"We're not the party to bitch and whine": Exploring US democracy through the lens of a college Republican club

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Abstract

Following Donald Trump's 2016 presidential win, college Republican clubs across the United States – anecdotally reported by mainstream media outlets (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) – have increasingly supported the Trump Administration. This form of political support, however, appears to parallel elements found in the development of authoritarian governments. Contextualized by ethnographic exploration of one particular college Republican club at a mid-sized, western, public, wealthy, highly selective university which grew to become one of the largest clubs on the campus, I argue that these political expressions, similar to those found in single-party governments, could be a harbinger of broader governmental shifts within the US.

Keywords: Conservatism, college Republican clubs, fascism, Donald Trump, politics, social movements

Introduction

Across the globe, democracies appear to be entering a new era of "fragility" (Curato, Hammond, & Min, 2019, p. 21; Frazee, 2019; Traverso, 2019). For example, in Brazil, South America's largest economy, president Jair Bolsonaro has stripped land from indigenous communities (Sims, 2019); attempted to ban "Marxist Garbage" from Brazil's public schools (Bolsonaro, 2019); and supported far-right militants through such acts as calling Colonel Carlos Alberto Ustra – a former army officer who was convicted of torture and who frequently suppressed leftist political opponents – a "national hero" (Boadle, 2019). In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rule has propagated a resurgence of hate speech toward Muslims; government erasure of historical, political, and religious Muslim ties to India; and an elevation of Hindu nationalism at the expense of growing violence toward lower-caste and non-Hindu groups (Gettleman, Schultz, Raj, & Kumar, 2019). The European Union's 2019 elections demonstrated unprecedented representation among nationalist and populist groups as well as increasing political instability in the region (Erlanger, 2019). In the United States (US), President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" rhetoric, suggestive of a mythically racially pure past, and frequent slurs toward underrepresented groups have been used to widen divisions within the country and destabilize the country's democratic structures (Giroux, 2018; Stanley, 2018).

Analyzing these global shifts away from democracy, scholarly discourse appears

to focus primarily on macro-level repercussions, particularly a potential resurgence in authoritarian governments (Giroux, 2018; Harris, Davidson, Fletcher, & Harris, 2017; Robin, 2017; Snyder, 2017; Stanley, 2018). One micro-level aspect that has been overlooked, however, is contemporary conservative college student mobilization (Munson, 2010). With the exception of Binder & Wood (2012) and Kidder (2016, 2018), contemporary conservative college clubs have been understudied. This oversight by activists and academics must be addressed given that conservative college students have historically been important players in Republican elections and administrations[1]. Conservative college students – both historic (Andrew, 1997) and current (Binder & Wood, 2012) – have also become conservative leaders and voters; therefore, their practices, value systems, and experiences must be better understood in order to predict and engage with future tensions, machinations, leadership, and policies of the conservative movement, as well as US democracy more broadly.

I addressed this oversight through a six-month ethnography of a college Republican club at a mid-sized, public, wealthy, highly selective, western, Predominantly White Institution (PWI), referred to in this paper as WestU. WestU students have a median household income significantly above $100,000, highly disproportionate to the national median household income, which was $61,937 in 2018 (Guzman, 2019). Socially, WestU students are involved in a plethora of on-campus clubs, organizations, and activist groups. Politically, WestU is predominantly liberal, though it has a student population slightly more conservative than the national average which, at the time of this ethnography, sat at approximately 21% (Jacobo & Lopez, 2019). Similar to this national study, I also characterize conservatives and liberals as those who self-identify as such. During my research, while there appeared to be hostile relationships between liberal/underrepresented student groups and the college Republican club, common ground was found in their mutual frustration with the WestU administration for their involvement in campus life.

Using an exploratory method common in qualitative research (Hochschild, 2016; Kidder, 2016), I began this project curious to understand how conservative students navigated a college campus, particularly those associated with the WestU college Republican club, which, following Trump's presidential victory, grew to become one of the largest clubs on campus. Students from this club typically identified themselves as "CRs" (College Republicans), therefore I use this term throughout the paper. I also use the term "under-level" to describe students in their first or second years at WestU, and "upper-level" to describe students in their third, fourth, or fifth years. While I openly identified as a gay, liberal, Jewish researcher, I believe being white and male – two identities highly representative of the club – helped me feel welcomed with open arms by CRs, and made it challenging to reconcile the increasing and lasting fondness I felt for many members, and discomfort with the club's rigid gender roles and

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[1] See Andrew (1997) for his analysis on the impact of conservative college students involved with Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) in the 1960's on both the Nixon and Regan administrations.

rhetoric against minorities. Operating together, these norms suggest a striking parallel with "mobilizing passions" (Paxton, 2004, p. 41) that have historically been associated with rises in authoritarian governments. This phenomenon must not be overlooked given the deep and often hidden ties to broader political environments that are forged during these formative years (Andrew, 1997, Binder & Wood, 2012, Robbins, 2002).

Given research suggesting that college campuses produce different types of conservative performances – that is to say that politicians and voters frequently reproduce activist styles learned during their undergraduate years (Binder & Wood, 2012) – CRs could, in future years, become important agents in authoritarian development. While there were frequently elements of authoritarianism embedded in US history throughout the 1900's (Stanley, 2018), norms documented at WestU's Republican club, as well as other clubs across the United States post-Trump's political arrival (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) suggest a novel and unexplored challenge to democracy. In the context of an increasing number of unstable democracies across the globe (Curato, Hammond, & Min, 2019; Giroux, 2018; Stanley, 2018), it is paramount to continue excavating these potential threats.

Literature review

Conservatism and college Republican clubs

For the purpose of this article, I take at face value CRs' understandings of conservatism. It is important, however, to highlight the myriad of discussions among activists and scholars regarding the challenges in identifying and/or defining different factions of right-wing politics. For example, focusing on morality and values, Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) argue that conservatives are a group that hold a "pessimistic view of human nature, believing that people are inherently selfish and imperfectible" (p. 1030) as well as place equal weight on "Harm, Fairness, In-group, Authority, and Purity" (p. 1041). Robin (2017) tracks the development of the Republican party in the US, describing conservatism as "an idea-driven praxis" (p. 18) that is "disciplined by its task of destroying the left" (p. 245) and a reaction to social progress from marginalized groups. Blee and Creasap (2010) draw boundaries between conservative and right-wing movements, arguing that the former coalesce around patriotism, capitalism and a set of morals while the latter centers on race/ethnicity. In comparison, Berlet and Lyons (2000) argue against drawing these boundaries, stating that they make invisible the links within different streams of conservative politics and reinforce the misconception of the fringe-right as socially marginal. In other words, precisely defining conservatism is fraught.

With regard to the intersection of conservatism and college students, however, despite widespread mobilization of conservative students (Munson, 2010), contemporary college Republican clubs have been understudied by social movement literature. Among the academic research that has emerged, conservative college clubs have been studied as vehicles for identity formation,

group solidarity, generating distrust of liberal bias embedded in academia, and community development for conservative students (Binder & Wood, 2012; Gross & Frosse, 2012; Kidder, 2016, 2018). There has been slightly more discussion in mainstream media, including a Vanity Fair article exploring victimhood among college Republican women at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Sales & Laub, 2018) and an NPR podcast highlighting anger and distrust among conservative and libertarian students associated with Turning Point USA[2] (Chace, Kolowich, & Chivvis, 2018). Still, the academic research and mainstream coverage that has emerged does not connect victimization and isolation expressed by these students (Binder & Wood, 2012; Kidder, 2016; Sales & Laub, 2018; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) to highly similar emotions found among right-wing members from extremist groups (Bacchetta & Power, 2002; Blee, 1991, 2002a; Ezekiel, 2002). Additionally, while Binder and Wood (2012) and Kidder (2016, 2018) both note that the conservative students they studied coalesced around political and social views that mirror the mainstream Republican party, such as limited government, secure borders, and a strong military, new reporting in *The Atlantic* and *Time* has suggested that mobilization is now occurring around Trump as an individual rather than an ideology (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018). Yet these tensions between conservative students who are pro- and anti- Trump have not been contextualized within broader US and global trends of increasing white nationalism and transnational governmental shifts from democracies to authoritarianism (Stanley, 2018). In other words, there is minimal analysis exploring tensions among contemporary conservative college students under Trump's presidency.

Authoritarianism

While many scholars agree that democracy is increasingly threatened by fascist-like elements, there is debate surrounding the manifestation and implications of this shift. Regarding political tensions in the US, Giroux (2018) points to Trump's attacks on public values and language as prescience of "ghosts of a dark past which can return" (p. 23). Similarly, Snyder (2017) states that "post-truth is pre-fascism" (p. 71), highlighting Trump's propensity toward banning reporters from his rallies and criticizing the media. Harris, *et al*., (2017) look at the ways

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[2] According to its website, Turning Point USA (TPUSA) is an activist non-profit with over 800 high school and college chapters across the US with the mission to "educate students about the importance of fiscal responsibility, free markets, and limited government" (Turning Point USA, nd). TPUSA has also been known for its attempts to "defund progressive student organizations" (Fucci & Catalano, 2019, p. 3), fund right-wing student government candidates in order to transform college campuses (Vasquez, 2017), and oversee a professor watchlist which encourages students to " … document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom" (Professor Watchlist, nd). It should be noted, however, that approximately half of the professors on the list are included due to their personal beliefs, and not instructional behavior (Fucci & Catalano, 2019). While TPUSA does not publicize its funding sources, tax returns highlight millions in funding from leading GOP donors including the Koch brothers (Kotch, 2017).

in which the Republican party uses fear and racism to challenge definitions of conservative identities as part of a national shift toward a single-party system. Similarly, Stanley (2018) argues that power and fear, increasingly used by 21st century governments to propagate distrust of public discourse, are fracturing democracies. Curato, Hammond, & Min (2019) also take a global approach, although, they explore the ways in which understandings of human rights and global freedom challenge democracy and authoritarianism across the world. No scholar, however, has connected the growth of fascist-like – or even authoritarian-like – tactics to conservative undergraduate students.

Conservative women

In far-right spaces, while white women typically "are less publicly visible than their male counterparts," they nevertheless wield tremendous influence in membership recruitment, organizational development, and orchestrated attacks on outsiders (Baccetta & Power, 2002 p. 5; Blee 2002b; Blee & Creasap, 2010). Most notably, Blee (1991), in her study of women in the Klu Klux Klan, highlights how right-wing women frequently utilize "rumor, gossip, and demonstrations of political strength" (p. 153) as a mechanism to reinforce patriarchal ideals. Other scholars showcase a consensus among right-wing women to reject feminism and bolster patriarchal systems (Bacchetta & Power, 2002; Ginsburg, 1998; Schreiber, 2008, 2018). It is paramount, however, to study authoritarianism through a feminist lens as it provides powerful – yet historically overlooked – insight into the many political actors operating within a group (Blee, 2017; Passmore, 2008). In the 1920s, for example, "Klanswomen created a politics of hatred in ways differently than did Klansmen" that were overlooked for decades (Blee, 2017, p. 75). Additionally, in 1930s Germany, the Nazi party, with the support of many women's groups, created the mantra "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" – Children, Kitchen, Church – to reward women with larger families and support religious and patriarchal structures (Bridenthal, 1973; Mason, 1976).

Methods

Methodology

Qualitative research is a powerful tool to combat tenets of positivism and the expansion of neoliberalism (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006). Additionally, qualitative research can provide unique insight into a specific culture, aspects invisible to quantitative research (Binder & Wood, 2012; Hochschild, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative research allows for the opportunity to validate – but not overpower – the writing and analysis of subjects with whom researchers may disagree (Ginsburg, 1998; Ezekiel, 2002; Hochschild, 2018). One form of qualitative analysis which I utilize frequently throughout this paper, grounded theory, provides data analysis prior to applying theories (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2012; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

Reflexivity

Though CRs consider their meetings, emails, and events open to the public, in the interest of transparency, I received written consent from the club's president and verbal consent from the club's board before beginning this research. To quell suspicion and build trust, I explained that I wanted to add their voices to the dearth of literature on college Republican clubs, utilizing a similar method to Blee (1991), who reached out to women in racist organizations by positioning herself as a "recorder of their lives and thoughts" (p. 11) as well as other scholars such as Ezekiel (2002) and Hochschild (2018), who also studied far-right spaces. I hoped my research would not present a platform for CRs to espouse their ideas – a concern noted among some activists (Tolentino, 2019) – but rather would allow me to "scale the empathy wall" (Hochschild, 2018, p. 10) and understand their community. Though I never hid my identity as a gay, liberal, Jewish researcher, as a white, male undergraduate student, I nevertheless blended into the spaces I was studying. In fact, not only was I frequently told I did not look like a "social justice warrior" by many CRs, there were many moments during meetings and events when I even received smiles, nods of approval, and welcoming gestures from other CRs. I believe details such as these are important as there is an absence of research on contemporary conservative college students performed by a researcher who, at the time of the study, was also an undergraduate student. Thus, I have also incorporated auto-ethnography into this paper, as this research method "legitimates the personal location as a site of cultural criticism" (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009, p. 58; Creswell, 2012).

Data collection

Data were collected from a mid-sized, public, wealthy, highly selective, Western Predominantly White Institution (PWI) referred to in this paper as WestU. During the 2018 Spring and Fall school terms (a total of six months), I attended 12 club meetings and events, each lasting between one and three hours. I utilized content analysis on the club's Facebook page, emails, and group text messages to fully capture the breadth of perspectives, as well as performed 17 in-person semi-structured interviews with WestU students who identified as current or past CRs.

Following Gusterson (1997), I initially used polymorphous engagement, building rapport with a board member and a general club member in social circles outside of club settings. After I established their trust, these key informants introduced me to other current and past board and club members who then connected me with their friends, an iterative technique in qualitative research called snowball sampling (Charmaz, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and were performed wherever interviewees felt most comfortable, which included the WestU library, WestU dining halls, off-campus coffee shops, and students' homes. To further

build trust and protect identities, pseudonyms were assigned unless explicitly asked otherwise by interviewees. Since CRs prohibited me from audio-recording any participant observations or interviews, I took notes in a notebook and on a laptop, highlighting verbatim and non-verbatim quotes. Following Strauss, Leonard, Bucher, Ehrlich, & Sabshin, (1964) and Kidder (2016, 2018), in this paper, verbatim quotes are represented with standard quotations while almost verbatim quotes are represented with single quotations. Block quotes, unless represented with single quotations, are verbatim.

Data analysis

Utilizing Dedoose qualitative data analysis software, interviews and fieldnotes were analyzed using axial coding strategies, a vehicle to identify and connect experiences and relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initially, I had planned on developing one large codebook to better systematically capture themes from both interviews and fieldnotes. After open coding, however, I noticed significant differences between interviews and fieldnotes; while interviews illuminated general reflections on how to navigate the club and WestU's campus, fieldnotes captured specific club sentiments regarding upcoming and prior WestU events as well as (inter)national policy changes by the Trump Administration. To respect the unique nature of these data sets, I open-coded the data again, creating two separate codebooks. Codes included emic terms derived from club members' discussions, such as "witchhunt," "identity politics," and "diversity of thought," as well as etic codes I developed to denote themes such as "gossip," "types of conservatism," and "free speech." Utilizing Dedoose qualitative data analysis software, data were then close coded to improve organization (Charmaz, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Throughout this process, I frequently memo-ed on these data sets and reviewed them with a feminist anthropologist and an organizational sociologist.

Background

In the years leading up to Trump's presidency, the club was known as a small, loose-knit group of around five white male students. About a year before Trump was elected, however, two white female under-levels who were avid Trump supporters joined the club. Said one of the white women, Shannon, an upper-level and board member at the time of the interview, "When I first showed up, there were just five people in a room. It was small and sad. So, I started by pestering the current president at the time about things I could do which got me a position [on the board] the next year. We then revamped the board, … the bylaws, … and the meetings." Restructuring the board to allow for more leadership, shifting responsibilities, and adding social and educational components to meetings and events, said Shannon, helped CRs to become one

of the largest clubs on the WestU campus.[3] Lynn, the second white woman, added, "It's now a full operation. We have 30 to 40 people consistently and the first meeting had over 100 people." Indeed, meetings continued to have an average of 35 attendees, events upwards of 200 attendees, and an email distribution list contains over 500 students. Between the frequent free pizza, blasting of country music, scavenger hunts, Jeopardy games, and shooting range nights, the club felt more like a social gathering than a political space. That said, during its weekly meetings the club still included PowerPoint slides with news from Fox News and PragerU[4], as well as an occasional segment they called "Craziest Things Liberals Have Done," which highlighted recent incidents they thought were inflammatory. When asked how the club financed these meetings and events, Lynn stated, "Last year, we raised $4,000 from donors." Marcy, an under-level, white, female board member overseeing fundraising, corroborated Lynn's statement, explaining, "We go door knocking on weekends and send letters to companies and other large Republican organizations." Outside of fundraising, the club received a $500 stipend from WestU for being a registered club, and also charged a voluntary $50 yearly membership fee. While the majority of CRs were white men – a trend common to college Republican clubs studied by Binder & Wood (2012) and Kidder (2016, 2018) – at WestU, the club's board was almost entirely white women, a contradictory phenomenon which will be further explored later in this paper.

Among interviewees, seven identified as white males, two identified as Asian-American males, and eight identified as white females. All but one interviewee grew up conservative. Approximately one-third identified as Catholic, one-third identified as Christian, and one-third Jewish, Mormon, or non-religious. Interviewees came from different academic disciplines and about two-thirds were upper-levels. At the time of the interview, about half of interviewees defined their involvement in the club as "very involved" while the other half defined their involvement as "somewhat" or "not at all" involved. When asked how they joined the club, almost all interviewees spoke of another CR who extended an invitation during their freshman year, a trend that echoes the use of social networks in social movement mobilization (Luker, 2007; McAdam, 2007). While I did not directly study class and/or wealth levels in this research, I did ask each interviewee for their home zip code. Cross-listing their self-reported zip codes with data from *the US Census Bureau*, it appeared that interviewees had a median household income lower than that of all WestU

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[3] During this time, similar stories of Trump-supporting students taking over college Republican clubs were reported across the US, reflecting broader transitions of the conservative movement under Trump's leadership (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018).

[4] According to its website, PragerU is a non-profit started by Dennis Prager, a conservative, Jewish writer and talk show host that "promotes the ideas that have made America and the West the source of so much liberty and wealth" (PragerU, nd). Famous for its weekly five-minute videos which have garnered billions of views, PragerU argues that "the Left" is "akin to hate groups" (p. 39) and that mainstream media is untrustworthy. It also promotes white nationalist thought by far-right thinkers such as Paul Joseph Watson, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Stefan Molyneux (Tripodi, 2017).

students – which is estimated to sit significantly above $100,000 (Aisch, Buchanan, Cox, & Quealy, 2017) but still significantly higher than the US median household income, which was reported to be approximately $61,937 in 2018 (Guzman, 2019).

Manufacturing victimhood

Overwhelmingly, CRs told me they felt frustrated by how they were treated by their peers and professors for identifying as "conservatives." Describing these feelings of marginalization, most CRs recalled moments of being called names or silenced in classrooms. Regarding this seemingly ubiquitous experience, Shannon even joked, "You're lucky if people don't call you a racist, homophobic bigot." This theme of victimhood is highly similar to findings by other scholars studying conservative students (Andrew, 1997; Binder & Wood, 2012; Kidder, 2016; Sales & Laub, 2018; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018). Indeed, it may even be reflective of broader mechanisms of melodrama in the US (Anker, 2014) and a reinforcement of what Lowndes (2017) would describe as producer and parasitic language. Yet, when CRs described these attacks – and how they felt they should respond – three themes emerged: Clouded History, Appropriation of Liberal Thought, and Disrupted Hierarchies.

Clouded history

CRs frequently expressed frustration toward and felt attacked by dominant historical narratives. Reflecting many other CRs' beliefs, Shawn, a male upper-level and general member, said, "I don't like this narrative that America was built on slavery or oppression. Obviously, we know that, but saying that America is a terrible nation won't get us anywhere." Like many other CRs, Shawn critiqued historical accounts of the US, suggesting that acknowledging slavery, for example, was detrimental to the development of the country. This mentality was also present throughout meetings; during one such gathering in November, board members walked club members through a PowerPoint they developed entitled, "Were the pilgrims villains like your teachers might say?" Slides included topics such as "Why the liberals think [Thanksgiving is] evil" and "Why you shouldn't feel guilty." One board member told the club, "Conquering land is a thing that has happened throughout all of human history. Europeans had better tools, so the Natives didn't really protect their land all that well." Feeling uncomfortable with the violent history of the US, CRs suggested it was best not to acknowledge the past. A better approach, they believed, was to augment these narratives in a manner that portrayed white Americans in a positive light at the expense of those oppressed.

Appropriating liberal thought / terminology

CRs also commonly expressed their feelings of marginality through appropriation of liberal thought/terminology, including "coming out of the

closet," "safe spaces," and "diversity of opinion." This terminology, however, also had the added effect of furthering an "us versus them" mentality, constructing boundaries around political leanings and racial backgrounds.

In the LGBTQ community, the expression "coming out of the closet" signifies the announcement of one's sexuality to the public (Tamashiro, 2005). Framing the campus as an oppressively liberal environment, CRs utilized this expression to illuminate their feelings of marginality. "Closet conservatives" I was told, was a term used by the club to describe conservative students who were not public about their political views. Similarly, the phrase "coming out as conservative" was commonly used to describe a moment when conservative students publicly announced their political leanings. Russell, a multiracial male upper-level and board member, summarized what many other CRs felt:

> Wearing a [conservative] shirt, standing in line [to attend a conservative activity], openly putting a [conservative] sticker on your water bottle, it's hard because it 'outs' you. … It's hard to come out as Republican. … I wonder what it must have been like in the early 1900's to come out publicly or proudly as gay. And I feel like I almost do by being conservative. … The hate and resentment we get over time from peers or people we thought were friends is astonishing.

An announcement of one's conservative political beliefs – as many CRs explained – frequently resulted in backlash and ridicule from friends. As a result, CRs believed it was important to "come out" only when one felt comfortable. For example, Lisa, a white Christian female under-level and board member, said she frequently told incoming freshmen: "It's okay if you're not ready to talk with other people about [being conservative] yet. There are a lot of closeted conservatives around campus." CRs felt they had to "pass" within the dominant liberal community, which served as a barrier to their freedom of expression.

CRs also appropriated the phrase, "safe space" to highlight their desire for freedom from what they perceived as hostile dominant liberal perspectives. In fact, at many meetings, board members welcomed club members by saying, "this is your safe space." When asked why CRs frequently used this expression, Cheryl, a white Catholic upper-level and general member, replied, "It can get heated within the club, but no one is going to yell 'bigot' at you. That's why I kind of like the safe space analogy." Randy, a white Catholic male under-level and board member, added, "We help kids feel safe in a place that might be intimidating." Jane, a white Christian under-level and general member, compared CRs to other spaces on campus, saying, "It's a little nice safe haven like the Black Student Union. You can be around people with similar viewpoints like you." Similar to the LGBTQ epithet, the "safe space" analogy allowed the group to further strengthen a sense of community within the club by identifying themselves as an underdog within a liberal system.

CRs, while critical of broader diversity and inclusion initiatives that they

believed were typically supported by left-leaning groups, nevertheless supported one form of diversity: "of thought." For example, the club's Facebook page stated that one of their overarching goals was to "foster intellectual diversity." When I asked Shawn, a male upper-level and general member, what this meant, he responded, "Diversity of thought…is being driven into the ground, taking second to diversity of color. But I believe it is more valuable having diversity of ideas rather than one single megaphone." For Shawn and other CRs, diversity and inclusion initiatives felt burdensome, erasing their larger identities as conservatives. At another moment, reflecting on a recent WestU initiative to increase racial diversity on campus, Jane said, "I never understood how let's say a Black student comes to a college that's primarily White and they feel uneasy. … It doesn't make sense why we need to force diversity. But I fully understand the importance of diversity of opinion."[5] For CRs, racial and other forms of diversity were inconsequential compared to political diversity, which was considered a necessity. At the expense of other "underrepresented" groups, CRs validated their own feelings of marginality, drew boundaries around whiteness, and erased systemic oppression.

Disrupting hierarchies

In the Fall 2018 term, Judge Brett Kavanaugh was in the midst of a highly contentious confirmation hearing for the US Supreme Court. Kate Manne (2018), in her analysis of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's sexual assault allegations against Judge Kavanaugh contextualized by other #MeToo moments, highlighted the term "himpathy" to explore the ways in which sympathy was shifted away from female victims and toward male perpetrators. Similarly, many CRs felt that men – and particularly white men – faced unprecedented persecution, which should be noted, is a common trope in white male victimization and a hegemonic sentiment that has pervaded US culture for decades (King, 2012; Robinson, 2000). Said Lisa, a white Christian female under-level and board member, "I consider myself a feminist but not the type who is around today. I define feminism as women equal to men. But nowadays women tear down men. … There is definitely a war on men." Sympathizing with male perpetrators, Lisa and many other white women in the club believed it was their duty to support these white men who represented a significant portion of the club and further fed the narrative of victimhood. Comparatively, almost every white male whom I interviewed, when asked how they felt as a conservative navigating a college campus, instead expressed frustration with their feelings of helplessness as a white male. Encapsulating these feelings, Billy, a white Mormon upper-level and general member said, "I'm a normal white guy who has no problem with anyone, but it seems like everyone has a problem with white dudes." He and other CRs noted feelings of displacement – both on

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[5] While it may have been worthwhile to challenge CRs' views by asking harder questions, I decided it was important to maintain the genuine relationships I had developed as well as ensure I did not compromise my research method – snowball sampling – which relied on trust (Charmaz, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

campus and by the media – as though white men were being attacked in ways that other "underrepresented" groups were not.

Community as a remedy

At WestU, CRs used provocation – similar to CRs studied by Binder and Wood (2012) – and drew ideological boundaries between themselves and liberals – similar to CRs studied by Kidder (2016). Yet unlike CRs studied by these scholars – and following what may appear to be a national trend at other college Republican clubs (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) – CRs at WestU also used these tactics to foster a collectivized, hyper-loyal, and policed identity around President Donald Trump.

De-individualization

A respite from the perceived hostility and sense of victimhood faced on campus, club meetings and events became an important site for community development and group thought. CRs encouraged each other to become unabashedly conservative, by being provocative publicly. When asked what constituted successful events, Lynn, a white Christian female upper-level and board member who reflected many other CR perspectives, said:

> 'Every year, we have a free speech wall. Literally, all we do is put up a wall and people go crazy. I think it's important to do things that are outrageous and provocative to see that the basic concept of these liberal policies can be outrageous. … Like oh, whoa, that is kind of a crazy idea.'

A free speech wall, intended to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall, is a common political event that has been noted at other college Republican clubs for at least the past 15 years (Binder & Wood, 2012). At WestU, however, this large plywood board in the middle of campus was more commonly recognized as a vehicle to spark reactions due to the Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, racist, misogynistic and transphobic slurs written by students. This, in turn, provoked frequent op-eds in the WestU newspaper, protests across campus, and occasional news coverage by national media outlets. In previous years, CRs also hosted "Empty Gun Holster Day" to encourage CRs to parade around campus with an empty gun holster, as well as invited self-identified far-right speakers who preached racial superiority. Events such as these felt empowering to CRs who believed it helped foster an important sense of community. As Randy, a white Catholic male under-level and board member, explained, "The free speech wall, I helped put the nails in that. I love being part of something bigger." Events and social gatherings produced a sense of electrifying excitement and a social cohesion. At meetings and events, particularly those that sparked protests outside, CRs welcomed each other with large smiles and hugs, rarely permitting anyone to sit alone. After one such contentious event, when CRs were met with a

group of about seven protesters wearing black hoodies and with handkerchiefs over their faces, yelling and taking photos, CRs began wrapping their arms around each other, chuckling as they walked by. "Good to know that they're brave people" one white male CR said sarcastically, while another joked, "I'm a little underwhelmed." Comradery among CRs appeared to be reinforced by verbal attacks from other students, helping legitimize their actions.

During one club meeting, while discussing a recent on-campus racist event, a white male general member proudly regaled CRs with stories from attending an open-forum put on by the WestU student government. Dismissing the emotional toll that the racist event had on multiple student communities (particularly the Black, Latinx, and queer communities), the member proudly explained how he represented the club's voice: "I was the only one who wasn't crying and stuff. It makes us look really good. We're not the party to bitch and whine." CRs relished the belief that their inflammatory actions, which represented their collectivized standpoint, would be propagated to by other students.[6] During another interview, when asked about inclusion on campus, Kevin, a white Catholic male upper-level and general member who also identified as a member of the on campus Turning Point USA club, said, "I'm always open-minded, but excluding Turning Point USA, the Republican club is the most open-minded club on campus. The rest of the clubs are basically fucking Communists. It's really sad." Many CRs, some of whom were also members of the on campus Turning Point USA club, drew boundaries around tolerance, suggesting that acceptance was found only in libertarian and conservative spaces, while insinuating that liberals reflected or were manipulated by radical-left thought.

There also appeared to be an ostensibly growing consensus to refuse ruling out violence against liberals. Kevin, when asked what he thought about CR's record of inviting provocative speakers, explained, "We need someone to [verbally] punch back and hit people. I'm willing to accept [a speaker] who is a little rough around the edges but is able to fight for us. It's either that or capitulating." Similarly, when asked what he would do if he faced provocative protests from liberal groups, John, a white male upper-level and general member, said, "It's good to get a little bruised up sometimes." Violent rhetoric was also common during meetings and social events. During one meeting, a white female board member suggested CRs even host an "alt-Right fight night" and pit a liberal against a CR.

Legitimized viewpoint

While there was some internal debate regarding the club's official view on issues such as local candidates during elections, CRs vehemently defended almost every statement/action expressed by Trump, coalescing around him rather than

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[6] While I did not explicitly study relationships between CRs and other WestU clubs, relations seemed mutually antagonistic.

an ideology. Life-size cutouts of Donald and Melania Trump and flags stating "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) – the official slogan during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign – commonly draped the walls of club meetings and events. CRs also adapted the MAGA slogan, signing most emails, "Make WestU Great Again" and selling $25 red hats with the slogan as well. Meeting PowerPoints almost always included pictures of Trump and frequently included Trump-themed dating advice. At one meeting, for example, a risqué picture of Melania Trump was followed by the words, "Work hard so you can land someone banging and way out of your league like Trump did." During the weekly club meeting speed-dating activity in which CRs were paired together, the Board asked questions such as, "Why is Hilary Clinton the worst?"; "Why do you like Trump?"; and "Which of Trump's policies is your favorite?". The Wi-Fi password at the unofficial house for club parties was, "Trump2020," and the group text for all CRs was entitled, "God King Trump."

Anyone who disagreed with or did not support Trump was excluded from the club. Said Annie, a white Christian under-level in the process of leaving the club:

> 'Ever since winter last year, it went downhill. The Libertarians that wanted to drink and have fun were pushed out because they weren't conservative enough. They were considered RINOS – Republican in name only. The club thought my friends weren't conservative enough because they didn't like Trump. To be conservative in the club now is to be as right-wing as you can. … Our club has become the most extreme conservatives on campus, some of the most extreme right-wingers. That's why I'm not that involved this year. I don't even challenge them. I feel outnumbered. I don't want to be on the girls' bad side. I'm worried they're going to spread rumors about me. … They witch-hunted a lot of people out of the club.'

After Trump was elected, the board created socially unpleasant experiences for those who did not support the new president, using gossip to attack dissenters' social reputations and encouraging them to leave the club. Members who stood up to voice disagreement with this practice were met with a similar reaction. One such member, Tim, a Catholic Asian male upper-level and former CR who was forced out of the club after criticizing this exclusionary tactic, said, "The purpose of the club is to be Trump's puppets. …They go out of their way to defend [Trump] on every basis imaginable." More than merely defend Trump, however, it seemed that CRs did not tolerate almost any form of disagreement. In fact, for the most part, CRs did not challenge the board's decisions. Many CRs did not feel comfortable explaining what they disliked about the club, fearful of becoming social pariahs. One CR during our interview frequently asked to obscure their demographic information, as well as speak "off the record." Another interviewee, Cheryl, a white Catholic upper-level and general member, felt comfortable saying only, "If you've done something to upset one or multiple women on the board then it can kind of, word spreads quickly." Suggesting that backlash came from the female-dominated board, Cheryl hinted at the policing,

but quickly asked to move on to the next question. Fear was a powerful vehicle in the club's regulation of their internal discourse.

This policing extended outside the club as well. At one meeting, after receiving backlash from the Republican party for inviting a controversial speaker to campus, a white Christian female under-level and board member said to her fellow cheering CRs, "Local Republicans are pushing against us. I say they're not real Republicans." In another incident, in response to a WestU policy that increased student fees for out-of-state students to support working-class students – who were more likely to be students of color – a different white female board member spoke on a national conservative media outlet where she argued that WestU was cutting enrollment for white students. After WestU immediately released a counterstatement pointing out that it was illegal for the University to consider race in its enrollment process, the national media outlet apologized for falsely reporting on the issue. In response, CRs then released their own statement, denouncing both the conservative media outlet and WestU for their "promotion of identity politics." Despite receiving financial support from the off-campus Republican party, CRs still challenged those Republicans for disagreeing with them. Preaching dogma which, in its dominant form, rested on an unwavering idolization of Trump, CRs regulated discourse and ostracized those with whom they disagreed.

Women in the club

While most CRs were white men, the club's board was composed almost entirely of white women, a phenomenon that may be increasingly common at other college Republican clubs across the US (Sales & Laub, 2018). At WestU, when asked why she thought this phenomenon was occurring, Annie's response reflected many other women's perspectives:

> It's really nice to be a woman in the club because there aren't many of you, so you're coveted. Like people will say damn she's hot. If you're a Republican girl, you're way more attractive to conservative guys. … I love to bake and clean, but I can also party hard. Other guys would look down on that. Certainly, liberal guys would look down on that. Like oh, you just want to be a housewife? Conservatives think you're an awesome independent woman.

Annie, like other CRs, embraced a belief that the small population of Republican women made them more desirable to their male counterparts because of their aspiration, among other activities, to perform domestic work. Similarly, Lisa a white Christian female under-level and board member said:

> Feminists tell women that if you want to stay at home then you're less than. It's unnatural and unhealthy. Science has proven that men are better at spatial reasoning skills. There are so many things that women are good at, why can't they recognize that?

This was a common trope heard from many board members. Being a woman in the club appeared to grant a sense of empowerment and validation toward a hope to become a housewife. In fact, at almost every club meeting, the board led "group dating sessions" where they informally paired themselves with different men, answering questions about their personal lives. While male CRs typically groaned, shuffling their feet and glancing across the room uncomfortably, the women nevertheless cheerfully counted off everyone, forming different groups. While never explicitly discussed – at least in group settings or with me – it appeared that female CRs had a shared goal of finding conservative husbands, marrying, and having children. It was apparent that these women's' objectives were rooted in a desire to find a husband who would shape their future.

Discussion and conclusion

Coinciding with Trump's presidential win, WestU's college Republican club – a large group of white men led by a small team of white women – became one of the largest clubs on campus. Feeling victimized by liberals and people of color, CRs augmented their perceptions of US history to gain a sense of empowerment. Fortifying their in-groupness, CRs encouraged coalescing around Trump as an idol – rather than uniting under a set ideology. Protecting these values, CRs seemed to promote a singular opinion, which was regulated through violent rhetoric and a fear of internal social ridicule. While boundary work and in-group policing are certainly not unique to WestU's CRs (Oren, 1986; Robbins, 2002), given the current political environment under Trump's presidency, such policing may be reflective of more consequential constructs of victimized privilege. Indeed, individually, these strategies could be harmless, but taken together suggest a striking parallel with "mobilizing passions" (Paxton, 2004, p. 41) historically associated with rises in fascist governments. To be clear, it is certainly not my attempt to identify CRs as fascists; even defining fascism – which is understood by its elements rather than its historical manifestations – can be challenging (Harris *et al.*, 2017; Paxton, 2004; Stanley, 2018). That said, there have been fascist elements increasingly documented in governments across the globe (Giroux, 2018; Stanley, 2018) and as I argue, these fascist elements may grow when we ignore their intellectual centers.

In fascism, there is a "sense of aggrieved victimization" (Stanley, 2018, p. 90). Constructing a sense of loss within privileged groups while gaining power from the perceived loss, fascism encourages "replacement of reasoned debate with immediate sensual experience[s]" (Paxton, 2004, p. 17) causing a reliance on emotions rather than rationality (Harris *et al.*, 2017; Snyder, 2017). Similarly, CRs, a group primarily of white men led by a small team of white women with deference to masculinity, identified themselves as victims while naming liberals and people of color as a cause for their believed oppression. Imitating the mental shift from reality to fiction explored by Hannah Arendt (1951), CRs' sense of victimhood contributed to their ability to produce an obfuscated history, distorting and/or dismissing historical documentations of oppression

toward underrepresented groups in order to build their "mythic past" (Stanley, 2018, p. 7; Traverso, 2019). Pointing to the club as a safe haven from hostility on campus (such hostility, it should be noted, was intentionally exacerbated by their own provocative measures), CRs felt an overwhelming sense of community, which frequently slipped into an erasure of individuality, another common trait in fascism (Ushpiz, 2015), and was replaced with a singular truth centered around Trump. In fact, almost every club activity, meeting, and event featured an element of Trump, be it himself, his family, or his "Make America Great Again" slogan. This unwavering faith in a male leader who "stands to the nation like the patriarchal father stands to his family" (Goodman, Shaikh, & Stanley, 2018) is, of course, another hallmark of fascism (Paxton, 2004; Stanley, 2018). Any criticism of Trump was met with immediate exclusionary tactics as CRs believed their "legitimate viewpoint" (Stanley, 2018, p. 35; Paxton, 2004) left little room for debate or alterative understandings. Removing CRs who did not support Trump, CRs used threats of social ostracization to police this dogma. While no physical acts of violence were ever committed leading up to and during the ethnography, the language used by CRs evoking violence as a form of political imagery is important as words do not only "produce meaning" but "generate consequences" (Giroux, 2018, p. 10). Furthermore, in fascism, in-groupness is policed to a level of violent enactment as reality is distorted into a "war of survival" (Ezekiel, 2002, p. 156; Arendt, 1951; Paxton, 2004; Snyder, 2017; Stanley, 2018; Traverso, 2019). Lastly, white female CRs, by identifying potential husbands who would dictate their future, mirrored the common role of women in fascist governments to bolster patriarchal values (Goodman, Shaikh, & Stanley, 2018; Paxton, 2004; Harris *et al.*, 2017; Traverso, 2019).

At first glance, CRs at WestU may appear contradictory to current US and global trends. On a macro-scale, in 2019, approximately 59% of Americans 18 to 24 identified as Democrats while 33% identified as Republican (Badger & Miller, 2019). The percentage of Americans of all voting ages who identify as Republican has been slowly declining since 1992 (Saad, 2019) while among college students who identify as "right-of-center", Trump's approval ratings fell approximately 20% in his first year in office (Della Volpe, 2017). Furthermore, in the last decade, there has been a steady decrease in the number of incoming first-time, full-time freshmen who identify as "right-of-center," falling to a level, 20%, last seen in the late 1990's (Eagan, 2016). That said, in recent years, millions of dollars have been pouring into college campuses to support conservative students, financed by groups such as Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), the Heritage Foundation, and the Koch Brothers (Kotch, 2017). Following Trump's initial presidential announcement, there have also been reports of a sharp increase in the number of chartered college Republican clubs (Godfrey, 2018) and Turning Point USA clubs (Kotch, 2017) across the US. Additionally, as the US becomes a majority-minority country, white Americans – regardless of political identification – are projected to increasingly support conservative policies (Craig & Richeson, 2014).

While this argument is based on an ethnographic exploration of a single club, there should be similar ethnographic accounts, particularly on both more and

less ethno-racially diverse campuses, rural and metropolitan communities, and within both pro- and anti- Trump states. Furthermore, with the introduction of Turning Point USA, there should also be greater research exploring how their novel involvement may shift campus terrains, as well as further research into the interactions of algorithms, media outlets, and college students (see Tripodi, 2017). For liberal activists, I believe it becomes increasingly critical to pay attention to and understand the driving/mobilizing forces behind conservative college student activism. This is a population that has historically been overlooked (Munson, 2010) and that is increasingly observed to act in ways paralleling national political trends (Curato, Hammond, & Min, 2019; Frazee, 2019; Godfrey, 2018; Sales & Laub, 2018; Stanley, 2018). It becomes increasingly crucial to engage with these actors during their formative years as they become future conservative leaders and voters (Andrew, 1997; Binder & Wood, 2012). As the practice of fascist behaviors may grow when we ignore their intellectual centers, liberal college activists therefore cannot afford to overlook these important players; they must instead anticipate and respond to the unique ways in which their conservative college peers operate and react (Binder & Wood, 2012). In other words, "the ghosts of fascism should … educate us and imbue us with a spirit of civic justice and collective courage in the fight for a substantive and inclusive democracy" (Giroux, 2018, p. 23). These threats, while disconcerting, must also provide us with a sense of empowerment to promote change. This is a group that can offer key understandings into the future operations of the conservative movement.

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