in a 90-minute semi-structured interview exploring their campus political engagement, how they structure and inform their arguments, and how they understand themselves as campus political actors. Questions asked fell under subheadings Campus Political Engagement, Rhetorical and Discursive Practices, and Individual Political Actor Identity and were informed by extant research on conservative student political engagement (Haveyr, 2020a; Binder & Wood, 2014) and the demographic questionnaires. Following the provision of informed consent, I clearly identified as white at the start of each interview and asked participants to racially self-identify as well; I did not inform participants of my political ideology (some of them asked and my reply was consistently “left of center.”)



Interview participants were asked for their preference of interview location and all interviews were conducted in private spaces on the site campus. Interviews were recorded via the researcher's personal smartphone and the application Otter, which records audio and transcribes it to text in real time. Due to the imperfect nature of the transcripts, I reviewed and revised transcripts while listening to original audio. These transcripts were transcribed verbatim, reviewed, and assigned pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality.

### **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 and my family is still staunchly conservative), I carefully considered my own positionality and political identification in contrast to conservative students. As a white cisgender man, my body and the ways I inhabit space are inherently political (though markedly less political than bodies of color or trans bodies). In approaching both the framing of the study and the execution of data creation and analysis, I carefully considered how my position as a white man can facilitate access to and rapport with conservative students, who may be less willing to speak to someone who appears more visually queer or liberal. This consistently proved itself to be true as, when I pushed on certain topics in meetings with which I was intimately familiar as a result of my own work (tenure, data on student political orientation), I was always assumed to be conservative. One guest speaker, a nontenured faculty member at another institution, condemning the institution of tenure as an academic mechanism that exclusively privileges liberals, said that I “deserve tenure so you can talk about conservative issues!”

### **Analysis Plan**

Analysis of data produced over 15 weeks (~30 hours), dozens of informal interviews, and 5 formal, semi-structured interviews informed my findings. Following 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 from the interview, questionnaire, and notes from the interview (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Transcripts were reviewed initially for preliminary codes (interesting *in vivo* codes or particularly colorful quotes were recorded) and subsequently distilled down into larger and more thematic codes (Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Saldaña, 2015). I specifically selected codes that explicitly answered my research questions and reread transcripts with a keen eye for comments on intragroup divisions, comparisons to liberal peers, and overall political engagement. Because some of the participants' responses directly contradicted each other, I also employed versus coding (Saldaña, 2015). These codes were compared to my participant observation notes, informal interview notes, and personal communication with participants (emails, Twitter direct messages) and any direct observation of an interview participant was linked to their summary sheet.

I also employed a constant comparative technique (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. While this research was only conducted at one site (and there was thus only one case), constant comparative analysis was helpful in identifying consistencies, discrepancies, and departures among participants within Western Republicans. This analysis was conducted until transcripts had been adequately reviewed, compared, and data saturation had been reached—the participants were remarkably consistent with respect to each other and fell into two distinct rhetorical camps, which I will describe in detail in the findings section (Jones et al., 2006, Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Seidman, 2019).

## **Validity**

Throughout data collection and analysis, I engaged in reflexive researcher memoing, writing about my personal experiences conducting the interviews, interpreting participant responses, and identifying similarities between participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). In addition to memoing, I engaged participants in member-checking, offering them access to their transcripts and the opportunity to clarify, contest, or question their responses, my interpretations, and my final analyses of the data we co-constructed in the interviews (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Seidman, 2019).

## **Limitations**

This study is limited by participant recruitment from a single site, specifically as Binder and Wood (2014) have identified that conservative student political repertoires vary across campus and institutional types. While this is a clear limitation, it does open the possibility of future multisite studies evaluating similar phenomena. Similarly, this study was conducted during an election year, which may have made the social and political interactions I observed particularly contentious. Future research should consider reproducing this analysis at another institution or across several institutions and outside of the presidential election cycle. This study is also limited in that the population I am considering, conservative students, can occupy an imaginary in which they are marginalized and oppressed by liberal ideology without any evidence of that marginalization or oppression (Havey, 2020a; Binder & Wood, 2014). For instance, and consistent with Havey (2020a), participants described being graded worse as a result of their political ideology, though they simultaneously described their success in the courses this was allegedly happening in and their academic superiority over peers. As a result of occupying this imaginary, participants may have been unreliable narrators of their own experience, emphasizing experiences, as well rhetorical or discursive moves, that may be, in practice, less than real. For some of the participants, there was also a marked concern about being heard discussing their opinions and beliefs; one even ended an interview early because people she found “suspicious” sat down near us at an adjacent table (they were racial minorities). Interrogating the unreliability of student narratives, however, can also be a contribution of this research, as it may serve to indicate that conservative students engaging in political discourse on their college campuses are not engaging in the ways that they are framed. Similarly, the acknowledgement that some of the participants’ responses were contentious enough for them to self-censor or self-edit highlights the nature of their political engagement. Future research should consider ways to incorporate in situ and unprompted data (social media feeds, etc.) to mitigate participants’ conscious and unconscious management of what they share.

## **Findings**

### **Overview**

At Western University, conservative students feel particularly embattled. Locating themselves as a numerical and “oppressed” minority, the conservative students I spent 15 weeks with were quick to frame their liberal campus counterparts as confrontational and “looking for a fight.” Within Western Republicans, students were clearly divided into two camps: more moderate (to be clear, still very far to the right), discourse-preferring students and those who, like the liberals, they acknowledged, preferred confrontation and “making a scene” and were closer to alt-right or the extremist right. As I will show, the space between these two camps quickly developed into a rift and ultimately resulted in the resignations of 75% of the executive board of Western Republicans—what the students referred to as “Conservative Inc.”—and the consolidation of the club’s membership

among the confrontational and, frankly, xenophobic, jingoistic, and white supremacist “New Right.” The division and subsequent split revealed the importance of stylistic differences between members of the same group and has dangerous implications for individual students (Darius in particular), Western Republicans, and the campus. Specifically, several months after the data collection for this study ended, Darius was expelled from Western University following antisemitic threats towards other students (including one member of Conservative Inc.). According to his social media profile, he also attended the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2020. Since the acceptance of this manuscript for publication, he has been placed under arrest and is awaiting trial following his participation that event.

### **Embattled Conservatives**

All the conservative students I spoke to expressed getting into campus politics because they wanted to make a difference, ensure their voice was heard, and represent what they felt was a minority position on liberal college campuses but a majority position in the country. They also described this political engagement as particularly difficult on an overwhelmingly liberal campus that left them feeling embattled, attacked, and belittled.

Mark, cofounder of the Western Political Union (a nonpartisan debate organization), a former president of Western Republicans and, before that, Western Libertarians, described most students on campus as “fairly apathetic when it comes to politics” but noted that the “genuine minority of students who are actually engaged” are generally liberal. Recalling a speaker that Western Republicans brought to campus, he provided an example of the “even smaller minority who are vocal, aggressive, and violent.” Talking to a politically ambivalent student outside the event, Mark described how a member of the Revolutionary Communist Club (mentioned by all of the participants but simultaneously characterized as not a student club and comprised of random 30-somethings from the surrounding area) shouted that he was a “white supremacist” and that the other student should stop talking to such “scum.” Thaddeus and Omar both told me about similar run-ins with “RevCom,” describing situations in which they tried to stop them from burning an American flag (Omar) and getting called a racist over a megaphone (Thaddeus).

Later in our conversation, Mark told me more about the Western Political Union (WPU), a nonpartisan debate organization that he feels has gotten “definitely more liberal in terms of what they’re putting out there” since he was involved. Acquiescing that the more liberal tone might be a result of the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, Mark pushed that he still did not feel that the “conservative voice is represented” and characterized the Western Student Government as even worse. Western Student Government’s voter turnout hovers around 13% and, according to Mark, the majority of the electorate is “brainwashed.” “It’s almost impossible to get any of our club funding approved,” Mark said, a sentiment that Sophie, a Western Republicans officer, echoed. Since data collection ended, Western Republicans have completely severed ties from Western Political Union, slamming them as partisan and “ridiculous.”

While Mark and Sophie simply characterized the climate at Western University as stacked against conservatives, other participants, including visiting faculty members and speakers, described the climate at Western as overtly hostile. At the first meeting I attended, the Dean of Public Policy at a neighboring school pontificated to the group: “why are liberals so eager to get violent and shout people down?” The faculty sponsor for Western Republicans praised the visiting speaker, explaining that liberals “regularly try to block free speech on public campuses.” Omar, present at the first meeting, similarly told me that he has constantly heard conservatives described as “not the party of science” and as people who “don’t care about facts and data.” “It’s a really cheap way, a personal attack, you know, no one saying this at the WPU debate was supporting this, they’re just shouting at us,” Omar said. Ann, another Western Republicans officer, echoed this, describing liberals as willing

to “socially punish people that do not fall in line with their views.” While the Western Republicans unanimously described their campus as difficult for conservatives, the way that these students engaged with campus politics drastically differed.

### **Conservative Inc. (CI) versus The New Right (TNR)**

Before the Break: “The worst fighting is infighting”—Sophie (personal communication)

In one of my earliest interactions with Sophie (a casual chat prior to the meeting), she sighed deeply, looked me straight in the eyes, and said “Ugh, this fucking club,” before walking into the meeting room and setting up a PowerPoint. It was clear to me after an hour with the Western Republicans that there was a clear rift within the club. Between backhanded compliments, outright insults, and half the group (Conservative Inc.) clearly being on a group-text and actively ignoring a presentation by one of the officers, Ann (The New Right), I knew there was cause for tension. In some of my earliest encounters with Western Republicans members, I asked about friendships and quickly learned that the majority of the officers—Conservative Inc.—were close-knit and working in almost direct opposition to one of the other officers (Ann of the New Right). Over the course of my observations, interviews, and conversations with Western Republicans, I learned that, in the term prior to my involvement with the group, a bipartisan debate hosted by the Western Political Union had erupted in drama with an officer and debate participant making a series of transphobic comments. According to both Ann (TNR) and Sophie (CI), this was followed by Conservative Inc. calling for the resignation of the offending officer and The New Right defending his right to free speech. What followed quickly splintered the group.

According to multiple participants, including Ann, Ann quickly acted to consolidate power with the New Right. She called club donors, the state’s Republican Committee, and the faculty sponsor to discuss the “concerning attack on free speech” within Western Republicans. She also called for the resignations of the officers who had called for the apology and resignation of the offending member, leaving handwritten notes under their apartment doors and texting and calling them to demand that they “make themselves accountable to the group.” Sophie spent “almost an entire day” calling donors to ease external tensions and maintain good working relationships with the club’s supporters. Tensions crystallized when the Conservative Inc. coalition attempted and failed to impeach Ann at a Western Republicans meeting; this failed impeachment led Ann to return to the club with renewed vigor and a “mandate” from its members (personal communication with both Ann and Sophie). Ann would go on to try to impeach or bully the other officers out herself.

According to several members, there was both an expectation of ideological consensus and a failure to reach it within the club. “Honestly, some of the biggest arguments I’ve had have been with republicans. It’s the worst. There is so much in-fighting and it’s rarely cross-party because the democrats are more coalition based and aware of their factions whereas republicans sort of just assume consensus,” Sophie told me, describing the difficulties. Ann echoed this, but from the opposite end of the spectrum: “there’s less agreement in the last 3 years. There’s Conservative Inc. and then the New Right and the New Right is focused on changing the way the right does politics, so we exist in 40 years. There is so much infighting, it’s bad.” Thaddeus contextualized the split for me by explaining that it is not necessarily an ideological split (though when pressed, there was a very perceptible and articulated split on immigration and foreign policy with the New Right being aggressively anti-immigrant and “America First”) as much as it is a rhetorical split between confrontation and reasoned discussion. Mark crystallized this point, explaining the rift was not local to Western University:

So, there's definitely a divide in conservative spaces right now. The conservative umbrella is very broad. There are a lot of different groups within that label, and we see that divide right now in Western Republicans and College Republicans in general, especially with the president, who is not a conservative.

He's not a conservative, but a lot of people are joining the conservative movement because of President Trump. He's really engaged College Republicans, who want to fight on his behalf. People are energized, which, in a way, is good for the Republican party and the conservative movement because we have new voices coming in who are passionate, fiery, and they want to be involved in this conversation, but at the same time, some of the people that are being brought in are more in it for the fight. And if you disagree with them you are outcast, which I don't think is healthy, potentially in the long term for the party and conservatives.

For Western Republicans, this divide proved immediately harmful. After the failed impeachment and heightened tensions within the club, participation nosedived from a reported average of 70 members to around 20 (which I observed to be generous, noting the consistent membership closer to 12). While egos and personal conflict were clearly at play within Western Republicans, rhetorical styles, ideological differences, and political repertoires similarly influenced the rift.

### **Western Republican Styles: Polite Discourse**

"If you're a minority on this campus, you have to make allies," Sophie told me, criticizing some of her peers' more confrontational styles. "Republicans tend to think everyone is against them," she said, "and it's like, you really can't work with the other side if you think that. They think they're terrible people and I'm like no, they aren't. My big thing is working with the other side to create good friendships. I think bipartisanship is very important, especially on campus. Start local." Sophie, along with Mark, stood out as members of Conservative Inc. focused on ensuring that their organization had a good public image and a functional working relationship with their peers. "You don't want to be seen as the black sheep, yelling and starting fights on purpose just to like, trigger people to get a response," Sophie told me, "it's not about solidarity to the 'liberals are harassing us' cause, that's so stupid and it makes our club look super unprofessional."

Similarly, Mark told me that he "tries to stay as neutral as possible." Directly referencing the rift in Western Republicans, he told me "I don't really think that campus politics should be divisive, at the end of the day, we're all college students. Just trying to figure out what we want to do in life, let alone debate, and like trying to engage with each other and compete for these positions. I'd rather grow and learn together, not lose friendships and backstab each other." Similarly, Thaddeus told me that he just wants to "be friendly with everyone" and "treat people with kindness," particularly to avoid "being misrepresented in a bad way" by "standing on principle and not acting like a jackwagon." (Thaddeus does not curse).

Like Sophie, Mark, and Thaddeus, Omar was less interested in starting fights and more focused on getting across "the core idea you care about." He told me that the nature of debate is a kind of "intrinsic problem" and that calm and respectful discussions with friends are more productive. Though politically the members of Western Republicans aligned with Conservative Inc. were in congruence with their New Right counterparts, they were more focused on maintaining friendships and avoiding "disrespecting each other." Members of the New Right, in contrast, felt strongly that "confrontation is how we're heard" (Ann).

### **Western Political Styles: Overt Confrontation**

With the organizational fallout from the prior term, I thought that Western Republicans might be shying away from confrontation. When the president, John, noted that they should be “hush hush” about the big, invited speaker for the quarter because they were “controversial,” most of the Western Republicans seemed on board with mitigating backlash. What I found was the exact opposite: those interested in confrontation were actively attempting to overpower their more moderate peers and recruit potential defectors into the fold. They were successful.

At Western Republicans meetings, the split between polite political discourse and an overtly confrontational style was immediately apparent. Western Republican meetings are either a guided discussion on a political topic (the assassination of Soleimani, Trump’s impeachment proceedings, US-Iran relations) or a guest speaker with little variation past that (one week we did play political jeopardy). The guided discussions were led by Ann (TNR), who, though she was one of the strongest proponents of confrontation, was fairly moderated in meetings and patiently called on raised hands and praised members for insightful commentary (Sophie and the active president, John, told me that this was merely a front so that people liked her). While most discussions were fairly respectful, immigration and foreign policy were a flashpoint that rested consensus and caused Western Republican members to turn on one another. In one memorable exchange, a Western Republicans member who did not attend every week—Rachel—got into a heated debate with a prominent member of the New Right, Darius. In a back and forth about US intervention in Iran, Rachel’s tone and volume dramatically increased and, at one point, she called Darius a “fucking idiot” and spent more time “shouting him down” (Omar, describing the exchange later) than responding to his fair, albeit condescending, arguments. While Darius did not raise his voice at Rachel, his behavior at the bipartisan Western Political Union debate exemplified the confrontational and disruptive style the New Right seemingly favored.

Midway through my data collection, the Western Political Union held a “Crossfire Debate,” featuring three debaters from Western Republicans and Western Democrats. Originally, Western Republicans were slated to run Ann, Darius, and Mark, but Mark pulled out of participation (Ann had slated him against his will) due to the events of the previous term’s debate, not wanting to participate in what one attendee seated next to me referred to as an “ongoing shitshow.” Prior to the debate, Darius, who was scheduled to debate gun rights, told me about his personal position on gun rights: he owned several automatic weapons and bump stocks and gun rights for him were “personal” and tied to his desire to protect his family. He told me he would never let the government take his guns.

On stage, Darius was clearly better prepared than his Western Democrats opponent and, though he was knowledgeable about Supreme Court cases and federal gun regulations, he favored consistent interruption, arguing with the moderators, and attacks on the preparation of his opponent. Though the “logistical nightmare” (Sophie) of the previous debate was fresh in the Western Republican and Western Political Union leadership’s minds—they even held a pre-debate huddle to refresh participants on the rules and style of debate—the first debate was chaotic and disrespectful enough to warrant a change in moderators to a much more fearless duo.

Overall, the Crossfire Debate was evocative of the New Right’s confrontational spirit. Ann thinks “it’s an asset that we have an ability to get attention on campus. No one wants to speak to an empty room.” Describing Ann, Darius, and the rest of the New Right’s proclivity for disruption and provocation, Sophie criticized confrontation as unproductive: “she’s [Ann] trying to get us recorded provoking other people to get on Fox News and that’s not what we want as a group.” Mark acknowledged that the New Right, and the current Western Republicans club in general, was a “bit

more confrontational” but didn’t “necessarily see that as a bad thing, it’s just energy that needs to be channeled.” He told me that, for conservative groups, confrontation is one way to get press—“When you’re funded by national groups, the reason you get money and donations is because of publicity. Charlie Kirk and Candace Owens [Turning Point USA] want protests. That’s what they’re here for. They just want drama.” He did qualify this with some concern: “If everything’s just demonizing each other or Ted Cruz and AOC bickering, that’s just not a benefit to anybody. It doesn’t help to hear the President shout someone down for being stupid or dumb. That gets us nothing.” While Mark differed ideologically from Ann, Darius, and the rest of the New Right, he told me that “if you’re that passionate about your issue and your cause and you’re willing to get out there and fight for it and be vocal and have a voice on campus, that can be a great thing.” Unfortunately, that energy was channeled into a decidedly bad thing: xenophobic, racist, and jingoistic attacks on immigrants and people of color amidst a global pandemic. It also resulted in Sophie, Mark, and Conservative Inc. quitting the club.

## Discussion

In my last interview with Ann, just a few weeks prior to Western Republican elections and the end of the term, she told me that she was “worried about what was going to happen” because they (the New Right) were going to do something “unexpected and radical,” but she would not explain what. It was later revealed via the Western Republicans’ social media that they had voted to pivot to an “America First” agenda, contrasting the wishes of the pre-fracture club. During Western University’s finals week, the global pandemic COVID-19 caused campuses nationwide to shut down, including Western. In the ensuing weeks, elections were postponed, information sessions were held via Zoom, and a new academic term started. During Western’s spring break, a coalition of students led by Darius formed an offshoot club called “America First Western,” advocating for the overt prioritization of “real Americans” and the tacit degradation of people of color and immigrants. In combination with the general Western Republicans accounts, this club began to amplify QAnon conspiracy theories on their social media platforms—Darius himself made it clear on his social media accounts that he believed in QAnon. He would later attend the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

Alongside several other university Republican chapters, the Western Republicans and America First Western signed a statement calling for a moratorium on “all immigration” in the wake of the “Wuhan Virus.” The statement also called for an indefinite freeze on asylum applications, refugee programs, international student visas, all international work visas, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), a tax on “illegal aliens” income, and an expedited construction of Trump’s border wall. Throughout the statement, overt xenophobic, racist, white supremacist, and jingoistic verbiage prevailed: the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was referred to exclusively as “Wuhan Virus,” immigrants were called “illegal aliens,” and China was simply called “the Communist Regime.” Implicit in the statement was the coalition’s call to protect “American citizens,” but not in the event they had international or Chinese roots, or were immigrants, or were Dreamers.

This message drew swift fire from Western Democrats and resulted in the resignation of the Conservative Inc. members of Western Republicans (Sophie, John, and 6 others) who told me in personal communications that they had strongly advised against the signing of the letter and, after they were ignored, felt they needed to resign. Darius personally drew fire on Twitter with several members of the Western Democrats and just general Western University community members calling for an investigation into his actions and for his expulsion, tagging the Western University Twitter handles for a response. Though his Twitter accounts (both his personal account and the

account for America First Western) have since been locked, he has a history of antagonistic, xenophobic, anti-semitic (he regularly and publicly has threatened Sophie, who identifies as Jewish), and racist behavior, which I discuss elsewhere (Havey, 2020a). As of this writing, Darius is no longer a student at Western University.

With the resignation of the Conservative Inc. faction of Western Republicans and the defection of several members of the faction to the New Right, the New Right consolidated power and effectively took control of Western Republicans, ensuring a continued provocative and confrontational style. Was this precise event—the “coup” that Ann had referred to and later confirmed to me in personal communication, chilling considering the subsequent coup attempt at a national level—an inevitable result of the rift within the group?

While I cannot say for certain that this would have happened had the COVID-19 pandemic not cancelled the regularly scheduled Western Republican elections, personal communication with members of both factions suggest to me that Conservative Inc. was simply burned out (“Ugh, this fucking club”) and the New Right energized to take control. Both Mark and Sophie indicated that this divide and subsequent shift in rhetorical and political styles was not local to Western University (Sophie is very active at the state and national level and is a student member of the Republican National Committee), suggesting that campus conservative groups nationwide may experience a shift towards the aggressive, confrontational, and potentially violent part of the party Mark noted was activated by President Trump. Western Republicans’ shift towards the nationalistic is also consistent with increasingly populist narratives (us versus them) benefitting nationalists (Bonakowski et al., 2019; Brubaker, 2019; Wimmer, 2019). As national politics become increasingly divisive and the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to shift political leadership toward the authoritarian or reactive/revolutionary (for instance, in Hungary and more recently the capitol insurrection), mitigating the proliferation or activation of radically right conservative groups is imperative. On college campuses where conservatives already feel particularly embattled, gaining a clearer and more nuanced understanding of campus political discourse and the ways students are engaging is crucial. Within Western Republicans, extremists prevailed over their more moderated peers which led to a dissolution of bipartisan group ties and the radicalization of the group—colleges and universities should be concerned about this happening with their student groups, student populations, and potentially even alumni, particularly as national political tensions around COVID-19 polarize and spill over onto campuses.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This study has multiple potential implications for future research, practice, and policy. First, this study provides additional clarification on the discursive and rhetorical styles employed by conservative students engaged in campus politics and notes a distinct split between those who favor discourse and moderated debate (Conservative Inc.) and those who favor provocation and confrontation (The New Right). Second, this study contributes to the existing literature on conservative student mobilization and experience by 1) offering a more thorough understanding of how conservative students construct and understand themselves as campus political actors, largely in response to perceived liberal dominance and a desire to make their beliefs known and 2) interrogating the veracity of claims that conservative students are far more academically rigorous and systematic in their political engagement than their liberal peers. Though my analysis did not focus specifically on how conservative students develop their arguments, my data show that conservatives favor interruption, emotional appeals, and name-calling to the same if not a greater extent than their liberal peers at Western University, particularly those they debated. Finally, this study indicates, the



disturbing possibility of radicalization within conservative groups that can lead to threats of violence and participation in events like the Capitol insurrection. As politics become increasingly divisive, understanding intragroup rifts, particularly when they result in mass resignations and organizational radicalization as in the case at Western University, is exceedingly necessary to prevent the transformation of campus political organizations into something more sinister: white supremacist cells masquerading as clubs. Identifying these transformations is also crucial, as conservative student clubs are often backed by external conservative organizations and the tenor of their advocacy is readily reflected in local and state conservative politics. Historically, conservative politicians have viewed higher education as “illiberal” (d’Souza, 1991; Horowitz, 2009) and threatened state funding allocations for what they view as liberal endeavors. As President Trump and his political cadre made similar threats (backed by a Department of Education who actively worsened Title IX protections for marginalized groups), understanding conservative political spaces on campus may provide administrators and legislatures with evidence to proactively work against. Identifying and monitoring the tone of policies advocated for and supported by conservative student groups may help institutions react to or prevent policy moves made by likeminded conservative legislators.

Future research should consider other institutions as cases and seek to understand more about how students become politically informed and active. At both a research and practice level, more work needs to be done that situates conservative students’ feelings of marginalization within the greater sociopolitical contexts of the college campuses. Specifically, faculty and student affairs practitioners (as well as students) must engage in greater conversations about structural oppression that both hears students’ concerns while simultaneously exposing them to research and experience that can help them to understand that simply being a statistical minority does not mean you are persecuted. Existing intergroup dialogue programming and education may support this, though not if it is optional or solely considered by the students less likely to benefit from it. Student affairs practitioners and campus administrators should also strive to be more keenly aware of the campus political discourse and divisions occurring within student groups. This may mean shifting oversight of student clubs to a more centralized administrative process, as the Western Republicans were a student government recognized club that advocated against participating in student government and strongly criticized the student government that provided both their funding and club charter. Increased administrative or faculty oversight, though not active control of any club activities, in the future may mitigate a club’s rejection of peer organizations (like the student government and Western Political Union) and encourage more proactive administrative steps concerning student and group radicalization.

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