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# Trumpism on College Campuses

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## Abstract

In this paper, we report data from interviews with members of conservative political clubs at four flagship public universities. First, we categorize these students into three analytically distinct orientations regarding Donald Trump and his presidency (or what we call Trumpism). There are principled rejecters, true believers, and satisfied partisans. We argue that Trumpism is a disunifying symbol in our respondents' self-narratives. Specifically, right-leaning collegians use Trumpism to draw distinctions over the appropriate meaning of conservatism. Second, we show how political clubs sort and shape orientations to Trumpism. As such, our work reveals how student-led groups can play a significant role in making different political discourses available on campuses and shaping the types of activism pursued by club members—both of which have potentially serious implications for the content and character of American democracy moving forward.

**Keywords** American politics · Conservatism · Culture · Higher education · Identity · Organizations

## Introduction

Donald Trump, first as a candidate and now as the president, has been an exceptionally divisive force in American politics, even among conservatives who typically vote Republican. This has been especially true on college campuses. During the 2016 election, several notable chapters of the College Republicans (e.g., at Harvard and Pennsylvania State University) formally broke with their party over Trump's nomination (Pager 2016). And, across the board,

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whether college-educated or not, people under the age of 30 tend to hold strongly negative views of the president (Kamarck et al. 2018). Indeed, Trump’s most vocal base is comprised of older blue-collar workers without college degrees (Pew Research Center 2018).

Universities, therefore, are not a natural fit for Trumpism.<sup>1</sup> Yet, plenty of right-leaning collegians support the president and his administration (Chason 2016; Godfrey 2018). Some students, much like his older blue-collar base, are inspired by his iconoclastic style and are energized by his agenda. Others are more reticent in their approval, but they still prefer Trump over any Democratic candidate. And then there are conservative students who vow they will never support the 45th president or his vision for the country. In this paper, we expand on these three orientations to Trumpism: true belief, satisfied partisanship, and principled rejection. We then argue that the political clubs these collegians join on their campuses serve as “microcultures” (Perrin 2005), which shape members’ discourse on Trumpism.

Much has already been written about Trump’s appeal to the white working class (e.g., Ball 2018; Dreher 2016; Hochschild 2016). The president’s significance for more affluent conservatives is less understood—despite the fact that it is these Republican voters who actually elected him to office (Carnes and Lupu 2017). If Trump’s cultural resonance comes from connecting with the “forgotten man” (see Berezin 2017; Gidron and Hall 2017; Lamont et al. 2017), then what are we to make of the support he garners from the better-off and the privileged? The conservative students in our study fall into these latter categories. They attend four of the nation’s best public universities, even if some of them come from rather humble backgrounds. They are on promising career paths. They are also politically-engaged, “active citizens” (Braunstein 2017), and their club memberships have given them social connections to highly resourced foundations, think tanks, and other organizations beyond their universities’ gates (Binder and Wood 2013). All of this is to say, they are set to be the winners—not the losers—in a post-industrial global order (Murray 2012). Yet, the majority of our conservative interviewees support the president. Why?

Part of the answer may be protecting their race-based privileges. As analysts have demonstrated, racial minorities in the working class have *not* been drawn to Trump’s messaging, but a substantial portion of poor and wealthy whites alike are (Bhambra 2017). That is, the president’s forgotten man narrative is couched in identity politics, and his electoral success relies on racial resentment (Sides et al. 2018). As such, Trumpism is powered by an economically diverse coalition of white voters (Kitschelt and Rehm 2019). But an explanation of white grievance, when applied to our qualitative data from collegians in conservative political clubs, is incomplete (also see Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016).

The vast majority of Trump supporters that we talked with did not articulate a sense of racial resentment when describing their views on American democracy.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the ability to downplay Trump’s racist pronouncements and ignore the real-life harm of his immigration

<sup>1</sup> To quote Tabachnick (2016), “Obviously, Trumpism is linked to the person Donald Trump, but its roots run much deeper, intertwining contemporary and traditional political trends in such a way that makes it both uniquely American and of the twenty-first century [...]” Its characteristics include “distillations of much more complicated phenomena” that can be summarized as a mix of celebrity, nativism, outsider status, and populism. We use the term “Trumpism” in this paper to capture respondents’ views on Trump as a person, as well as his administration overall, including the federal appointments that have taken place under his watch, his style of governance, policy positions, and so on.

<sup>2</sup> Only one interviewee *explicitly* linked his support of Trumpism to white grievance. This respondent blamed immigration for the economic downturn in his hometown and lamented what he believed were the much higher standards applied to white applicants of his university. However, his responses are the exception that prove the rule in how Trump supporters framed their political viewpoints in our interviews.

and domestic policies depends on white privilege (Coates 2017), and it may well be that in other contexts—such as on message boards or discussions among peers—these students would lean into more racialized pronouncements. Regardless, our respondents did not express their political viewpoints in these terms with us. Our goal in this paper is to analyze the discursive practices used in the construction of conservative social identities on college campus—not to examine the race-based privileges undergirding these narratives, fitting though they may be (cf. Kidder 2018). Instead, we will show that discussions about the president and his administration were a way for right-leaning students to promote what they felt were the most valued images of the self within the interview setting (Zussman 1996). And, in doing so, our conversations with collegians reveal the ways symbols (in this case, Trumpism) can be used to build different types of social identities (Tajfel 1974). Further, we propose that political clubs offer a unique opportunity to study discursive practices linking (or *unlinking*) identities to particular meanings (in this case, “real” conservatism). Specifically, we argue that instead of being an “anchor” for cultural coherence (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011), Trumpism serves to divide young conservatives. Unlike Republicans in Congress, who at the time of this writing continue to rally around the president for fear of losing their seats, Trumpism unsettles the identity claims of students, as divergent meanings between members of political clubs come into conflict time and again.

## When Culture Leads to Incoherence

Over the last two decades, social scientists have moved away from assumptions that culture is either tightly unified (e.g., see Geertz 1973; Schneider 1976) or irreconcilably jumbled (e.g., see Abu-Lughod 1991; Crapanzano 1986). The dominant perspective in sociology now hinges on a notion of nominal (but rather resilient) forms of correspondence across cultural phenomena (DiMaggio 1997). Sewell (1999) refers to this as “thin coherence.” In this view, differences engendered through competing actions, beliefs, and values can still be organized through anchors (Swidler 2001). That is, a shared community of meaning can be sustained through recurring and interconnected practices and discourses that allow for dialogue across divergent constituencies. For example, Ghaziani and Baldassarri (2011) show how a theme of “community building” has historically served as an anchor with broad enough consensus among LGBT activists to hold otherwise disparate groups together as they organized marches in Washington, DC.

Similarly, Perrin et al. (2014) argue that American conservatism is comprised of thinly cohered ideologies. There is great potential for opposition between factions. Libertarians, for instance, desire limitations to governmental oversight at the same time that Christian fundamentalists push for new social regulations. More than a mere coalition of political convenience (e.g., Zernike 2010), Perrin and his co-authors propose that the *identity* of being “conservative” (see Gross et al. 2011; Mason 2018) anchors heterogeneous modes of thought. The upshot is that ordinary citizens aligned with the Republican Party have a diverse (and possibly contradictory) ideological repertoire in which to form their opinions and policy preferences—all of which are organized under the valued self-image of being a conservative (Kidder 2016).

The tensions within right-leaning social movements are adeptly revealed in Braunstein’s (2017) study of the Patriots, a grassroots Tea Party group. Members had differing views on how to hold politicians accountable, and they disputed their proper relationship to the

Republican Party (not to mention the clashes of personality within the group). Reading Braunstein's research with Swidler's (2001) eye towards anchors, though, the US Constitution can be seen as a unifying symbol for the Patriots—giving coherence to their practices and discourses (see especially Braunstein 2017, 59–65; also see Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Members bought pocket-sized versions of the Constitution and carried it with them. They made frequent references to the document, often pulling out their copies to consult passages. They read aloud from it. The Constitution, in other words, was a major component in the Patriots' shared community of meaning. Even in the face of other disagreements, their recurring use of the Constitution as a symbol helped integrate varied activities with other Tea Party themes, which ultimately led to a sense of coherence within the group and between related organizations.

Less understood from the literature, though, are the inevitable strains placed on thin coherence. We know contradictions and disagreements abound, and researchers have chronicled divisiveness within social movements (e.g., Blee 2012; Carson 1981; Waite 2001). Ghaziani (2008) even shows the potential benefits of infighting—its presence can encourage participants to articulate what activism means to them. Our analysis, however, takes us in a different direction. We focus on a singularly potent symbol of disunity, one in which individuals grapple with its current significance and future implications. Specifically, we argue that Trumpism unsettles the thin coherence existing between conservative political clubs operating in the space of higher education. There is much that still anchors right-leaning collegians together—such as practices and discourses around themes of personal independence, the power of free markets, and the value of tradition. But student-led groups that might otherwise bond on issues tied to these anchors are (at least partially) unmoored by Trumpism. As such, we highlight a thin coherence wrought too spindly to find common cause. Differences over the president and his administration pull club members in separate directions as they construct narratives about their conservative social identities. These disagreements are about more than policy debates or disputes over specific issues. Trumpism serves as an overarching symbol for how students on the right understand themselves and their peers. While much will inevitably change between now and the next election, our interviews reveal—in situ—young people struggling over the heart and soul of the Republican Party and its undergirding ideology, conservatism.

## Data and Methods

Data for this paper come from semi-structured interviews with 26 conservative college students who are (or were) active members of either College Republicans (CRs), Turning Point USA (TPUSA), or a libertarian group at their schools. These data are a subset of a larger sample of 77 politically-engaged collegians from across the ideological spectrum.<sup>3</sup> Discussions with students took place during the first complete school year Trump was in office (the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters). We interviewed matriculants at the University of Arizona, the University of Colorado Boulder, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Virginia. All four are the flagship schools in their university systems. We selected these states because they are considered toss-ups in presidential elections. In 2016,

<sup>3</sup> Our full project ( $N = 113$ ) also includes representatives from off-campus political organizations, as well as administrators, faculty, and staff at our selected schools.

Colorado and Virginia voted narrowly for Hillary Clinton, while Arizona and North Carolina went by slim margins for Trump. Subsequent elections—especially the 2018 midterms—further highlighted their status as “in play” for either party. We focus on CRs, TPUSA, and libertarian groups<sup>4</sup> in this paper because they represent the three most prevalent types of conservative club memberships at our field sites. Over three-fourths of our right-leaning interviewees belong to at least one of these student-led groups (26 out of 34).<sup>5</sup> In the examination of Trumpism provided here, variations between chapters of the same club on different campuses are less relevant than the similarities of chapters across schools. As such, we discuss them collectively for this paper. Campus- and state-level analyses will be part of future reports on our larger sample.

Nearly all of the 26 respondents in our conservative club subset are traditional college students between the ages of 19 and 23 (at the time of the interviews). Our oldest student interviewee was 28; another was 25. Based on the family descriptions they provided, 16 of this group are from a professional elite background. Seven are from the middle class. Three are from the working class. We had one Latinx respondent and another considers himself bi-racial (with one parent of Asian descent). The rest are white. Ten are women. Based on firsthand observations of conservative college groups, reviews of the clubs’ official social media posts, as well as past research on right-leaning college students (Binder and Wood 2013; Kidder 2016, 2018), we assume the dearth of minorities in our data is representative of typical club memberships, while women are probably overrepresented in our subset. Which is to say, student-led groups on the right are disproportionately populated by white men.<sup>6</sup>

Students were contacted via their university email addresses (as listed on the official websites for their clubs) or through contact information on their groups’ Facebook pages. Additional respondents were snowballed through referrals. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and covered a variety of topics—from their thoughts about the 2016 presidential election to their relationships with professors to the inner workings of their political clubs. Most interviews were conducted in public areas on campus (e.g., libraries or food courts). Some were done off school grounds in nearby coffee shops. Several interviews took place in borrowed university office spaces. Three interviews from the conservative club subset could not be arranged during our campus visits and were carried out over the phone. We had the interviews professionally transcribed, and then we coded them for recurring themes and topics.

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<sup>4</sup> There is no single libertarian organization that stands out in our data. Instead, we found a mix of sponsored chapters and locally independent clubs across our field sites. At the national level, Young Americans for Liberty claims to be the largest libertarian organization mobilizing college students. However, at the University of Virginia, Students for Individual Liberty was the premier libertarian group. They received support from Students for Liberty, a different national libertarian organization. Conversely, at the University of Arizona, we talked with students associated with Strive—an organization promoting the objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand. Rand was not a libertarian, but her ideas have greatly impacted libertarianism. And the Strive members we interviewed self-identified as libertarians. Despite the students in our sample being affiliated with different organizations, they described their relationship to politics in very similar ways. As such, we have lumped the libertarian groups together for this analysis.

<sup>5</sup> With the exception of two students who were on American Enterprise Institute’s Executive Council for their respective universities, the right-leaning students removed from this paper’s analysis did not share membership in similar conservative clubs. Three were unaffiliated with a campus-based political club, two were part of separate transpartisan dialogue groups, and one was a member of Christians United for Israel.

<sup>6</sup> For example, at a University of Virginia CR meeting we attended, of the approximately 25 students present, six were women and three were non-white (based on phenotype). At the same time, our interviews with progressive college students in the larger project (while diverse in gender) also skews white (although, not as strongly). Much of this racial over- and under-representation results from the predominance of whites at our four field sites.

For this paper, we pull from sections of the interviews in which respondents discuss their club memberships, their thoughts and feelings about the president or his administration, and comments about their right-leaning peers.

As co-PIs, we split the interviewing responsibilities. Amy is a white woman in her mid-50s. Jeff is a white man in his early-40s. Our age (which influences our clothing styles, mannerism, etc.), along with our occupation, set us apart from the students we talked with. Further, for conservatives, our status as professors (*sociologists* no less) marked us as outsiders (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006). However, we have previous experience studying students on the right. We are conversant with conservative issues, and we are comfortable in such discussions. Thus, while our identities inevitably shaped the situational dynamics (Mishler 1986), we created an interview setting that allowed our respondents to elaborate on their viewpoints and guide the conversation as they saw fit—which gave us the opportunity to capture the ways that their self-narratives were constructed.

We use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of our interviewees. We told students that we would obscure their identifying information, but that we intended to include the real name of their university and club memberships in any written or presented work. Everyone that sat down with us demonstrated an interest in speaking openly about their opinions, although some opted to go “off the record” for some answers. The decision to reveal the schools and student-led groups we studied is not completely novel, but it is uncommon. We believe it is justified for our project because each university and club is distinctive in its traditions and organizational features. Brackets are used to indicate places in which we have added, altered, or removed sections of quoted text for clarity or confidentiality.

## Typologizing Trumpism on College Campuses

It is not surprising that none of the progressives we interviewed for our larger project aligned themselves with Trumpism. Our conversations with students on the right, though, illuminate a much more nuanced political terrain. Collegians who backed the president and his administration all identified as conservatives, and they saw themselves (at least to some degree) as in-step with the Republican Party. However, Trumpism has pushed many conservatives—in and outside academia—into a period of self-reflection (e.g., see Boot 2018; Flake 2017; Will 2019), and we can see this introspection throughout our data. In the course of our research, we met many right-leaning students who were principled rejecters of Trumpism. We also talked to many who connected with the presidency, but their support took very different forms—from true belief to satisfied partisanship. Our goal in this paper is to offer a sociological framework, informed by research on identity and organizations, to interpret conservative students’ differing views on the president and his administration. In this section we provide a typology of Trumpism on college campuses. This is followed by an analysis of how club affiliations mold the available discourses on conservative social identities in relation to Trumpism. As we will show, student-led groups represent a key arena in which discursive practices about the presidency are developed and shared amongst peers.

It is important to note that none of our interviewees explicitly used true believer, satisfied partisan, or principled rejecter to describe themselves. However, we find that they are valuable analytic categories for capturing the everyday experiences of students trying to make sense of Trumpism. At the same time, these orientations are ideal types. The lines between satisficers and believers and between satisficers and rejecters are fuzzy and might even shift over time for



the same individual. Our criteria are based on whether, in talking to us, respondents explicitly aligned themselves with key tenets of the presidency (i.e., not only whether they approved of Trump as a person, but how they described his accomplishments since taking office). Additionally, we are not attempting to predict if our respondents will vote for Trump in the future. Nor are we reporting on the actual voting choice made in 2016 (although, many students chose to share this information). Instead, we are exploring how conservative club members chose to orient themselves in relation to Trumpism when they had an opportunity to account for their perspectives on the president and his administration.

### Trumpism’s Principled Rejecters

A sizable portion of our conservative club subset—11 out of 26 respondents—felt a strong antipathy toward Trumpism (see Table 1). These students found one or more aspects of the presidency so reprehensible that they could not support the Republican Party’s leader. Principled rejecters’ complaints were similar to those of their left-leaning peers. For example, Sandra, a CR, explained, “I think Donald Trump, as a person, is extremely divisive and unappealing, and some of his rhetoric [verges] on sexism and homophobia, racism, etcetera. So, I really dislike him as a person. I think he has made things a lot worse [...]” Jerry, a member of a libertarian club, told us, “We hated Trump [in our club] because, to us, he was kind of like a statist, fascist guy.” Like Sandra and Jerry, a large majority of principled rejecters expressed their opposition in unambiguous terms. However, these students did not necessarily support Hillary Clinton, either. For some, that would have been a step too far. Many told us they cast their ballots for Gary Johnson (the Libertarian candidate), Evan McMullin (a Never Trump Republican from Utah), or even people not running for the office (such as writing in Mitt Romney).

Regardless of their ideological leanings, nearly everyone we interviewed described Trump’s worldview as indecipherable. For example, we asked students to place the last six presidents (along with other notable figures) on a scale from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Plotting Trump’s location in this way proved excessively difficult for most of our respondents. As Ava, a CR, exclaimed when trying to fill out the diagram, “Oh goodness, I don’t know where to put Donald Trump. [...] I don’t think he actually understands the role of politics in this country at all.” And Ava said this as someone who considers herself generally favorable to the president. As a principled rejecter, Chloe, another CR, said, “I don’t even know what his views are. I’m just going to put him dead in the center because [...] the way he spends is not conservative, but it’s also not liberal. I don’t know. He’s just pttthh.” Ernest, a libertarian, told us, “He’s kind of all over the place.”

Trump’s obtuse belief system is especially troubling for students more aligned with libertarianism than party politics. As Ernest would go on to state, “Trump, I just never saw as somebody who was, first of all, committed to a single platform. [...] He’s] definitely not

**Table 1** Orientation to Trumpism

Principled rejecters		11
Supporters		15
True believers	6	
Satisfied partisans	9	
N		26



somebody who's firmly [supportive of] limited government.” In short, Ernest was bemoaning Trump's abandonment of first principles. Similarly, Steve, a founding member of Young Americans for Liberty (YAL) at his school, was utterly miffed by Trump supporters joining his group. “[...W]e have kids who yell and just don't know what [being a] libertarian is. [...YAL] is supposed to attract people we can get along with: limited-government conservatives, classical liberals, libertarians. And [these] guys are all just Trump supporters. No libertarian would support Trump, I don't think, unless it was completely in their financial interest to do so.” In other words, Trumpism is for the naïve or the cynically self-interested. In either case, for Steve, it was a nonstarter according to his purist views of libertarianism.

### **True Believers in the Presidency**

At the other end of the conservative electorate are those who professed unconditional support for the president and his administration. They might dislike certain aspects of Trump's behavior or take exception to particular stances, but they still remained steadfast boosters. For instance, Layla, a CR, told us, “I think people are genuinely turned off by his use of Twitter.” However, she also explained to us:

I'm behind Trump 100 percent, I would say. Yeah, I just think the amount that he has accomplished since he has taken office has been pretty remarkable. What we've seen with ISIS [...] taking a hit, and with the economy, with the tax cuts, with families now having more freedom to choose how they want to spend their own money when it comes to paying for their children's education—I think that's remarkable.

Support from students like Layla extends beyond just picking Trump (as a Republican candidate) over a Democrat.

Instead, much of what repels principled rejecters attracts true believers. As Ariel, a TPUSA member, stated:

I think he's good for the party because I think the party needed some shaking up. And I think the party needed somebody to go in there and say, “Hey, we're not going by X, Y, Z anymore. We're going to do it the way that we want and in a way that we see best fits.” And I think Trump has rallied up a bunch of conservatives who were just like, “Eh, I'm not going to vote; I don't really care.”

The notion that the Republican Party “needed some shaking up” was a nearly universal theme among true believers but virtually absent among our other interviewees (on this point, see Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017; also see Petersen et al., 2018). Take George. He started the TPUSA chapter at his school as a means to support the Trump campaign. Citing his admiration for figures like Pat Buchanan and Andrew Breitbart, George praised the president, “He stood fast and defended himself, no matter what the accusation was. He just stood up for himself.” That is, George liked the fact that Trump was willing to double down on the rhetoric that students like Sandra found “divisive and unappealing.”

Overall, true believers made up slightly less than half of the Trump supporters we interviewed. Out of our conservative club subset, 15 respondents were favorable toward the president and, of these, six were inveterate Trump backers. On college campuses, therefore, it would seem that if a politically-engaged student has the mettle to cheer on Trump, there is a decent chance they will be full-throated about it. Miles, another TPUSA member, for example, strode across his school's grounds wearing a red Make America Great Again (MAGA) hat and

a Trump t-shirt (which depicted the former reality TV star, amid explosions and a soaring bald eagle, riding atop a gold-plated tank, wielding a rifle) on election day 2016. “I was expecting to get harassed [...on campus]. I almost didn’t wear the outfit. And then I’m like, ‘You know what? This is America. We have a First Amendment. I’m wearing it.’”

### The Satisfied Partisans of the Republican Party

Between the two poles of unwavering rejection and steadfast support is a group we call the satisfied partisans. “Satisfice” represents a tension between something that satisfies and something that merely suffices (Simon 1976). Satisficing is not about trying to maximize for the best possible outcome but about making acceptable decisions from limited options. Thus, while satisfied partisans find much of what Trump does problematic, they continue to choose him over any possible Democratic alternative (although not, perhaps, over Republican challengers). Our interviewees who fit into this group are an especially good window for viewing how conservatives think through their ideas about Trumpism—assessing the positives and negatives using a heuristic of issue preferences and ideological identities (Mason 2018). Satisfied partisans outnumbered true believers in our sample, with nine of 15 expressing ambivalence about Trump.

Arlo is illustrative of the satisficing among CRs. In explaining his willingness to back Trump, he repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction with the president. First, Arlo told us, “I’m not the biggest Trump fan.” He then went on to tell us:

[...]here’re a lot of times that Trump says something and you just want to duck your head in the sand and ignore everything for the next media cycle. [...] I think that, morally, there’s a lot that Trump has done and said that make me question him as a president a little bit. At the same time, if you look at the guy’s legislative achievements, they’re pretty impressive as well. [...]How do you judge the fact that he sends out a lot of tweets that make you want to duck your head in the sand versus the tax cut, which is going to bring [savings to the vast majority of] Americans and really help a lot of people? By measuring those two things, at least in my opinion, the policies, a lot of times, seem to outweigh the personal attributes of the president.

Similarly, McKenzie, another CR, told us she had felt certain Trump would win the White House. “I knew right when he descended [on] the escalator: that man is going to be president.” But, at the time of our interview, she also felt uncertainty about his presidency. “I’m struggling with if I’m happy with the results or not.” That is, like Arlo, McKenzie was stuck trying to balance the benefits of a Trump presidency with what she felt were his sizable costs (“immaturity,” “lack of experience,” etc.).

In fact, as satisfied partisans, both Arlo and McKenzie claimed the ideal set-up going into the 2020 election would be Trump withdrawing from the contest. But this preference was tempered by their desire for a Republican victory. As Arlo explained, “[...]in some ways I’d like to see [Trump get challenged for the party’s nomination] because I have personality issues with the president. But, at the same time, [...] I’d like to see a Republican win [the general election]. If we hurt that chance by having a bloody primary fight, that’s not good either.” Likewise, Dante, a CR, unfavorably contrasted Trump to Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio. “During the primaries, [Trump] wasn’t my candidate of choice. [...] I resisted pretty long, in the sense of wanting to get [a better nominee]. [...] But then, at the same time, I’m not [of the mind] we should try to replace him with another [candidate] right now. I’ve agreed with a lot of the stuff

he [has done] during his first year.” The satisficing of Arlo, McKenzie, and Dante can be contrasted with rejecters, who claimed to have cast their votes for candidates they knew could not win in order to take a principled stand.

## The Influence of Conservative Political Clubs on College Campuses

Having established the three-part typology of collegiate Trumpism, in this section we analyze student-led groups’ influence over the discourses about the president and his administration. First, we should note that it is reasonable to assume that conservatives in the general population could also be broken down into rejecters, believers, and satisficers. However, the percentage within each category would be different, as polls routinely show support for the president to be far higher among registered Republicans than what we found among right-leaning students involved with political clubs. This speaks to the fact that universities simply do not provide a comfortable home for Trumpism. To help explain this, we emphasize disunifying symbols. Unlike anchors, which link disparate themes together, disunifying symbols agitate assumptions of shared meaning by bringing competing practices and discourses into conflict. They reconfigure previously taken for granted similarities into unignorable differences. Specifically, Trumpism unsettles the thin coherence underlying conservative social identity, and this process is particularly acute in political clubs operating on college campuses.

Whereas a theme of community building could tie together LGBT activists pursuing otherwise divergent ends (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011), the Trump presidency disrupts the ideological détente within the American right. In place of a symbiosis of conservative ideas (Perrin et al. 2014; see Himmelstein 1990), we find warring factions of rejecters and believers, with satisficers wringing their hands over the consequences of their choices. Occupants within each category position themselves as the proper defenders of what is now an even more contested conservative social identity. And we argue that political clubs are integral to these varied discursive practices. Which is to say, our analysis is not about isolated individuals expressing unique viewpoints about the president and his administration. Our analysis is about how clubs influence students’ orientations to Trumpism.

We hasten to add here, we are not arguing that Trumpism represents an existential threat to the right flank in higher education. As noted above, there is (and will remain) a vibrant community of meaning among conservatives. Anchors—forged out of symbols connected to individualism, capitalism, and traditionalism—continue to cohere. Further, battles over strategies and identities are part of every social movement (Ghaziani 2008)—especially among the young and idealistic activists enrolled in universities (e.g., see Andrew 1997; Klatch 1999; McAdam 1988). As such, we are studying Trumpism not only because it is singular, but because it offers an opportunity to look at a more generic process of contention within culture.

Ironically, many of our interviewees stated that their clubs were not intended to be places for hashing out fractious arguments. They may join to have a forum for friendly debate among like-minded peers, but their groups are also valued “safe spaces” in which their conservative positions should not require self-justifications (Kidder 2017). Hinting that the weight of Trumpism (along with other disputes) was simply too much to ignore, Billy explained, “We, as conservative organizations, don’t do a good enough job talking about our ideological viewpoints. We have people really all across the spectrum of conservatism here, and we do a pretty poor job of talking about that [...]” The differences alluded to by Billy may not be

addressed in the way he wanted, but our data show that students on the right are actually quite adept at drawing distinctions between their groups vis-à-vis Trumpism—while also situating their own identities in relation to the clubs on their campuses.

### Sieve and Incubators for Campus Politics

Stevens et al. (2008) argue that in studies of higher education, universities are conceptualized as sieves (by allowing only certain students to enter and graduate) and as incubators (by nurturing new skills, knowledge, and ways of being among students). Such an analogy also helps us to better understand political clubs. Student-led groups are sieves that filter through only particular types of prospects (e.g., collegians who identify as Republicans may join CRs, not College Democrats). But, once students are sorted, clubs shape particular social identities in relation to the activism they promote. And initial members of CRs may eventually gravitate to other clubs on campus, which better fit their ideologies and styles of activism.

Many collegians, of course, are not terribly interested in politics to begin with. In 2016 over 40% of entering freshman self-identified as “middle-of-the-road” (Eagan et al. 2017). Many of these, we assume, have no strong activist bent. And for those who are more politically-engaged, most are not coming from the ideological right (in that same survey, only about 22% identified as conservative or far-right). This is the first level of sorting. Most students elect to not join political clubs at all, much less right-leaning ones. Then, for those that are looking to be actively involved with conservative politics, clubs attract members through their ideological positions: classical liberals, evangelical Christians, moderate Republicans, and so on. This is the second level of sorting. Even holding beliefs constant, there is variance in how students want to tackle political issues. Some want to take part in reasoned discussions with their peers. Others want to meet politicians and gain experience working on campaigns. And a certain portion relish the chance for confrontation with their fellow students. Thus, at the third level, prospects are sorted—not only by ideology, but also by political tactics. To this point, Binder and Wood (2013) distinguish between “civil,” “provocative,” “campaign-oriented,” and “highbrow provocative” styles of conservative student activism. In joining clubs, therefore, would-be members have to consider just what type of activists they want to be, and which clubs seem to give them opportunities to engage with their preferred style of activism.

Clubs, however, are not just containers that capture the fully formed activists filtered into them. Rather, social groups have habits and customs that come to define interactions among participants (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). In other words, clubs are also incubators. The activism styles of different groups actually help shape what types of political tactics members come to view as appropriate and desirable (Binder and Wood 2013). While pre-existing preferences attract or repel students to this or that club, once they become members, group-styles normalize some practices while proscribing others. Perrin (2005) refers to this as political microcultures, which constrain and enable different types of discourse. Further, this is always a relational phenomenon. Club participants, Reyes (2015) points out, are aware of what other student-led groups are doing on campus, and this knowledge influences their own style preferences. As such, political clubs play a particularly important role in campus politics.

We can see this dual process of sorting and shaping in conservative clubs through students’ own accounts of their memberships. Specifically, true believers are likely to seek out and stay in TPUSA, while principled rejecters are drawn to libertarian groups. The prominence and storied history of CRs, meanwhile, appears to attract a mix of orientations (with satisficing most common). Sometimes students join clubs only to become disillusioned—dropping out of

the groups or moving on to different ones.<sup>7</sup> However, for students who continue to participate with a club and socialize with its members, their participation comes to influence their political viewpoints. What might be a fringe perspective in one group is commonsense in another. We have already seen hints of this in the preceding sections, but now we turn to this matter directly. In doing so, we can see how struggles over social identity are intertwined with club membership and the way Trumpism functions to disrupt the resonance between different strands of conservatism.

### The Microcultures of Political Clubs

TPUSA was founded in 2012, and for the last eight years their local chapters have found a niche in being the brash conservative club on campuses, less willing than CRs to appease their progressive classmates by tempering their rightist positions.<sup>8</sup> As a national organization, it has stepped onto the mainstage of politics in tandem with Trump's ascendancy in the Republican Party (Kotch 2017; Markay 2018; Rubenstein 2018). And TPUSA's rise on campuses—combined with its inflammatory tactics (Kolowich 2018; Olson 2018)—has upset established right-leaning organizations operating in higher education, including Young America's Foundation (Wegmann 2018).

At the time we collected our data, four out of seven interviewees with a primary affiliation in TPUSA were true believers in Trumpism (see Table 2).<sup>9</sup> This can be contrasted with a mere two out of 14 of CRs and zero of five for libertarians. Miles offered a useful illustration of how TPUSA sorts and shapes in relation to the presidency. We introduced Miles earlier in this paper as the student who wore a MAGA hat and t-shirt with Trump atop a tank. In our interview, Miles described his former self as a “traditional conservative.” He felt shunned by progressives in the build-up to the 2016 election. He told the story of how his best friend cut social ties with him after Miles posted a conservative political statement on social media. This ostracism, though, only emboldened Miles' transition into an extreme Trump supporter. “Afterward, I started taking the attitude, ‘Okay, I’m going to be as political as I can on Facebook and just clean house’ [i.e., intentionally offend those not already on the far-right].” And “That’s when I actually started seeking out Turning Point.” Once in TPUSA, Miles found a small group of equally fiery peers. This gave encouragement to Miles' growing impulse to “clean house” on Facebook but also, in the case of his university, to “take the underground conservative counterculture and put it above ground.” To this end, Miles showed us flyers he was planning to put up around school. They were all designed to infuriate liberal sensibilities. The most provocative one mocked concern over police shootings of black men. Others criticized gun

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting here that unlike the sorting that happens in school admissions, in which students are either filtered in or filtered out, the sieve of political clubs allows movement in both directions. Students can be sorted in and then sort themselves out as they join other groups better aligned with their interests and dispositions.

<sup>8</sup> Since we gathered our data, TPUSA has occasionally come under attack from individuals and groups further to the right (e.g., see Coaston 2019). At our field sites, at the time we conducted our interviews, though, TPUSA was considered *the* group on campus willing to stake out extreme positions and take risks in promoting them.

<sup>9</sup> Politically engaged, right-leaning students are often members of multiple conservative clubs. As a CR, Sandra, told us, “I would say a majority of conservatives on [campus] are members of CRs and they might additionally be members of groups like [Young Americans for Freedom] or Turning Point, but I think we are still, as of right now, anyway, the primary voice for conservatives [in college].” For the analysis offered in this paper, we focus only on what we determined to be students' *primary* affiliation, which we base on interviewees' descriptions of their personal involvements with their various clubs (e.g., holding an official position with a group or discussions of social ties, time investment, etc.).

**Table 2** Orientation to Trump by Primary Club Affiliation

	Principled rejecters	True believers	Satisfied partisans	N
College Republicans (CRs)	5	2	7	14
Turning Point USA (TPUSA)	1	4	2	7
Libertarian groups	5	0	0	5
N	11	6	9	26

regulations and social welfare efforts. While none of the flyers mentioned Trump by name, they touched on popular talking points for the president.

Of the three TPUSA members who were not true believers in the president at the time of our interviews, their dissatisfactions with Trumpism did not track completely with rejecters or satisficers. For example, like other satisfied partisans, both Jaiden and Joaquin expressed ambivalence towards the president and his administration when we talked with them. But each had previously been firm backers. During the campaign, Jaiden unequivocally endorsed Trump in his school's paper while Joaquin attended a Trump speech and even went to the president's inauguration. Trevor, too, had been an ardent booster of Trump's campaign, vocally supporting the candidate on campus and attending rallies. However, he came off as a rejecter when we talked—telling us he had become disillusioned with Trump's ability to get things done in Washington. Nevertheless, Trevor still embraced the populist core of Trumpism; he just no longer had faith in the man for carrying out his agenda. In other words, our discussions with TPUSA members revealed a strong connection between the club and an orientation of belief in Trumpism.

CRs have been the must-join club for activists on the right for many decades. Both Karl Rove and Grover Norquist famously got their starts with the organization. Of the 26 students in our conservative club subset, 14 were primarily affiliated with CRs. Of these 14 CRs, seven were satisfied partisans, while 5 were principled rejecters, and only two were true believers. Thinking about the influence of CRs on its members, Dante's story is instructive. We discussed Dante above, in relation to his desire to not see Trump primaried, despite his lukewarm assessment of the president. Dante told us how he appreciated the serious approach to politics taken by CRs. And he contrasted that with the "trolling type of stuff" done by TPUSA (exemplified by Miles' flyers).

As a member of CRs, Dante was exposed to a variety of conservative viewpoints—many of which challenged his previous assumptions about what a conservative should and should not support.

College Republicans attract a wide ideology[. There are] people across the conservative spectrum, and, more specifically, [I mean with regards to] President Trump and [what] conservatism [should be]. There is a group message [board] with a bunch of [CRs] where there are a lot of arguments over what Trump did. So, being there has helped extend my views on that issue. [...] I definitely think coming into college, I was [...] less knowledgeable. A lot of it was just, "I'll fall [along] party lines" in a sense [of being a] Republican. [...] A lot of the [executive] board members [for the club] are not big Trump people here [...]. [...] They gave me the norm that it's okay to be a Republican and be critical of [Trump]. [...] I think being able to [see...] the president of College Republicans criticize Trump on somethings, [I realized] it's okay to criticize Trump on stuff. I don't have to follow party lines.



In short, Dante came to school believing a “conservative” should simply back the Republican Party. Through CRs, though, Dante came to see principled rejection as an equally valid position for someone on the right. As such, Dante—like many members—came down somewhere in the middle. He acknowledged his displeasure with Trump’s flaws, but also wanted to be pragmatic about America’s political system. Which is to say, if Dante wanted Republican policies signed into law, Trump appeared to be the best choice among flawed options (on this point, also see Pierson 2017), and the CR club he belonged to gave him ample opportunity to work out his ideas.

CRs often prided themselves as being—to use Sandra’s words—“pragmatic about what they want [their] organization to be.” As Billy explained about his chapter’s decision to not bring firebrand speaker, Milo Yiannopoulos, to campus, “I think it was justified by the executive board at the time as a pragmatic concern. [...] ‘We don’t want that stigma. We don’t want to be the group that brought Milo.’ Turning Point, they want to be the group that brought Milo.” Demonstrating the relational dynamic among clubs on campus (Reyes 2015), Billy was fully aware of his membership options. Echoing this sentiment, Silas said of CRs, “We’re not here to fight. We’re here to solve problems. If you want to fight, go somewhere else. Turning Point is right over there.” Which is to say, for CRs, TPUSA has become a foil for what is wrong with conservatism. As a further example, Chloe conceded that TPUSA has “cool stickers,” with slogans like “socialism sucks,” but she also felt the club was “counteracting the work we were doing [to show a more open and diverse party].” And she expanded, “Usually, Turning Point USA’s approach, to us, felt like it was uninviting, and we’re like, ‘Can you please not stand next to us?’ Like, [CRs] want people to [come to our events].”

George’s explanation for why he started a TPUSA chapter at his school speaks to the flipside of this perspective, with TPUSA members critiquing CRs.

So, when Trump was going to run in 2016, I went out and campaigned for him on campus. I was one of only three or four people who did [...]. I don’t see any leadership from the College Republicans for doing any type of activism work on campus or trying to persuade anyone [to vote for Trump] or get people riled up to go out and do stuff. I felt like there was a need for that. [...CRs] don’t really like to be controversial at all. They just kind of stick to themselves [...].

That is, the satisfied partisanship of CRs (much less the principled rejection of some members) did not provide the sort of enthusiasm for Trumpism that George was looking for in a political club. As a result, he turned to the resources provided by the national office of TPUSA to start his own club.

While there was a strong contingent of principled rejecters in CRs, members of the libertarian clubs we interviewed were unanimous in denouncing Trumpism. For example, we previously noted Ernest’s critique of the president and his administration for not adhering to an ideological platform. However, Ernest also told us how in high school he had been a “pretty mainstream Republican. At one point I actually bought a Reagan-Bush shirt.”<sup>10</sup> But, even before coming to college, he started shifting towards more libertarian ideals. “I started having doubts about certain things, like the military and marijuana. I started looking into it more.” It is this inquisitiveness that led him to join a libertarian club. “I was definitely not as

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Reagan has been beatified among younger Republicans, and campaign shirts from the 1984 election have become conservative chic in recent years. In telling us this, Ernest is positioning his former self as a typical Republican, not a true (free-thinking) libertarian.



libertarian as I am now, when I came to college. That was influenced by my friends in Students for Individual Liberty [SIL].” Ernest also contrasted the provocations of TPUSA with his political outlook. “I would say [...] Turning Point [is] just as disconnected from my views as those on the left.” Instead, SIL members prided themselves on having serious intellectual discussions (e.g., inviting scholars from the Cato Institute to give talks).

In fact, more than just promoting a cerebral environment, libertarian club members often described a desire for intellectual sparring. On this point, Hugh explained, “Thankfully, [...] we’re willing to bash literally anyone and everyone. [...] We are willing to see the flaws in our own arguments, in our own movement, and address them.” In the context of our interview, Hugh’s description of being “willing to bash” other viewpoints was couched in an academic mindset of reasoned debate. And the product of this intellectualism was one in which Trumpism was simply outside the realm of serious conservative thought. This is also why Steve (quoted above) was so bothered by Trump supporters joining YAL. From Steve’s perspective, they just wanted to “yell” rightwing talking points. They did not want to get into philosophical expositions on the true nature of conservatism, as he envisioned the members of the club should be doing.

## Conclusion

Using the three types of political clubs featured in this paper, we can see the significant role student-led groups play in supporting or resisting Trumpism on college campuses. TPUSA has led the charge in advocating for a more provocative, populist-oriented conservatism—one with President Trump at the very center of campus chapters’ practices and discourses. Alternatively, CRs have been riven by Trumpism. Pragmatism dominates among our CR respondents, but it is an uneasy position to be in. To quote Arlo again, “you just want to duck your head in the sand.” The students associated primarily with libertarian clubs, by contrast, were comfortable in denouncing the presidency outright. However, their groups were also largely removed from electoral politics, and their dislike of Trump was mostly academic.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, our interviews with members of political clubs on college campuses allowed for what Zussman (1996) calls “autobiographical occasions.” In asking a variety of questions about activism, politics, and college life, we provided a context for students to develop self-narratives. Among right-leaning collegians, such discussions were mostly about asserting a valued portrayal of their conservative social identity (Gross et al. 2011). And respondents’ orientations to Trumpism was a prominent component of how students attempted to position themselves in relation to others on the right.

We talked to principled rejecters who joined their left-leaning peers in condemning the president and his administration. But we also heard from supporters of the presidency. True believers embraced the shake-up promised by Trumpism, while satisfied partisans touted being pragmatic about the limits of the US electoral process. More important than the typology of Trumpism itself is our analysis of political clubs’ influence on orienting members toward distinct positions about the president and his administration. Groups have styles (Eliasoph and

<sup>11</sup> Libertarian students’ withdrawal from electoral politics is not necessarily the position of the national organizations that help sponsor their groups on campuses. YAL, for example, supports a highly orchestrated student mobilization effort to help chosen candidates in local and state races (known as Operation Win at the Door). However, campaigning (especially for traditional Republican politicians) was not a key interest among the libertarians in our sample. If anything, participation in these groups appears to promote an intellectual cynicism toward electoral politics.

Lichterman 2003), which mold the political discourses of participants (Binder and Wood 2013; Reyes 2015). We show the sorting and shaping of clubs by examining the rejection found in libertarian groups, the belief in TPUSA, and the satisficing in CRs. Each club exerted pressure on participants by providing “social environments that [...] offer different resources for political thought and action” (Perrin 2005, 1050).

For anyone interested in (or concerned about) American democracy, the influence of political clubs on campuses is a crucial consideration because these groups are not managed by students alone. Activism, especially on the right, is funded by deep-pocketed donors (Mayer 2016) and supported through a network of national organizations (Binder 2017; Binder and Wood 2013). This investment has become part of a battle over the heart and soul of the Republican Party. Universities are one of the epicenters for the conflict. Many of the students we interviewed have already been foot soldiers in the fight; some will go on to become commanders. As such, what is happening inside political clubs today on campuses is a part of what will define American politics at large tomorrow.

Our future research—pulling from our full sample—will address the role of national organizations in campus politics (for the left and the right). In this paper we have provided a preliminary step by shedding new light on collegiate conservatism. Specifically, we have analyzed Trumpism as a divider of the right. In making their identity claims, club members frequently referenced the presidency. It was used as a symbol—not to anchor disparate constituencies (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011) but one—that agitated differences. Researchers need to grapple with the concurrence of cultural anchors *and* disunifying symbols. Nothing in our argument negates the fact that many themes continue to unite students on the right. For our respondents, personal independence, the power of free markets, and the value of tradition helped bond members of various clubs together. But there were also themes that disrupted this unity, and Trumpism stands out in our interviews as generating a great deal of contentious identity talk among conservatives.

Further, symbols of disunity are not unique to students on the right. While we do not have space to analyze progressives in this paper, they too inhabit contested communities of meaning. Themes of multiculturalism and social justice, for example, pull left-leaning students into a sense of ideological alignment. Conversely, free speech—once a prominent anchor for progressives—has become a fracture point between liberals and radicals (e.g., see Moskowitz 2019). Which is to say, collegians on the left are increasingly divided over the meaning of “free speech” and how it relates to their shared values of equality. As with Trump for conservatives, disagreements over free speech for progressives is about more than any one policy decision or a single speaker. It has become a rift in what it should mean to occupy the left side of the ideological spectrum.

At the same time, the symbolic power of free speech to disunify the left seems less robust—in our current data, at least. As such, in this paper, we have focused on the ways conservatives discussed the president and his administration. During the first full year Trump occupied the Oval Office (i.e., the time we conducted our interviews), Trumpism on college campuses offered a unique opportunity for studying the boundaries of thin coherence. To be a rejecter, believer, or satisficer required (and, presumably, still requires) drawing from competing discourses of what a conservative social identity means—discourses molded by the microcultures in which students are embedded. Of course, there is nothing new or surprising about divisiveness within social movements. In the data we have presented, though, we see how Trumpism was actually used in students’ images of self and—most crucially—how this identity talk was intertwined with club memberships.

We also believe there is a great deal of potential for researchers to build on the groundwork we have laid in this paper. Thinking not only of anchors, but also of the ways cultural meanings

become unmoored, helps us better understand an increasingly complex political landscape. Moving forward, sociologists need to explore symbolic disunity in other aspects of social movements, as well as in the quotidian beliefs of ordinary citizens. Appreciating both the thin coherence of culture along with the limits of individuals and groups to find common cause will enrich the analyses we have to offer on how contemporary democracies actually function. And, as we have attempted to highlight in this paper, group memberships—along with the activism styles they encourage—play a significant role in what political engagement entails.

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