

Navigating Conservatism in Trump's America: How the Penn State College
Republicans Construct and Perform Political Discourses and Realities on
Campus

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the Penn State College Republicans that attempts to explain how the students understand and perform conservatism as white, middle-class Americans in the midst of Trump's presidency. I argue that the College Republicans find discursive and performative ways to negotiate and define their political outlooks and realities so that they combine classic elements of conservatism but still align with contemporary Trumpian-style politics to a degree. The students rely on particular discursive and performative tactics in order to express their beliefs regarding class-status and privilege, political realities on campus, and feminist social movements in America. I further argue that the College Republicans display their discontent with the changing social and political landscape in America by rejecting political correctness.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The official launch of Donald Trump's campaign for presidency in June 2015 led to controversy that followed the populist, unpolished, "not-a-politician" candidate constantly thereafter. Trump's antics, including but not limited to demanding Hillary Clinton be "locked up" as well as insisting America "build the wall" along the Mexican border, were a thrill to many of his supporters: finally, they had someone on *their side* who was not afraid to speak his mind, "stick it to the man," and go head to head with the elites who, in their opinion, overlook and disregard lower class Americans in the pursuit of the upper-class' best interests. "Their side" refers to the predominantly white and predominantly male voters who were fed up with seeing *their* income, *their* opportunities, and *their* social spaces shared amongst demographics that did not previously hold high economic or social privilege in America. Trump's anti-elitist, anti-immigrant, "America-first" rhetoric appealed to these voters who did not want to give up what they viewed as rightfully theirs to undeserving minorities. Though Trump garnered a large base of enthusiasts with his brazen, outspoken discourse, his behaviour and approach to politics threw Republicans across America into a state of disarray; many Republicans were appalled by his behaviour and viewed his "brave outspokenness" as unrefined foolishness. As a result, Republicans who do not necessarily support Trump but who hold conservative values have spent the last few years renegotiating what it means to be a conservative in America. This is especially true amongst young Republicans who are forming and solidifying their political opinions on college campuses and who may

partially agree with those who saw Trump as *their guy* and with those who view Trump's ideologies and policies as unappealing.

This thesis is an ethnographic study of conservatism amongst the Pennsylvania State University College Republicans in State College, PA, and serves to explore how young Republican students negotiate and express their political opinions and realities on campus in the midst of Trump's presidency. Their daily lives on campus consist of a carefully constructed combination of dancing to the beat of Trump's drum at times and dancing to the beat of their own at others; Penn State is a space where the College Republicans discover how their understanding of conservatism aligns with the style presented by Trump as well as more traditional understandings of conservatism presented by their families and their peers. Ultimately, the students are able to construct their political selves in a space where their views are sometimes affirmed and sometimes challenged by those around them, allowing them to both solidify and re-examine what conservatism means to them on an ongoing basis. Constructions and negotiations of their political selves and opinions happen in their daily interactions with strangers, professors, and other College Republicans: through the interviews they give me, their interactions in classrooms, and the stories they tell each other, conservatism is produced and expressed differently in their day-to-day experiences. In this thesis, I will explore how conservatism is expressed discursively by my informants and examine what it indicates regarding their perspectives on class-status and privilege in America, their political realities and how they align with the public political realities of a liberal university¹, and their

¹ The extent of Penn State's liberal influence is perhaps up for debate, and it is true that the campus houses a multitude of political perspectives and groups, but I refer to the space as primarily liberal for two reasons: firstly, my informants' describe the campus and their professors and peers as being liberal-leaning and see

understandings of masculinity and feminism in the midst of social movements promoting change in America. The reoccurring theme throughout the thesis is my informants' aversion to "political correctness": the College Republicans feel that political correctness is becoming more prominent in America, and as they construct their political selves at Penn State, they do so with the knowledge that political correctness is changing the social and political landscape in America in ways that they do not support and in ways that do not necessarily benefit them as white, middle-class Americans.

In the following chapters, I will explore how my informants discursively express and perform their conservatism: in chapter 2, I will explore the importance of economic fiscal conservatism and examine its relationship to middle-classness, the American Dream, and issues of privilege and racial diversity, ultimately concluding that the College Republicans sense that their social privilege as white, middle-class Americans is being threatened, and thus they attempt to maintain the country's economic status quo in order to preserve their privileged position. In chapter 3, I will examine how my informants performatively produce their political selves in their daily lives on campus, primarily focusing on their interactions with interviewers as well as with one another, and will suggest that the students use discursive strategies that are popular among contemporary Republicans in order to deflect undesirable stereotypes as well as to influence political realities in public spaces where these collective realities are negotiated. In chapter 4, I will explore the hegemonic masculinity amongst the students and explore how their

themselves as the minority political group on campus, stating that there is "liberal bias on pretty much every college campus". Further, Binder and Wood (2013) suggest that because of course content on topics such as gender equality, racial diversity, and the LGBT+ community, many conservative students at American universities view the students and professoriate as overwhelmingly liberal.

understandings of masculinity and gender realities in politics result in the rejection of feminism and non-traditional displays of masculinity, ultimately concluding that the students believe traditional, masculine-coded characteristics are under attack, as are historically male-spheres of society, and as a result, the students only accept a very narrow understanding of masculinity as legitimate and only accept stereotypical characteristics as those that define a strong leader. As mentioned above, each of these chapters will explore how the rise of “political correctness” in American society impacts and shapes the College Republicans’ political outlooks and performances. Ultimately, this thesis will explore how the College Republicans navigate contemporary politics and resolve tensions between traditional conservative discourse and modern, outspoken Trumpian-style politics with different discursive and performative strategies. As a result, this thesis aims to provide insight into contemporary conservatism amongst young Republican Americans amid Trump’s presidency.

My Interest: The 2016 Election and Aftermath

As the ballots were cast for the 2016 presidential election I was completing my honours thesis at the University of Alberta. The thesis compared the linguistic political performances of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump during the second presidential debate, and it was during this time that I developed an interest in understanding Trump’s rhetorical style; terms like “fake news” and “alternative facts” were entering the public lexicon for the first time as a result of the new administration, and though many people denounced these terms and ideas, myself included, many Trump supporters embraced

them. Thus, I became interested in understanding why this performative political style, which suggested, for example, that “facts” are subjective, resonated with so many voters and, further, how it resulted in a change in the understanding and construction of conservatism in America. Journalists and scholars attempted to explain the popularity of Trump’s political rhetoric at the time, as the headlines show:

“How Trump Won: The Democratic Party’s Abandonment of the Working Class Cleared the Space for Trump” (Purdy 2016)

“Behind Trump’s win in rural white America: Women joined men in backing him” (Morin 2016)

“Why the rural poor love Donald Trump” (Williams 2016)

The explanations offered by popular media focused on describing Trump supporters as rural, uneducated, and working-class, and while it is true that Trump was popular among white rural voters², this explanation does not fully address Trump’s success. Specifically, the focus on rural, working-class Americans does not account for the millions of middle-class, university educated individuals who voted for Trump³, leaving a significant gap in the understanding of what inspired voters to support his controversial and, at times,

² Among white voters who had not completed college, (44% of all voters), Trump won by a margin of 64% to 28%. See: For Most Trump Voters, ‘Very Warm’ Feelings for Him Endured (2018) for more.

³ Among white voters with a four year college degree (or more education), 38% voted for Trump (though 55% voted for Clinton). While not a majority, a significant number of white college graduates supported Trump. See: For Most Trump Voters, ‘Very Warm’ Feelings for Him Endured (2018) for more.

widely-criticized 2016 campaign. Thus, in addition to the goals outlined above, this research aims to fill this gap and provide insight into university educated Republicans, many of whom voted for Trump in 2016.

In the months following Trump's victory, Americans became increasingly divided, as evidenced by the slew of protests that erupted in the wake of the election. Examples of these protests include demonstrations opposing Trump's official inauguration, the Women's March, and Not My Presidents Day, among several others. Most of these protestors were "Never Trumpers" who were displaying their discontent with Trump's official presidential policies and unofficial remarks – most notably those that were prejudiced toward women and racial minorities. However, Trump supporters were still holding their own rallies frequently in order to voice their support for the new president, and these two sides clashed constantly, most infamously and unfortunately during the Unite the Right rally, which resulted in a counter-protestor being killed by a far-right extremist. As these hostile encounters further divided Americans, the Republican Party experienced similar tensions amongst some of its most prominent politicians, with many party members, including Mitt Romney and John McCain, publicly denouncing Trump. The party reflected the public as it was, in many ways, thrown into a state of disarray; Republicans could not uniformly decide whether to support the party's new leader or to oppose his outspoken attitude and unconventional political approach. As I planned my graduate research project on the topic, I discovered that this divide within both the general public and the Republican party was occurring on a recursive scale amongst College Republicans across the United States: these university student clubs were experiencing just as much turmoil as the rest of the country and the

national party. As my project took shape and my research topic became clear, I came to learn that this was a serious point of contention for the group that I would undertake fieldwork with at Penn State; the students could not agree as to whether or not they would, or *should*, support Trump's campaign.

My Expectations: Tales of Turmoil at Penn State

When the Republican National Convention selected Trump as the party's nominee for the 2016 election, before the election even took place, College Republicans across the United States faced a dilemma they had not before: whether or not they should endorse the controversial nominee. Ultimately, several College Republicans groups from prominent universities opted to not support Trump: for the first time in 128 years, College Republicans at Harvard University refused to endorse the Republican candidate, citing Trump's "racist slander" (Harvard Republican Club 2016) and "misogynistic taunts" (ibid) as the reason for this choice, and Duke University followed suit (Godfrey 2018). The University of Virginia rescinded their support after the release of the Access Hollywood tape in which Trump made predatory remarks toward women (Godfrey 2018). At Penn State, a vote was held among the board members, and with roughly 72% voting against official endorsement, it was determined that they would not be supporting the Republican nominee in his bid for presidency (ibid). This led to a serious dispute between members of the group and ultimately resulted in several members opting to leave the Penn State College Republicans in order to found their own official political club in support of Trump. This newly formed student club, which was initially called the

We Are For Trump, later became the Bull Moose Party. They were immediately the center of conflict on campus, especially in the weeks leading up to the election: they attempted a coup of the College Republicans as a result of their decision to not back the presidential nominee; they interrupted College Republican meetings to hurl insults at board members and to chant “Trump, Trump, Trump” (Godfrey 2018); they built a makeshift wall on the Old Main Lawn, drawing the ire of hundreds of their peers (Baumgarten 2016); and they were allegedly at the centre of a homophobic and racist rant posted on a public but anonymous chatroom called GroupMe, which was directed at the then-president of the Penn State College Republicans (McKelvey 2016). The tension was so high that students on campus were labeling the Bull Moose Party a hate group and were calling for action from the president of the university, likening the club to the KKK (Herdle 2016). Across campus, as within the political clubs themselves, students were polarized. It is important to note that, as with many universities, Penn State is a predominantly liberal space, a reality of campus life that is acknowledged by my informants and that ultimately shapes the social context of their interactions. Therefore, the actions of Republican students on campus are scrutinized constantly, a phenomenon that will be explored in relation to my informants and their performative political choices on campus in more detail throughout the thesis.

As a result of the tension and conflict on campus in the weeks leading up to the 2016 election, which was well documented by Pennsylvania news outlets, I expected to find multiple Republican clubs on campus and, further, I expected them to be at odds with one another. I also anticipated encountering some very outspoken Trump supporters in these groups, especially considering the fact that my fieldwork coincided with the 2018

midterm elections and, as a result, political alignment would be at the center of conversation amongst the students. What I found instead is that the Bull Moose Party had disbanded sometime after the spring 2018 semester ended, though someone was keeping their social media pages active. Further, I discovered from my informants that some of the “reasonable” members of the Bull Moose Party rejoined the College Republicans and, as a result of uniting as a single club once again, much less drama stems from the group. The Bull Moose Party’s legacy on campus and the former members of the group, who are now College Republicans, will be discussed in detail throughout this thesis, as their actions, both past and present, continue to impact the political choices and performances of the current College Republicans as they construct their political discourse and navigate the liberal landscape of Penn State and the changing social spaces of America more generally. Further, the events involving the Bull Moose Party are a significant part of this thesis as the tensions they created – and, in some ways, continue to create – on campus are representative of the conflicts that young American conservatives are experiencing contemporarily as they construct their political selves in the midst of a presidency that adopts unconventional political discourse and tactics. Therefore, discussions of the Bull Moose Party provide relevant context for understanding the processes of self and discourse construction amongst young conservatives that will be explored throughout this thesis.

Ultimately, what I found at Penn State is a group of young Republican Americans with varying conservative beliefs and performances, but a group that nevertheless manages to form friendships with one another and to work together to promote Republican ideas on campus by organizing debates, hosting guest speakers, and

campaigning for local Republican politicians. Though they do not share homogenous opinions nor constructions of political realities, they are all students who find common ground in their dislike of political correctness and the way it is changing white, male, middle-class privilege in America. Perhaps most surprisingly, I discovered that many of these students are not as outspokenly pro-Trump as I anticipated; as mentioned above, and as will be discussed in great detail throughout these chapters, the students all construct their own understanding of conservatism in America in ways that are both aligned with Trump and his supporters and aligned with other political opinions and realities that they are exposed to by their families and friends on campus. As a result of this synthesis between Trumpian-style politics and other understandings of conservatism, by choosing young, educated conservatives as the main focus of this thesis, I am in a favourable position to study the dynamics of contemporary American conservatism.

Methodology

After learning of the turmoil at Penn State with regards to the election, I determined that the campus would be an ideal place to undertake fieldwork. Getting in touch with the Penn State College Republicans proved to be a challenge, but in August 2018, I was finally able to get in contact with a board member of the group who would go on to become one of my main informants: William. He informed me of several events the club would be hosting over the course of the semester and confirmed that I was welcome to join. The first of these events was a recruitment activity that was part of the university's annual Clubs Fair in late August. Thus, on August 22nd, I made the drive

down to State College, believing that the event was a-go and that I could start my participant observation that day. I arrived at the campus HUB, a central administrative building, at noon and was informed that the Clubs Fair had been rained out – on a suspiciously sunny and warm day – and that it was postponed “indefinitely”. Wanting to make the most of my time in Pennsylvania, I went up to the College Republican’s office on the third floor and met with two other board members who would become important informants later in the semester: McKinley and Howard. After knocking on the door, which, to my surprise, had a photo of Clinton tacked on the front (placed there, I later discovered, by the College Democrats, whose office was next door), I was invited in and held an informal interview with McKinley and Howard as they told me about their upcoming events and reaffirmed that I was welcome to join the group during the semester. Despite their willingness to facilitate my ethnography, the theme of unanswered emails and cancelled events were a constant throughout the semester: students showed up 30 minutes to an hour late for interviews, office hours I intended to drop in on were cancelled without warning, and one student timidly backed out of an interview altogether. It was clear early on that, despite their willingness to let me join their events, my interviews were not a priority for the students. In a similar vein, many anticipated activities were cancelled, including the annual Truth Week event, during which many speakers are brought to campus to engage with the Republican students, such as representatives of the NRA. The reason for these cancellations was out of the students control, as it was the result of funding issues with the university. As a result, much of my time on campus was spent waiting for students to arrive for interviews and trying to find out information about activities from whoever was in the office when I

arrived. This is perhaps unsurprising, as many of the students were seniors preparing for midterms, both in class and in government, and thus had many obligations that were more important than answering my questions regarding their political beliefs. It did, however, pose challenges as it limited the number of interviews I was able to conduct during my time at Penn State.

Thus, the majority of data collection for this thesis occurred over a three week period in November 2018, with a few trips to State College having been made in late summer and early fall to establish contact and meet the group. Before, during, and after the midterm elections I was able to conduct participant observation during three official club meetings that involved all five board members and approximately fifteen other club members. During these meetings, which lasted for approximately 45 minutes each, I was able to sit amongst the students in a classroom on campus, listen to their conversations with one another, and participate in their discussion of upcoming group activities and political events. I also participated in these additional activities, which included attending a senatorial community debate, during which the College Republicans and I sat in the audience as they wrote down questions to ask local candidates who then debated their answers, as well as observing a call centre on election day that involved various club members volunteering to phone local voters and encourage them to vote for Republican candidates. Thus, much of my time conducting participant observation with the group was spent sitting with them in various spaces on campus as they discussed and shared their Republican beliefs both with one another as well as with other Penn State students and State College voters. In addition to conducting participant observation, I conducted three in-person interviews with three people, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes,

and had in-depth, informal conversations with two of these people on several occasions. My key informants consisted of one woman and two men; the club president and two other board members, respectively. The rest of the data, outside of group events and interviews, was gathered by listening to on-campus podcast debates and by reading the numerous articles written both by members of College Republicans and by other on-campus journalists about the group. By gathering information from these media sources I was able to explore my informants' interactions with other interviewees and examine their responses during political debates. Further, I was able to supplement my own interview findings with additional examples.

It is important to note that information about my informants is easily accessible online as a result of their willingness to speak to local media and their desire to author their own political articles. Pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis and identifying information has been removed wherever possible, but in some cases, anonymizing my participants has posed a challenge as, ultimately, they do not wish to remain anonymous: their online article contributions and their involvement with several different political organizations means that their personal information is posted on several different websites. For many members of the College Republicans, including more than one of my informants, this is because they wish to pursue a career in politics upon graduating, and, therefore, by "putting their name out there", they are able to network with others in their chosen field. Thus, while I do not directly discuss any of my informants' personal information nor state their real names, it is possible to find if one digs deep enough, simply because the students want it to be found; in the era of the Internet, networking is

an important part of being a university student, and it is an important part of finding career prospects for Penn State graduates.

Chapter Two: Fiscal Conservatism, Socialism, and Privilege – Economics as a Tool to Discuss Threatened Social Status and Superiority in America

It was a cool, rainy morning in early November and I was driving from Ottawa, ON to State College, PA, ready to begin three weeks of fieldwork. This was not my first time visiting Penn State, as I had previously joined the College Republicans in August and October, but neither of these prior trips were for as long a stay nor so close to the midterm elections, which were now less than a week away. On my previous trips, I had noticed campaigning; my informants had organized an afternoon of door-knocking for their local Senate candidate, Jake Corman, and I had joined them in October in the audience of the League of Women Voters Candidates' Night Debate, during which Corman and others laid out their policies and promises to voters. By the beginning of November, however, the local campaigns for House and Senate candidates had increased substantially. Throughout upstate New York, a significant number of lawns were decorated in pro-Trump flags and signs – many of which I suspect were on display year-round – and the radio waves and billboard signs bombarded motorists with messages demonizing ISIS, abortion, and Nancy Pelosi as the local Republican nominees vied for a vote from an increasingly polarized public. Upon arriving in Pennsylvania, I was greeted by a set of shoddy, homemade signs in the small town of Mill Hall. In bold black letters on faded yellow, aligned one behind another along a 50 metre stretch of highway, the

weathered signs read: WHEN DO LIBERALS BECOME SOCIALISTS???? *JUST VOTE* REPUBLICAN. I slowed down, pulled over, and turned around in an abandoned gravel parking lot so that I could drive back down the highway and get another glimpse of the signs. I quickly understood the message they were trying to convey: that socialism was a) *clearly* on the rise and b) posed a threat that locals should be fearful of. This was not the first explicit denunciation of socialism that I experienced during my fieldwork, nor would it be the last.

These assumptions and declarations regarding socialism in America are a significant part of this chapter as I will explore the primary concern of my informants: economics. As will be explained throughout this chapter, the focus on economics and its use as a discursive tool plays an important role in my informants construction of their political selves in the midst of Trump's presidency. I will explore this topic by first examining the values that the students state are important to them as Republican voters, which are closely aligned with the ideals of the American Dream. These values include individualism, self-reliance, and a strong work ethic. Then, I will discuss their strong belief in fiscal conservatism, which is also a significant aspect of the American Dream, in relation to their middle-class status and, in some cases, upwardly mobile families. Further, I will describe their self-declared fear of socialism and ultimately argue that their focus on economic concerns is just one part of a much greater underlying concern regarding social change in America and is a declaration of their privileged position. However, I will begin the next section with a brief overview of the history of the middle-class.

Middle-Class History and Characteristics

Before discussing my informants' concerns and the relationship between their middle-class status and conservative values, I will discuss the history and defining characteristics of the middle-class in order to establish a background for the interpretation to follow.

Toward the end of World War II, in 1944, the G.I. Bill was created to help servicemen returning from the war begin a successful life in America, and it did so by beginning a wide-spread middle-classing project. This is not to say that this was the beginning of the middle-class as a brand new socioeconomic status in America, but that it was the beginning of the middle-class as the most populous class status in America. Among other benefits, the G.I. Bill granted men⁴ who served at least one year of paid college education, with an additional month of funding for each additional month served (Mettler 2005, 26). This meant that all tuition fees were covered and that monthly subsistence payments were issued that greatly exceeded the cost of living at the time. Thus, those who would not have previously been able to afford a college education had the financial means to attend. This new means of affording a college education occurred in conjunction with another social change taking place in America after the war: the changing category of "whiteness" (Brodin 1994, 87). Prior to World War II, immigrants of certain ethnicities were not considered "white" in America; namely, Jews, Irishmen, Italians, and eastern Europeans. Further, colleges were institutions that traditionally reserved enrollment for white men. However, following the war on fascism,

⁴ While these benefits did not officially discriminate against women and were not gender-specific, it was much more difficult for women to cash in on these benefits. See: Mettler (2005) for more.



Figure 1. Anti-socialism signs in Mill Hall, PA.

discrimination against eastern Europeans, and especially anti-Semitism, fell out of fashion, so to speak, in America⁵ (Brodkin 1994). Many young men from these ethnic backgrounds served in the war and, thus, upon returning home, found that the category of “whiteness” expanded to include them and that they too could reap the benefits of the G.I. Bill and receive a college education. Thus, those who would have previously struggled to attend college as a result of their ethnicity were able to do so⁶. Because these men, who had previously been limited to working-class labour jobs, were able to attend college, they were able to work in “professional” careers that included new titles such as

⁵ This is not to suggest that anti-Semitism abruptly ended in America, just that it became less overt and explicit following WWII.

⁶ The changing category of “whiteness” opened up opportunity for some previously marginalized ethnicities but was not extended to black American men or immigrants from outside of Europe.

business managers (Cullen 2003). This new group of “professional” men opened up a new class position, as they occupied a space where they were higher class than the labourers who worked for them but were lower class than the owners of the businesses they managed. They belonged to the “middle-class” and their salaries allowed them to buy into this class lifestyle by owning houses and purchasing cars and other desirable consumer goods; material proof that they were no longer working-class citizens (Ortner 2003).

With this middle-classing project and new material lifestyle came the creation of suburbs, which, from the outset, have exemplified the complex convergence of racial tensions and the American middle-class. Suburbs – residential areas on the outskirts of busy city-centers – boomed following WWII, as more families with middle-class salaries desired homes in communities where they could raise their children away from business districts and nearer to parks and schools. However, from the beginning, suburbs were a place of social disconnect that lacked social integration and, specifically, lacked racial diversity, as suburbs have traditionally been understood as white spaces (Archer et al. 2015). In many suburbs, including Levittown, “America’s first suburb” (Oliver 2017), racial discrimination and segregation was official policy, as houses were only sold to white families; the founder of the suburb insisted that if black families moved into the neighborhood, white people would be less likely to buy properties and move to the area (Oliver 2017). This narrow reality of suburbia has dominated both common cultural understandings as well as academic literature since the 1940s and 1950s when suburbs like Levittown were established; only white, middle-class homeowners belong in these

“good” neighborhoods⁷, and black families or other minorities that move into the area cause a cultural unrest (Winddance Twine 1996). The integration of minority families into suburban neighborhoods frequently results in “white flight;” the process of re-segregating the United States into white suburbs and racialized ghettos (Avila 2004). In this process, white families leave the community that is experiencing an increase in minority integration in order to seek out another “good” – or white – neighborhood. Thus, it is evident that these middle-class spaces were, and still are, about more than just one’s economic status; they are about one’s social and racial status as a privileged, white American (Winddance Twine 1996). The integration of minority families into white spaces has caused a cultural anxiety for white Americans since this middle-classing project began, and recent sources show this trend continues among the contemporary American middle-class (ibid). Thus, when the privileges afforded to white, middle-class Americans are replicated by minority groups as the middle-class expands, there is a particular cultural tension that results.

Racial tensions are also important in understanding the history of the appeal of Republicanism to white Americans of certain classes: Republicans have relied on exploiting racial tensions in order to secure votes from disgruntled, white, lower and middle-class Americans for decades. Dionne (1991) suggests that racial politics has been crucial to the Republican Party’s resurgence since the late 1960s. More specifically, racial tensions allowed Republicans to gain popularity, particularly in the South, by

⁷ This is an example of coded language; “good neighborhoods” always refer to predominantly white spaces, while “inner city” or “urban” spaces reference neighborhoods that are dominated by racial minorities. Thus, a “good neighborhood” is a “white neighborhood”, and when racial minorities move to the area, it is no longer viewed as a “good” space but rather one that has been polluted in some way. See: DiAngelo (2011) for more.

inciting fear and discontent around the Democratic Party's support of civil rights; Republican politicians like Nixon and Goldwater won the votes of the Deep South for the first time in nearly a century by appealing to white racism and by taking advantage of class inequalities (Dionne 1991). Lower and middle-class white Americans were most threatened by the Civil Rights Movement, as they were more likely than upper-class whites to have black Americans enter similar occupations and neighborhoods as them, and thus Republicans appealed to the growing fear and anger of white people in these classes. As a result, Republicans in the 1960s were able to sway the vote in their favor by appealing to the grievances felt by white voters in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. The same resentment that resulted in the South becoming predominantly Republican-controlled is arguably still fueling fear and a sense of loss amongst predominantly white male voters contemporarily, a theme that will be explored in more detail below and throughout this thesis. The fact that white middle-class Americans were targeted in particular by Republican politicians is significant as the middle-class has distinct characteristics and a precariousness that distinguishes it from other classes.

The growth of the middle-class and its establishment as the most populous class in America meant that it had characteristics that distinguished it from the upper and working-class, which had both existed for much longer. Though the creation of this new status resulted in changes in the characteristics of each class status, the most significant characteristic that developed as distinctly middle-class was instability. Historically, the upper and working classes have been distinguished by a lack of class mobility; being born into an upper-class family meant that you maintained an upper-class position throughout your life, with little chance of abruptly falling into the working-class. The

same was true of the working-class, as suddenly jumping into the upper-class was extremely difficult and uncommon. This is not to say that upward and/or downward mobility was impossible for the upper and lower classes, but that it was significantly less common and posed a less pressing concern. Contrarily, the middle-class was, and still is, precarious and unstable, as mobility both up and down the proverbial class ladder is easier for the middle-class; the fear of their economic status suddenly and drastically changing as a result of a lost job is more present in the minds of those in the middle-class. Though members of the upper-class also experience downward mobility, it is generally a less precarious and more stable class position fraught with less class anxiety than the middle-class (Newman 1988, 21). The fear of falling, or the fear of downward mobility, is an idea first explored in detail by Ehrenreich (1989) who attempted to explain why those in the “professional managerial class”, or PMC, who significantly impact America’s political direction, became increasingly conservative in the 1960s. As they were throughout the latter half of the 20th century, middle-class families are plagued with the fear of intragenerational downward mobility, where one sees their personal socioeconomic achievements deteriorate, often after the loss of a job, which results in one sliding into the working-class (Newman 1988). For those in the middle-classes, the working-class represents the memory of their own recently-shed, poorer past that they do not desire to return to (Ortner 2003, 52). The fear of intergenerational downward mobility exists as well, and is what prompts middle-class parents to pressure their children to succeed academically, and, similarly, what encourages them to financially support their children as they become adults: the anxiety within the middle-class is a result of the fact that the recreation of this class status relies entirely on the educational potential and

career prospects of middle-class children. Education acts as a mover of class status, and if children are unable or unwilling to dedicate a significant portion of their adolescence and young adult life to prospering academically so as to attain a lucrative career position, the threat of the family's class status changing in the future is always present. Ultimately, this middle-class fear of falling stems from the awareness that maintaining class status through education is precarious and not guaranteed (Ehrenreich 1989, 83; Hill 2015; Ortner 1998). Moreover, moving from the middle-class to the upper-class is less common, but possible; through proper schooling and career-building, one has the ability to not only maintain their socioeconomic status but to improve it. Additionally, women in the middle-class often improve their class status by marrying into an upper-middle-class or upper-class family⁸. Thus, for middle-class Americans, and especially those in the lower-middle-class, who occupy the "most unstable and insecure place in the American class structure" (Ortner 2003, 73), the fear of falling and the loss of economic status is a constant threat as they attempt to maintain or improve their socioeconomic position.

In sum, the middle-class is a fairly new but very large class, characterized as an unstable in-between where upward mobility is desired but downward mobility poses a serious, persistent threat. My informants, all of whom come from lower-middle to upper-middle-class backgrounds, display several of the characteristics that define the middle-class, and they relate their class status to their values as young Republicans by emphasizing the relationship between the middle-class and the American Dream.

⁸ Class status was and is embodied and experienced differently by women; see Ortner (2003), 238-262.

Republican Values and the American Dream

I sat on the third floor of the HUB, a central student organization building on campus, at 10:40am, twenty minutes early for my scheduled interview with McKinley. Those twenty minutes came and went, and then twenty more, and I realized that she would not be arriving for our 11:00am interview, or, at least, she would not be arriving on time. Finally, at 12:15pm, Howard, another College Republican board member I had arranged to interview, stepped off the elevator and unlocked the door to the club office, and McKinley was right behind him. I approached the door, not wanting to appear intrusive but also not eager to continue my unanticipated stakeout of the office, and asked if they were still willing to speak with me. They both agreed⁹. Thus, for 40 minutes, I conducted a dual-interview, with both students answering the questions I posed one after the other, often building on one another's answers and looking to one another for confirmation of details as they provided specific examples to emphasize their answers to my questions. Later that day, in a separate, one-on-one meeting in the same office, I interviewed William, whose responses will also be used throughout this chapter.

McKinley, the president of the College Republicans, is accustomed to being questioned about political matters, as she gives several interviews to different media outlets over the course of each semester and has done so since she joined the College Republicans in her freshmen year¹⁰. Additionally, during election years like this one, she

⁹ At this time, another member of the College Republicans, Calvin, was in the office. He was not a board member, just part of the club, but was someone who was very vocal during club meetings. I invited him to join the interview as well, but he timidly declined, something that will be explored in more detail in chapter 3.

¹⁰ Links to these articles and the names of the media outlets are withheld in order to protect my informant's identity as much as possible.

spends much of her free time partaking in campus-organized podcast debates and roundtable interviews with the College Democrats' president. She also authors political opinion articles as a freelance writer for popular conservative websites¹¹ and, along with serving as the president of the Penn State College Republicans, she works closely with the state-wide Pennsylvania College Republican board. Thus, she is used to, comfortable with – and, likely, tired of – answering questions regarding her opinion on Trump and other ongoing political affairs in America. As a result of her willingness to discuss her political views with various media outlets, her answers to and opinions on commonplace questions regarding the Trump administration and other simple political queries are easily accessible. Thus, in order to expand on information that I had already collected regarding her beliefs, and in order to focus on my research interest of class status, I began with questions that focused less on her opinions about Trump and more on her personal familial class background. This ultimately led to a discussion of her values as a Republican.

McKinley describes herself and her family as belonging to the middle-class. Her father is a “higher up” financial advisor at Wells Fargo, a financial service business. Hailing from a small town north of Philadelphia, she credits her parents, who are both life-long Republicans, with introducing her to and instilling her with what she regards as the core, foundational values of the Republican party:

¹¹ Links to these articles are also withheld for privacy reasons, but discuss topics such as Republican women and feminism, the process of abortion, gender identity, and Trump's tariffs. These articles and their significance in relation to my fieldwork will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

McKinley: My parents really value the core ideologies of the Republican party that aren't necessarily, you know, specific policy, but like, hard work and self-sufficiency and individual liberty. That's just how I grew up, so that kind of shapes my ideology, but I could disagree with my parents on a few different things. My dad and I, you know, have different views of how we embody conservatism, and I got involved in politics when I was in high school, so I kind of formed my own opinions. [My parent's values] definitely influenced me in the way I grew up but I don't model my opinions off of my parents.

Here, McKinley stresses values that she believes are fundamental to the Republican party's ideology and that she also believes unify Republican voters, despite potentially disagreeing about other policy issues, as she does with her father. She believes these values, among other things, have turned the Republican party into a "big tent"¹² party in America. Her colleague and friend, Howard, agrees to an extent, confirming that "core values" were instilled in him at "a pretty young age" by his family, who are all life-long Republicans. In fact, Howard mentions that he cannot not think of a single person in his immediate family who does not vote Republican. Both McKinley and Howard describe the values that they share as fundamental Republican values, passed down to them by their conservative parents. However, these values are more than solely Republican beliefs, as one could argue that they are fundamental values of America in general, as these values are widely understood as those that define the American Dream.

¹² "Big tent" parties are those that unify many voters with varying views on a number of policies and issues under one party with one goal.

With the middle-classing of millions of working-class individuals in the 1940s and 1950s came the rise and widespread promotion of values that promised economic success to all Americans: individualism, self-reliance, and hard work. It was the belief that these values assured the opportunity for a better, richer life for anyone and everyone willing to put in the effort (Cullen 2003, 15). Though the values themselves have a deep history in America, they were first widely promoted as the “American Dream” during the economic struggles of the 1930s¹³, these values are contemporarily described as the “dominant ideology” (Kluegel & Smith 1986, 101) in America, as individualism and bootstrapping are viewed as the sole determinants of whether or not one succeeds economically and can achieve a middle-class life or better (Cullen 2003; Di Tomaso 2013, 102). By the same token, if one does not achieve economic prosperity, it is one’s own fault as an individual, as everyone is given equal opportunity to “make it” in America; those who “radically” suggest that there are external, structural issues at play with regards to climbing the class ladder just simply are not working hard enough (Kluegel & Smith 1986, 101). Therefore, according to the values and beliefs of the American Dream, one’s race, religion, or gender are not determinants of one’s ability to achieve a middle-class status; only one’s work ethic is. Thus, my informants’ description of the importance of what they view as a Republican ideology is indicative of the significance of the American Dream to them as young Republican voters and, further, suggests that they think Democrats do not believe in these foundational American tenets.

¹³ James Truslow Adams promoted and popularized the values of the American Dream in his book *The Epic of America*, published in 1931 in the early years of the Great Depression. See: Cullen (2003) for more.

Moreover, this emphasizes their belief that individuals are the ones responsible for creating their own economic success in America.

Fiscal Conservatism and the Fear of Socialism

In addition to citing these foundational beliefs that make up the American Dream as important personal values, all three of my informants outlined another value related to economic prosperity that is important to them: fiscal conservatism. This laissez-faire approach to economics, which claims that the economy operates most efficiently with little state influence, less government spending, less regulations on businesses, and lower taxes, is frequently cited as one of my informants' primary concerns as young voters, both in their interviews with me and in their campus-wide roundtable debates. The discussion of fiscal conservatism often outweighs and overshadows discussions of other pertinent social topics such as gun control, immigration, and abortion¹⁴. It became obvious after listening to several podcast debates and conducting interviews of my own that this was not coincidental; they seemed to purposely steer these conversations toward a discussion of policy related to unemployment rates, international trade, and deregulation. Robin (2018) claims that economic discontent is a recurrent theme of conservatism, and that issues that concern right-wing voters tend to be expressed through

¹⁴ This is not to say these social issues do not come up; they do. Howard states that one of the beliefs he was introduced to and adopted at a young age was being pro-life, and McKinley believes a strong southern border is important. However, in my interviews and in public debates these issues are discussed infrequently and hardly ever without prompting, which is not the case in other settings. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

a discussion of economic policy. This pattern is evidenced in the responses of my informants:

McKinley: Yeah, definitely for me, I think for Howard as well, and pretty much everyone involved in the organization, being fiscally responsible, spending taxpayer money in an appropriate way, you know, lowering taxes, letting people keep the most out of their paycheck, is something that's always been important to me, it's important to my parents, um, [it's] something that I learned from a young age.

Howard, a sophomore from rural Pennsylvania, comes from a lower-middle-class background and uses his mother's occupation as a school teacher as an example of his family's income bracket. He is a self-described "analytical conservative" who sees Paul Ryan and Ben Sasse as "his guys", and is a fiscal conservative "before anything else". He believes so adamantly in deregulation and less government intervention that he describes taxation as a form of theft. He, along with William, my third informant, highly value a free market economy, stating that, policy-wise, he believes that the Trump administration has done a "great job", despite disagreeing with his choices regarding tariffs¹⁵:

¹⁵ Trump imposed tariffs on goods imported from China, as well as on imported steel, aluminum, solar panels, and washing machines. The only countries not impacted by tariffs are Australia and Argentina. These tariffs are in opposition to free trade beliefs of many Republicans, as noted by Howard. For more on Trump's tariffs, see: Brown & Kolb (2019).

Howard: We're huge advocates for free trade...tax cuts, deregulation, I mean, we haven't seen deregulation like this in 50 years. That's something that the media hasn't really been covering and that's somewhat okay with me, I think the media can be a little bit unfair sometimes, but, um, that type of deregulation and tax cuts has really been causing the economy to boom right now, I mean, unemployment is the lowest it's been in a long time.

William, my third informant, whose family experienced upward mobility during his lifetime, climbing from a lower-working-class status to an upper-middle-class position, agrees, and although he describes himself as socially-moderate, he is very “far free-market”, indicating that right-wing economics and fiscal conservatism is important to him the same way it is to his colleagues.

Individualism and the values of the American Dream go hand in hand with a belief in a free-market economy. The promotion of individualism was heavily stressed in America during the middle-classing project that followed WWII when the country focussed all of its efforts on fighting a collective foe: communism (Ortner 2003, 28). Ironically, this was also the moment when “socialism” was most prevalent in America, as workers unions and high taxes were common across the country. Nevertheless, it is remembered as a period when the country rallied together to oppose the threat of a communist nation. The Cold War against the Soviet Union was a war on socialism, which threatened to destroy the individualism of Americans and their right to reach individual economic success in a free market, unobstructed by government intervention. The propaganda of the time stressed this threat heavily, framing the communist Soviet Union

as a place where individuals had to give up both their wealth to others who had not earned it and their freedom to pursue uninhibited economic success (Byrnes 2016). Communism was at odds with America's identity as a place where individuals could flourish and thrive on their own merit, and was painted as the enemy to the fundamental values of the nation, a belief largely propagated by Republicans in the McCarthy era (Byrnes 2016; Cullen 2003, 107). This message of individualism saturated American culture so completely that, as the Reagan administration moved the country away from post WWII "socialist" policies by cutting taxes, for example, it became the central plot point in several critically acclaimed films, including *Nothing in Common* (1986) and *Secret of My Success* (1987). In these films, which were created as America was moving toward more conservative economic policies, an American man, through hard work, charisma, and a bit of good fortune, could build a successful middle-class career and life for himself and his family (Traube 1989). The onus, and privilege, as it was propagated by the messages in these films, of constructing a financially successful middle-class career and family was placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual. Therefore, "socialism", though at one point arguably a central part of America's post-war economy, was, and still is, understood as inherently opposed to the Republican values of my informants; their faith in a free-market system means that they are innately against "socialist" ideas.

It became clear to me as I continued to conduct interviews with my informants that they did not simply wish to explain the policies they *do* desire from politicians, but also those that they adamantly *do not* desire and that would be a "terrifying" detriment to America; this, of course, being socialism.

McKinley: Now we see this rise in candidates running on socialism which, to me, is absolutely terrifying for America. I never thought in my, you know, twenties, that I would see people actually running on socialism and winning, so that's, again, terrifying. But socialism doesn't work, it certainly will not work here, we can't afford it, and people, you know, you see these candidates running on socialism, they can't even defend what they preach at all. Look at Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, she can't defend anything she preaches.

Me: So socialism, just to make sure I understand, terrifies you because you don't want people losing more of their income?

McKinley: Yeah. It's more terrifying to me that people my age, um, will embrace socialism. And I think, to me, at the risk of sounding condescending, that shows a lack of information on economics.

This is not the first time that McKinley cited this rise in socialism as a concern while I was at Penn State, as, while debating the College Democrats' president, she stated that the Democratic party in America has shifted too far to the left, and the fact that there are "actual socialists running in America terrifies [her] and keeps [her] up at night". Further, the official Penn State College Republicans Twitter account, run by my informants, frequently accuses local Democratic candidates of being socialists, claiming that Pennsylvania voters deserve to know if they are voting for a potential socialist candidate.

Despite this constant fear of socialism that comes up both in conversation and on social media frequently, the only person who really provides an example of what part of this threat really scares him is William, who states that something like socialized healthcare would create more problems than it solves for Americans:

William: So I think most of [what I dislike about socialism] actually, for me, is the policies. I think the intentions are obviously benevolent, but I think the actual execution of the policies is [the problem]. First and foremost you see things like, in a universal healthcare system, 20 week waiting periods to even get to see a doctor, which, to me, in a system where your only option is to go through the healthcare system as provided by the government, your only option is the waiting list. Here in the United States you at least have the option to get care, whether it be through emergency room visits, which will automatically grant you care, whether it be through, um, insurance given to you by employers, or Medicare or Medicaid if you're eligible, um, or even if you need to, going bankrupt to get care but you're still going to get care, versus waiting 12 weeks on a waiting list and maybe never receiving care if you expire before then. So things like that; it's frustrating to me to see a revamping of the healthcare system take away options like that.

Here, William expresses clearly the fact that he believes paying into a socialized healthcare system will take away the freedom of Americans to choose a course of action with regards to their health concerns, and would prefer to keep the option of going

bankrupt in exchange for care rather than not have that option at all. Howard shares the beliefs of his colleague and friend, as he stated that socialism breeds a lack of altruism, because have-nots desire to selfishly take that which they have not earned from those who have, thus threatening and minimizing the success of the individual. The way my informants employ the term “socialism” needs some exploration: it is used to discuss everything from basic taxes to health care to Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, and perhaps even ranging to the communism of the former Soviet Union. It seems that “socialism” is used as a catch-all for the economic or social policies proposed by Democrats that they dislike, regardless of how much those policies have to do with “socialism” in the traditional sense of the word.

Robin (2018) argues that one of the longstanding goals of conservatism has been to triumph over social democracy and international communism; he suggests that this goal has largely been accomplished, but I argue that the memory of this threat lives on in the minds of young Republicans and prompts the concerns they express through a discussion of economics. Further, I suggest that not only do my informants focus on this memory, but that they long for a time when referring to someone as a “socialist” was an effective insult; contemporarily, calling someone a “socialist” does not carry the same negative connotations that it did in the Cold War and Red Scare era in America. Therefore, when promoting their desired economic policies, they are unable to undercut Democrats with this insult the way they may want to. Thus, I argue that the fear of a social democracy is contemporarily important for my informants at Penn State, and perhaps for other Pennsylvanians, as their aversion to socialism is made explicit, though their meaning of “socialism” is one that is complex and all-encompassing.



Figure 2. An anti-socialist tweet from the official Penn State College Republicans account.

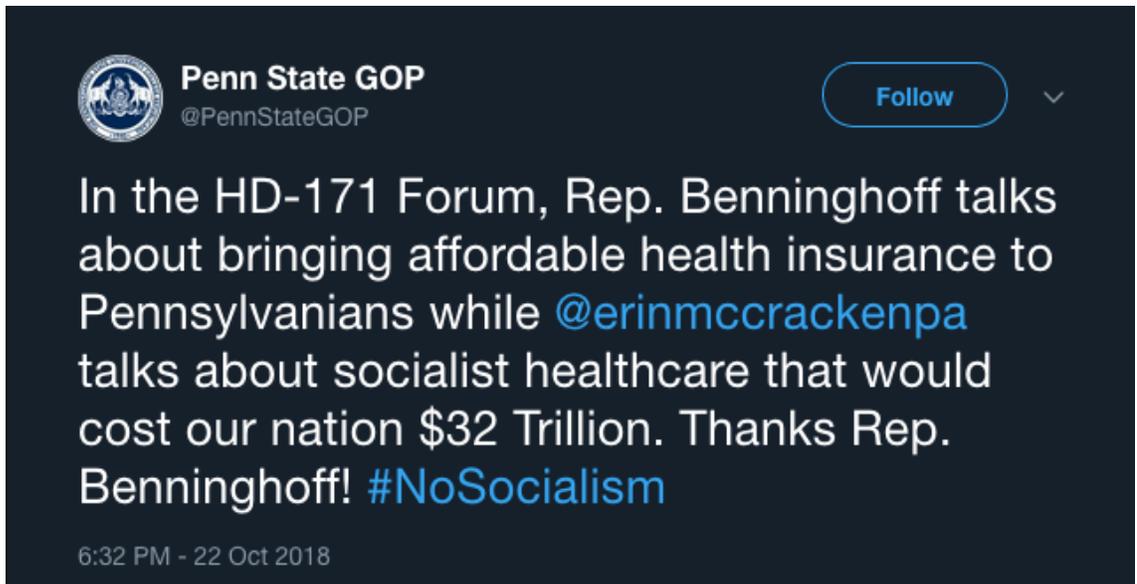


Figure 3. Another anti-socialist tweet from the official Penn State College Republicans account.

Thus, McKinley, Howard, and William all come from families that fall squarely into the middle-class, though seemingly on different ends of the spectrum. William in particular states that his family experienced upward mobility over the course of his lifetime, moving from the lower-working-class to the upper-middle-class. They all believe strongly in the right to individual economic success free of government intervention, values that are promoted within the middle-class and that align closely with the American Dream. They further express the terror they feel as a result of the fact that politicians are running and winning on socialist platforms in America. Like those in Mill Hall, the small town from the opening anecdote of this chapter, who sense that socialism is on the rise in their country and that it is something to be avoided, my informants are cognizant of and opposed to what they perceive as a rise in socialist values in American politics.

In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss how my informants aversion to socialism is related to the idea that conservatism is founded on a sense of loss (Robin 2018). I will then discuss how their concern with the loss of economic individualism is about more than just the fear of falling as it is related to various contemporary social tensions in America.

“Smartness,” Superiority, and the Threat of a Diverse Privileged Class

As described above, the fear of downward mobility is a hallmark of the unstable middle-class. There is an unease surrounding socioeconomic status, as the potential for those who previously “had it made”, so to speak, in America to slide into the working-

class poses a continuous threat as a result of the recreation of this status residing in the ability of children to prosper in their education and their careers (Ehrenreich 1989; Newman 1988, 8). In this section, I will discuss how the fear of downward mobility includes anxieties regarding social status and opportunity as much as economic standing. I will do this by discussing Robin's (2018) assertion that conservatism is founded on a sense of loss. Further, I will argue that my informants' understanding of themselves as a privileged group, a position that they understand as being one they deserve on the basis of merit, is evidenced through their discourse, and that this suggests that their fears regarding their social positions are related to losing their privileged status in America. Thus, I will argue that my informants' self-described fear and aversion to socialist ideas in America is related to the fear of falling from their precarious middle-class positions but also to the sense that their opportunities as white, middle-class Americans are being threatened. These fears are not expressed overtly, but I will analyze and discuss their covert comments expressed in their discourse with the help of Ho (2009) and Povinelli (2016) to argue these points.

Robin (2018) claims that conservatism is, and has always been, "the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back" (38). He suggests that unequal power relations have always existed in America, and conservatism is the war that those in a beneficial position, both economically and socially, wage in order to maintain their power. Historic examples he gives to support this include workers union strikes and the Civil Rights movement, while more modern examples of similar struggles include Occupy and Black Lives Matter. Those in positions of power in these examples, such as business owners or white Americans, feel as though their status as

privileged and elite members of society is challenged by the movement. It is important to note that, as mentioned above, white Americans commonly view their privileged position in society as being one achieved through individualism and hard work, and, further, reject the notion that confounding social factors such as race and gender contribute to an individual's socioeconomic status. I argue that this perspective is an ideological means to protect and justify a structural position of social and economic power; by denying that other social factors are relevant in determining one's success in America, one preserves one's own privilege. As a result of feeling as though their position is slipping out from under them, they support the policies and politicians that promise to conserve their spot at the top. This can, in part, be understood as the fear of falling: individuals are worried that the economic status that they worked to achieve through personal diligence will be lost and that they will fall into a lower-class position. However, this can also be understood as the desire to protect one's privileged social standing in society. Although my informants do not directly discuss their social position as white, middle-class Americans, their comments regarding socialism suggest that they see themselves as an elite group, and, further, that they desire to maintain an economic status quo so as to protect the opportunities afforded to them as an elite group.

Ho (2009, 40) discusses America's "culture of smartness" and states that to reference one's smartness is to assert one's impressiveness as an elite or as an expert on a topic regardless of one's actual knowledge or skills. She further suggests that this tactic is used to justify one's position of power and superiority over others (Ho 2009). I argue that this is what my informants do through their discourse: they reproduce and reaffirm that they are of an elite status with regards to their conservative beliefs. Their statements

imply a sense of superiority, as they acknowledge that they likely sound condescending, yet suggest that they have looked into the data and found evidence and statistics that they can cite regarding economics and fiscal conservatism that others with opposing views have not. Thus, I argue that my informants implicitly recognize that they occupy a privileged position in society by discursively performing their “smartness” with regards to their economic and political beliefs. Some examples of their comments are listed below, with emphasis added.

“It's more terrifying to me that people my age, um, will embrace socialism. And I think, to me, *at the at the risk of sounding condescending, that shows a lack of information on economics.*”

“...you see these candidates running on socialism, *they can't even defend what they preach at all.* Look at Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, *she can't defend anything she preaches.*”

“...so when we look at data on, you know, former socialist markets, it hasn't worked out, and to be fair, I think *a completely socialist market is almost entirely faith-based*, to believe in that type of economy. Also, on the other end of the spectrum as well, *a completely free, anarchical economy [is] very faith-based*, to believe in something like that, [there] *isn't actually evidence for it...*”

“...I think that a lot of young people are seeing inequality in America, um, but what they're not realizing is *they're not diving deeper into that data*, and realizing that, for one, the economy as a whole is growing...”

In addition to these comments made during my interviews, phrases written by McKinley in her online articles express a similar attitude, as she suggests that her views on certain social phenomena, such as gender identity or abortion, are “in line with science”, while liberal perspectives somehow “go against science”. From these statements, one gets the sense that my informants view their perspective on economic issues and philosophies as the rational, evidence-based perspectives, whereas the opposing, potentially “socialist” views are not supported with evidence and, thus, are uninformed and misguided. Further, it suggests that they view themselves and their perspectives as superior to those around them.

My informants’ focus on economic concerns coupled with their claims of an elite status suggests that they acknowledge the social privileges and opportunities afforded to them as young, white, middle-class Americans. They believe that they are entitled to these privileges as a result of their and their parents’ hard work, and this is evident in the way they discursively perform their “smartness”. Povinelli (2016) asserts that white Americans who support certain conservative policies and politicians are expressing “a desire to maintain a dominant relationship between economic benefit and race” (para.6). This is similar to Robin’s (2018) understanding of conservatism, which he explains as the desire to maintain power. White, middle-class Americans are attempting to seal their privilege as an elite group in America, the group with the easiest access to upward

mobility and the one with the most social capital. As minorities expand into this elite, privileged domain, the dominant groups who already view themselves as belonging in the privileged position feel threatened; as has been the case historically, diverse groups encroaching on traditionally white spaces results in cultural unrest. As a result, the dominant group attempts to maintain the status quo as best they can, and for Povinelli (2016), the attempt to maintain the status quo is sometimes masked in a discussion of economics. Focusing the discussion on economics is a more respectable conversation to have compared to other potential contemporary topics in American politics, but one that sends the same message in an inconspicuous way: privileged Americans are wary of the diversity entering the space of the social elite. Thus, my informants' focus on economics as well as their insistence on their own smartness points to an implicit recognition of privilege. Their desire to maintain a certain economic status quo is actually a desire to maintain a certain social status quo that allows white Americans to seize upward mobility and other opportunities with more ease as the elite group in society. The threat of a socialist system that shares resources and opens up economic and social opportunity to other people is opposed because it challenges the current system that keeps white, middle-class Americans in a dominant position.

In sum, my middle-class informants express the values that are important to them as those passed down to them by their Republican parents, which they identify as individualism, fiscal conservatism, and the tenets of the American Dream. Further, they describe their aversion to socialist ideals, which they view as policies with the power to "terrorize" America. In doing so, I argue that they are implicitly and covertly recognizing and expressing their position of privilege in society that, if challenged, could potentially

lead to both the loss of their middle-class economic status as well as the loss of their elite position of social opportunity as white, middle-class Americans. The fact that these expressions of “smartness” and privilege are covert is significant, and is potentially an attempt by my informants to appear outwardly respectable and civil in their interviews. Both the use of “evidence” as well as their desire to remain respectable and civil in public political discourse will be explored in greater detail with regards to performativity in the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Don’t Tread on Me – Formal and Informal Performances in the Creation of Political Realities

Penn State’s campus was rife with political performances, often very controversial in nature, preceding the 2016 presidential election. An example of one such performance included the erection of a four foot wall on the lawn of one of Penn State’s oldest and busiest administrative buildings, Old Main: pro-Trump students, who came to be known as the Bull Moose Party after defecting from the College Republicans, built a wooden wall decorated in “Don’t Tread On Me” flags as a symbol of their support for Trump (Herdle 2016). Clad in their red “Make America Great Again” hats, they constructed their wall on November 1st, 2016, just days before the election, and did so *around* the flagpole on which the American flag was strung (Herdle 2016). The purpose of the wall, they claimed, was two-fold: it was meant to promote Trump’s campaign message of a strong southern border as well as to engage undecided voters in a dialogue about what were, according to the Bull Moose Party, important political topics, such as

illegal immigration (Baumgarten 2016; Herdle 2016). Further, they vehemently denied that their “beautiful” wall was a promotion of hate or a show of xenophobia (Baumgarten 2016; Herdle 2016). Despite the administration informing the students that the wall had to be removed, as the Old Main lawn is not an approved campus location for student demonstrations, the Bull Moose Party refused, thus drawing the ire of the Clinton supporters on campus. This resulted in hours of back-and-forth between the two groups, with the Bull Moose Party claiming they simply wanted to have a conversation about Trump’s policies and the Clinton supporters accusing the students of blatant bigotry. William recounted this tumultuous time on campus during our interview, stating that this was a moment when students were past the point of maintaining civil discourse with regards to politics. Tensions were too high, both within the student body as a whole and within individual political clubs, and the ill will between student groups was growing, resulting in frequent conflict. As a result, the ability to calmly discuss differences was at an all-time low.

This is just one example of a dramatic political performance that occurred at Penn State in anticipation of the election, and there is much to dissect with regards to performance: the imagery of the wall, it’s placement around the flagpole, and the accessories that decorated the wall itself as well as those who constructed it, among other things. This grandiose performance was provocative and it caused numerous students discomfort: one referred to it as “offensive” and another “disgusting” (Baumgarten 2016). The display put on by the Bull Moose Party can be understood as “trolling”; deriving from a term that originally described the act of baiting fish behind a boat, “trolling” contemporarily describes purposefully trying to bait others into arguments on the internet

by making disruptive and upsetting comments. As a result, trolling is a type of political performance that frequently results in shock for audiences, though certain performances can produce shock even when such an outcome is not the intention of the actors.

According to Fischer-Lichte (2008, 38), certain performances are meant to disrupt typical, expected ways of meaning making and, as a result, create an unpredictable and self-referential feedback loop; a performance elicits a reaction from an audience, which in turn further impacts the entire performance in uncontrollable ways. New ways of meaning making can result from the in-between spaces where an atypical performance elicits a shock from audiences. While it can occur in a variety of frames, including on a theater stage or in a more public setting, these performances can upset an audience so as to make a statement; by shocking the audience through performance, the audience is forced to respond and, as a result, potentially reflect more thoughtfully on the performance they witnessed and the message they received (Fischer-Lichte 2008). For the purpose of this chapter, and in order to establish a foundation for my exploration of contemporary performances amongst the Penn State College Republicans, I maintain that the trolling political performances of the Trump supporters on campus in the weeks leading up to the election produced a type of shock on campus, as they were arguably disruptive and meant to make a provocative statement that would ruffle feathers on campus. Further, according to the members of the Bull Moose Party, these trolling performances were meant to simultaneously encourage political conversations among Penn State students. The students force their peers to respond to their unconventional performance by presenting a new, atypical political reality in a communal space where collective understandings and agreements about reality are negotiated. As a result, by

forcing this performance on their peers, they are forcing them to respond and, potentially, re-negotiate public political realities. Thus, not only will the audience reflect on the performance, as was mentioned above, but they will also potentially determine what political performances are permissible on campus and what becomes a collective political reality at Penn State. I will explore how these performances have changed in the last two years below, but will emphasize that there is still an element of trolling and provocation inherent in the informal performances I experienced while at Penn State as a result of the diversity of conservatism found in the College Republicans.

Though I've now discovered that the overall approach to performances is much different than it was in 2016, ones like the aforementioned example impacted my expectations of Penn State's political groups: as mentioned in the introduction, I anticipated that there would still be a rift between the Bull Moose Party and College Republicans on campus, as the information I accessed online prior to conducting my fieldwork indicated that both clubs were still officially registered with the university. However, I came to learn that the Bull Moose Party had disbanded sometime after Spring 2018, and according to William, the "reasonable" members were welcomed back into the College Republicans. As a result, the College Republicans are now the primary student group for Republican students on campus¹⁶, and because they are an amalgamation of students with varying approaches to conservatism, several of them maintain a degree of provocation in their performances; they troll one another with statements that are meant

¹⁶ This is not to say they are the only Republican student group on campus. For example, Penn State is home to a Chapter of Turning Point USA, a youth organization that promotes the common Republican tenant of limited government intervention, amongst other principles such as free speech. However, the Turning Point USA group has fewer members than the College Republicans and is a much younger club on campus. Further, TPUSA's members and ideas are not always popular amongst my informants.

to be provocative and controversial but do so in a particular setting with a familiar audience. Because the club is a congregation of students with a variety of conservative views and values, provocative statements are more permissible, even if they are not always well received. Conversely, when they are in a public setting with a potentially liberal audience, and they know they represent the entire club, their performances change significantly as they are more neutral in the expression of their opinions. Gone are the days of vocal, controversial political displays on Old Main lawn, for now, at least. In this chapter, I will explore the differences in the performances of the College Republicans when they are speaking to me – or to another interviewer – compared to when they are speaking to other College Republicans who they know share their perspectives, at least to a degree; with interviewers, or in public settings, the students are less direct with regards to their opinions on certain social topics such as gun control and abortion, whereas with their peers they are more direct and, sometimes, crass. Binder and Wood (2013), in their study of College Republicans on American university campuses, present two distinct political styles that are embodied and practised by conservative students on campuses across the country. They suggest that there are some students, generally on more “elite” campuses, who practise refined, civil discourse and attempt to calmly converse with their peers. They also state that there are other students, who attend less prestigious institutions, who provocatively perform their political views in an attempt to rouse and agitate their peers. Binder and Wood (2013) ultimately assert that the differences in student life – such as the number of students on campus, the number of students living in dormitories, and other such factors – determine which type of political style is adopted and performed. Spaces with fewer students who live in close quarters

will converse civilly, while more populous campuses often elicit provocative performances from the conservative students. However, throughout this chapter, I argue that different spaces at Penn State elicit different performances from the College Republicans and will explore how these performances are a result of the changing collective understandings of political realities amongst different audiences in different frames. Further, I suggest that the different performances I encountered helped foster an understanding of particular spaces at Penn State and the impact those spaces have on students. In formal settings, the College Republicans adopt a dignified, civil “front” (Goffman 1959) when conversing about politics so as to combat contemporary negative stereotypes about Republicans and Trumpian-style political discourse. Examples of these common stereotypes are found in a variety of contemporary media sources, whose author’s suggest that Republicans do not care about children after they are born, do not care about the safety of children in schools, and do not care about middle-class workers, among several other claims (e.g. Granholm 2017; Levitz 2018). Further, several contemporary stereotypes and criticisms of Republicans have arisen as a result of Trump’s outspoken, “not-a-politician” way of speaking his mind. His followers support his approach and question the necessity of “tactfulness” (Fahler 2018) in political discourse just because “society dictates it” (ibid); they state that Trump is simply brave enough to say what he and everyone else is thinking. Thus, Trump’s supporters reject the widespread agreed-upon reality of civility in political discourse and opt instead for Trump’s newer, more blunt definition of public political situations. As a result, in formal settings where a multitude of political opinions are represented and where the agreed-upon political reality determines that Trump’s antics and unpredictable comments are

inappropriate, my informants opt for a more refined, dignified conservatism that distances them from Trump's unapologetic outspokenness and his supporters' belief that tactfulness in politics should be abandoned. In addition to acknowledging their rejection of Trumpian-style discourse, I will explore the discursive strategies they rely upon in formal frames to maintain positive relations with other student groups on campus as well as to justify their definition of political realities in public settings where understandings of reality are negotiated. Moreover, I will examine the College Republicans performances in informal frames where, as the audience changes, so do collective political realities; in these more casual, social settings, the students' "back stage fronts" (Goffman 1959) are on display, and though a degree of respectability is still expected, the students are able to be more provocative and less politically correct with their performances as a result of political realities shifting with the audience. I will ultimately conclude that the public performance of the College Republicans have changed significantly since the 2016 election that saw very provocative public attempts at disrupting political realities; though the students still use their performances to influence agreed-upon political realities and to legitimize their understandings of these realities in public settings, they do so with particular strategies that reject Trumpian-style discourses and are dignified and respectable. Further, in more private, informal settings, though students do not always share opinions, they are more likely to troll one another with provocative statements as a result of their weekly meetings creating a space where political realities are negotiated differently and determine that political correctness is not required to the same degree as it is in public settings.

Formal Performances in Public Settings

Formal performances, in the context of this thesis, will describe the performances of the Penn State College Republicans when they are speaking to a public audience that does not necessarily consist of only conservatives, which, as a result, influences them to maintain respectability and use particular discursive strategies when in conversation. This means that they are neither blunt nor direct when sharing their opinion on potentially controversial social topics, if they share them at all, in order to uphold the expectation of refined, civil discourse in public political discussions. Klatch (1987) suggests that there is a distinction between social and “laissez-faire” – or economic – conservatives. Social conservatives are primarily concerned with questions of morality surrounding topics such as abortion, feminism, and LGBT+ rights. Conversely, laissez-faire conservatives are concerned with the maintenance and protection of values such as individual liberty, self-reliance, and hard work. While I believe my informants are a combination of these two conservative styles, as they cite different social issues that are important to them as well as heavily emphasize their focus on fiscal conservatism, ultimately, they promote themselves through their interviews as mostly laissez-faire conservatives. Because they are aware of the situation they are in and, as a result, construct their performance accordingly, they are both abiding by the frame of the interview and establishing themselves as acceptable actors within that frame. Frames, as defined by Bateson (1972), are the metacommunicative cues that determine an actors performance and influence an audience’s response to a performance; for example, sitting across from someone who is holding a list of questions and preparing to take notes provides the cue that this is an

interview and that the interviewees answers will be recorded and potentially widely shared with a broader audience. As a result, by not rocking the boat, so to speak, my informants conform to expected interview norms and, further, establish themselves as respectable performers within the frame of the interview. Thus, through their performance, they maintain that interviews are frames where refined, civil discourse is to be expected and agreed-upon political realities are upheld (Binder and Wood 2013). Examples of formal performances were included throughout chapter 2, as my informants were aware that our interaction would be recorded and potentially published to a wider public audience. My presence as an outsider likely also influenced their treatment of the setting as one that demanded respectability and as one that differed from their casual conversations amongst one another. Moreover, in chapter 2, the primary concerns expressed by McKinley and Howard were economic in nature, though, as argued above, there were other underlying issues that I either had to prompt them to comment on or that never came up explicitly in conversation at all. This is why, at least partially, I had to suss meaning out of their discourse throughout chapter 2; their feelings about certain social topics are not made explicit in the context of an interview. Even when asked that they comment on certain social topics, such as gun control, immigration, or abortion, the most they would give was a short, one or two sentence answer that relied on certain discursive tactics to avoid the question at hand, whereas a discussion of fiscal conservatism resulted in monologues that lasted several minutes and that, when transcribed, amounted to a paragraph of writing. An example of their aversion to addressing social topics explicitly in interviews is as follows:

Me: Okay, do you think that [economic issues] are more important to you than other big things in the media right now, like the NRA¹⁷ and immigration and all of those types of things, or is it a little bit of everything?

McKinley: That's tough.

Howard: [to McKinley] It's not for me, if you want me to go first?

McKinley: [to Howard] Yeah sure.

Howard: Well like I said, I'm a big economics guy, so I think the economy overall is what's going to matter most, um, the unemployment rates and wealth in general is linked very closely to certain statistics like infant mortality, literacy, all sorts of things that are absolutely terrible. Um, so, you know, I'm much more concerned with, you know, the people in America that are poor and don't know where their next meal is coming from, um, rather than, you know, who has the right to have a cake baked for themselves...

McKinley: Mhm.

¹⁷ This interview was conducted 18 days after the fatal shootings at the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue, which occurred on October 27, 2018. As a result, the debate surrounding gun control and the National Rifle Association was especially prevalent in local media at the time of my fieldwork, as Pittsburgh is a short 2 hour 40 minute drive from State College.

Howard: ...which seems... it's a big deal and it's a symptom of a bigger issue of different problems we have in America, but I think when we have infant mortality rates that's increased because of a certain policy we're doing, that bothers me as a person. So, um, that being said, I do come from a small rural town in southwestern Pennsylvania, so gun rights are important to me as well. So those values that I think that we're born with intrinsically are something that we should stick to and are something that mean a lot to me.

In this example, Howard couches his discussion of social issues in a broader, somewhat disorganized discussion of the economic policies that can lead to certain detrimental social problems. He begins by reasserting that he is someone who values economics, something he has done several times throughout the interview up to this point, and then references issues of wealth distribution and economic policy throughout his answer. Further, the first social issues he identifies as potentially significant, such as literacy, are ones that he can directly relate to particular economic policies or phenomena, such as unemployment rates. Contrarily, he describes other social topics, such as whether or not a couple has a right to a wedding cake¹⁸, as relatively unimportant compared to more pressing economic concerns. While he does contend later on in the interview that this issue of the wedding cake does matter, he maintains that it matters much less than other topics related to unemployment rates. A vague mention of gun rights is brought up

¹⁸ In June 2018, the United States Supreme Court had to rule as to whether a baker was in the wrong for denying his services to a gay couple wanting to buy a wedding cake. Howard references this occurrence twice throughout the interview as an example of an issue he finds trivial compared to other matters such as unemployment rates. See: Gupta (2018) for more on the wedding cake debate.

at the end of the discussion, almost as an afterthought to the concepts he is more concerned about, simply because I asked about it. There is no discussion of whether he supports the NRA at all, whether he and his family own guns, or how important the second amendment is to him, though his comment regarding his hometown seems to suggest that he does support the NRA. The second example of a social topic I posed in my question, immigration, is not addressed at all. McKinley's comments are similar and echo this attitude, though she does address more than just the question of gun control:

McKinley: Yeah, um, I would say the economy is always the most important policy area for me, but I think we're seeing issues related to immigration, the second amendment, and abortion that I didn't think that we would necessarily see, you know, in our lifetime. I mean, you know, there are politicians ... running to keep the borders – the southern borders – open, I mean, there was just a poll the other day [that found that] 25% of Democrats are polled positively to abolish the second amendment, and that is a red flag for me. So, obviously the economy is the most important to me but I think we are seeing a rise in issues that, um, are also going to be [a big part] of the 2020 platform.

In her answer, McKinley also asserts that the political issues she believes are paramount are economic, but acknowledges that she cares about other issues such as government regulated gun control and immigration. However, though she does assert that the second amendment is important to her, she does not go into the topic in detail, much like Howard. Her answer is also significant as it relates to my informants' insistence on their

“smartness,” as was discussed in chapter 2, as she references a statistic in her answer. In the following section I will explore my informants use of “science” and statistics in their discourse in relation to the ways in which they construct and perform their political realities in public and formal settings.

“Scientific” Strategies in Political Discourse

In chapter 2, my informants’ reliance on citing statistics or data when forming their arguments was explained as evidence of their claim to a deserved privileged socioeconomic position as white, middle-class Americans. In this section, I argue that the citation of scientific rhetoric in political discourse is a performative tactic to avoid explicitly sharing opinions on contentious social topics as well as a way to legitimize a particular type of political reality and meaning-making in public spaces. McKinley’s citation of a statistic is significant as it is a strategy used by my informants to avoid heated political conversations about subjective and contentious social topics. Reciting statistics and data is something that both McKinley and Howard do throughout the interview when faced with questions about potential hot-button topics. Many examples of this were included in chapter 2, as McKinley and Howard both frequently referenced recent polls and other “evidence” that they believe those with opposing views do not have. Along with McKinley’s above example, as part of another comment in response to the aforementioned question regarding the relative importance of economics and social issues in guiding his political decisions, Howard states that “40,000 people in America die every time the unemployment rate increases by 1%”. By including data and statistics

in their answers, my informants are both alluding to their “smartness” by making their answer, which is really a matter of opinion, seem stronger because it is supported by “statistical evidence”, as well as avoiding sharing their personal opinions about the topic at hand. Though the data they cite may be accurate, the question was ultimately about what concern was most important to them personally and did not require statistics or evidence to answer. Thus, by responding with numbers, both McKinley and Howard avoid excessive discussion about subjective personal opinions by keeping the conversation focused on data and statistics, much like they do when they focus their discussion primarily on economics. This results in a less emotionally-charged discussion and one that appears more evidence-based. Arguably, in their answers, my informants rely on the relationship between numbers and rationality: numbers can be measured, but social opinions cannot, and thus numbers are often associated with logic and reason. As a result, because our cultural perspectives suggest that numbers and measurability equate to sensibility, my informants are able to weigh in on difficult discussions using a discursive strategy that implies they are speaking from a position of rationality. Additionally, I argue that relying on a political discourse based on data and “evidence” is a strategy that allows my informants to justify their way of constructing political realities and meaning-making in public settings where these realities are negotiated.

The use of scientific metaphors in political language and discourse is a performative strategy that allows an individual to explain or justify the “natural” order and structure of politics and, further, legitimize a particular “way of knowing” or meaning-making. Arkivoulis (in Carver and Pikalo 2008), suggests that scientific metaphors are employed in political discourse as a means of mapping scientifically-

understood phenomena onto something without “natural” order, such as political structure or government. Further, the use of particular metaphors in political discourse is a strategy used to alter political outlooks and realities; if a different metaphor is evoked, then a different political reality can potentially take shape (Stenvoll in Carver & Pikalo 2008). As a result, controlling the metaphor allows one to control the political reality that is presented. Thus, by relying on data, statistics, and “evidence”, my informants attempt to align their political realities with “nature,” or an unquestionable order. Further, they attempt to construct and solidify their particular method of meaning-making, or “way of knowing”, by rooting it in a discourse of “evidence”. In this way, their use of language suggests that their definition of political situations and political realities is a legitimate, and perhaps even the dominant, “way of knowing” (Stenvoll in Carver & Pikalo 2008). Thus, my informants rely on the strategy of scientific rhetoric in political discourse to both avoid heated, subjective discussions about topics such as gun control in public settings as well as to legitimize their ways of meaning-making in public political discussions in an attempt to influence public understandings of political realities. Further, as was discussed in chapter 2, this reliance on data and science in their discourse indexes a sense of superiority among my informants; this type of public performance is a show of their superior status as young, white, middle-class Americans. Though this tactic seems to be used frequently by my informants, it is not the only approach the College Republicans rely on in order to deflect personal questions and to promote their political realities through their discourse.

During a podcast debate between McKinley and the College Democrats president, held on the night before the midterm elections and broadcast across campus, McKinley

states, in response to a question about increasing gun violence in the country, that the rise in violent hate-crimes across America is the result of a “serious mental health problem in the country that needs to be addressed in a bipartisan manner” in order to prevent more “horrible, tragic happenings”. In this statement, there is no mention of the second amendment or gun control, though those are the underlying issues being discussed. Answering questions of gun control with discussions of mental health issues is a common occurrence amongst Republicans, and is one that has been described as a tactic to redirect the discussion and avoid an explicit conversation about gun control (Sullivan 2018). Kennedy (2018) states that “if Republican leaders are talking about mental health, it’s generally for one reason — to avoid talking about guns” (para. 2). This is the maneuver that McKinley utilizes here, which many critics refer to as a meaningless “lip-service” (Holmes 2018) to mental health, as she manages to assert her position regarding where to place the blame when violent “tragic happenings” occur without mentioning guns or gun control at all. She thus implies that gun control is not a relevant part of the question at hand. This example, as well as the aforementioned comments expressed by both Howard and McKinley, are performative strategies the students use in public, formal frames: the answers the students give to myself and to other interviewers regarding potentially contentious social topics are deflective and purposefully non-polarizing or off-putting to listeners who either have a different political point of view or who are undecided with regards to their political opinions. They further construct and solidify their definition of the situation in a public setting. Relying on these tactics and manipulating their answers in this particular way has direct benefits for the College Republicans.

The Benefits of Respectable Performances

Goffman (1959) states that “when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which is in his interest to convey” (p.4). In other words, there is reason for an actor to shift their performance amongst certain audiences, and in certain settings, in order to appeal to those audiences or to benefit from the performance. Further, internalized norms, which can also be thought of as common understandings of familiar frames (Bateson 1972), often dictate an actor’s behaviour in certain settings, and this, as a result, changes the “front” (Goffman 1959, 22) performance an actor chooses to convey. Essentially, all actors will adapt their day-to-day performances and demeanors depending on the frame of the situation and the audience they are speaking to so as to maximize the efficacy of their performance. This efficacy lies in the potential of their performance to influence the definition of the situation, or the agreed upon political reality, that those involved in the situation come to hold. For the College Republicans, it is beneficial to be seen as neutral or near-neutral on controversial, hot-button topics when speaking to someone whose political opinions may not be known to them and as a result they are not blunt with regards to their opinions and they steer the conversation away from social issues and toward economics and statistics. Further, with regards to campus-wide podcasts, they try their best to avoid directly addressing contentious issues, as they are ultimately attempting to promote and recruit students to Republican perspectives and causes more generally, and thus do not want to appear polarizing or “extreme”. If they did appear too polarizing, they would not appeal to undecided voters and thus would not

recruit new members, and therefore would not be performing in their best interest. For example, given that a fatal shooting occurred in Pittsburgh just weeks before both my interview and the podcast debate, my informants would be aware of the fact that it would appear insensitive and off-putting to adamantly and directly argue that gun rights are paramount at this particular point in time. Thus, instead, they either cushion the point they are making in a more general discussion of economics, or they state their position subtly, implicitly, and with tact so as to not alienate people with an opposing point of view or people who have the capacity to become Republican voters and so they are still potentially able to influence the political outlook of the situation. Thus, in order to “civily converse” with people who potentially have different points of view, and in order to successfully promote their club on campus, they must adapt their performances so that they are nonpolarizing.

Additionally, I argue that these performances are purposefully cultivated to present a type of respectability in the frame of a public interview: by maintaining a near-neutral point of view, my informants choose their approach purposefully, as they are aware of contemporary stereotypes surrounding Republicans and their beliefs about gun control, abortion, and climate change, just to name a few. McKinley and Howard actually cite some of these stereotypes during our interview, stating that it upsets them when someone suggests that they are complicit in the killing of children, do not care about women’s rights, or do not care about the environment, because, they say, that is simply not true. For the College Republicans, adamant support of the second amendment, for example, does not equate to not caring about public safety or the safety of children, though for liberals, this is often how the conservative political realities are perceived.

This stereotype is likely strengthened by the antics of Trump and the beliefs of his supporters, which were briefly explored above; many Republicans do not believe that sensitivity and “political correctness” is necessary in expressing one’s political opinion just because it is collectively agreed upon or, as one Trump supporter puts it, because “society dictates it” (Fahler 2018). This attitude, though not representative of all Republicans, has largely impacted others’ views of contemporary Republicanism in America. Nithyanand et al. (2017) suggest that when individuals are exposed to incivility by elites, such as popular politicians, they are more inclined to adopt and repeat these behaviours themselves. These understandings of conservatism influence others’ opinions and expectations of Republicans and, in turn, influences how Republicans who disagree with these beliefs attempt to deflect these stereotypes. As a result of their consciousness of these Republican stereotypes, in their formal performances, they purposefully avoid attempting to influence political realities using provocation; public trolling in political performance is not the norm among this College Republican board in public settings, as it was for some Penn State political students in previous years. They instead chose to take advantage of a frame that insists on professionalism in order to cultivate an appearance of respectable Republicanism and to maintain a refined, civil discourse with their peers who hold different opinions (Binder and Wood 2013). Therefore, because audiences are forced to respond to a performance, my informants’ performances are a pointed attempt to promote a response of respect and, further, to avoid the same anger and offense that some performances, like that described in the opening anecdote, might induce (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Though the “culture of smartness” that was discussed in chapter 2 is evident here to a degree, as the students use particular strategies, such as using “science”

rhetoric's in their political discourse, to influence public political realities, there is a clear and determined attempt by my informants to be respectable in their public political performances by focusing the discussion away from polarizing, hyper-partisan issues. However, the tactics they use to accomplish this result in their sense of superiority being emphasized; it points to the idea that my informants believe that some people are better than others – namely, that *they* are better than others – and this message is consistently expressed through their discourse. Their attitudes toward topics such as gun control change, however, when my informants are in a private setting with a familiar audience.

Informal Performances in Private Settings

When I returned to the club office on the afternoon of my interview with William, after already interviewing McKinley and Howard, McKinley happened to be in the room working on her laptop. As many young students do, she had a sticker on the back of her laptop screen near the Apple logo. It was a yellow circle that had an image of a coiled rattlesnake at its center, and it read: “Don’t tread on my second amendment rights”. This sticker adapts and repurposes the Tea Party slogan, “Don’t Tread On Me”, which adapts a popular mantra from the era of the American Revolutionary War, in order to protest the implementation of government regulated gun control (“Gadsden Flag History – Don’t Tread on Me” 2016). Her personal Twitter page also features images of her and Howard at a Pennsylvania shooting range, holding up their used targets, boasting about how they were out celebrating “2A,” or the second amendment. Further, during a preliminary discussion with McKinley and Howard, I learned that during one of the College

Republicans' regular conservative-centric campus events, Truth Week¹⁹, the NRA frequently visits, discusses their organization, hands out merchandise, and gives free memberships to anyone wanting to join the association. Thus, it seems that certain social topics and political associations such as the NRA are far more important to my informants, both as individuals and as a group, than they initially let on. Nevertheless, when explicitly asked about their position with regards to this association, my informants were vague, as described above. However, when they are among one another, and when they are sharing images and ideas on their personal social media pages, they are less scripted; their feelings and opinions on certain topics are shown to be much stronger than they initially appear in more formal settings where the frame requires a certain type of tact and respectability. The repurposed and provocative Gadsden sticker is one example of what I initially viewed as a contradiction between what my informants said and what their other actions seemed to express, and additional examples of these informal performances will be discussed below. Ultimately, I conclude that these are not so much contradictions as they are a change in the "front" (Goffman 1959, 22) of my informants as a result of an altered frame and audience; when in a certain setting, and around a certain audience, my informants' "back-stage front" (ibid) behaviour is on display, and the need for public respectability is no longer present as the accepted political reality and acceptable performances changes with the audience.

¹⁹ Truth Week is an annual event traditionally hosted in the Fall semester by the Penn State College Republicans. During the event, they invite nationally-renowned conservative speakers to discuss issues such as free speech, sexual assault, and the second amendment. The event was cancelled for the Fall 2018 semester and tentatively rescheduled for the Winter 2019 semester as a result of funding issues with Penn State that were out of the students' control.

Back-Stage Fronts and The Rejection of “PC Culture”

According to Goffman (1959), the setting of a performance includes the physical space in which the performance occurs, such as a specific room, as well as the décor of the room, such as the furniture. Each of these features contributes to the frame and establishes the nature of the performances that will take place. Every setting hosts a different audience, and so an actor’s performance changes with the setting, and in familiar, non-rehearsed performances, when the actor is comfortable, they present a “back stage front”; a performance that is less concerned with following expected social norms and less cautious of who is listening or who might be offended as a result of shared collective expectations of the political reality. In my informants’ case, it is largely a performance that allows them to move away from “PC culture” and to speak about their beliefs more bluntly than they do in public settings. “PC culture” was cited a few times by my informants, and particularly by Howard, as something they do not appreciate. An abbreviation for “political correctness”, it is understood by liberals as a conscious avoidance of language or actions that may offend minority groups in society, and by conservatives as a censorship of free speech and a coddling of a generation that is “offended by everything”. The most common setting for my informants to express their informal performances and their “back stage front” is in their weekly meetings in a small room in the Willard Building on campus. Every Monday night at 8:00pm the College Republicans host their weekly meeting, during which they discuss ongoing political issues both specific to Penn State as well as those affecting America more generally. During my fieldwork in October and November, the midterm elections were the topic of

conversation for several weeks in a row, and the students discussed their admiration for local Republican candidates, such as Jake Corman, as well as their dislike of Democratic figures such as Nancy Pelosi and Elizabeth Warren. It is in this setting, accompanied by particular rituals, such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance before the commencement of each meeting, that the College Republicans are able to speak informally in front of a familiar audience, and thus perform differently than they do during formal, public interviews. I suggest that the frame of the meeting in particular is the most important factor in determining the use of a “back stage front” by the College Republicans, as my presence did not seem to affect the on-goings of the group, though of course being among friends and familiar faces allows for a more frank, less rehearsed discussion as well. The room where they host the meetings and the rituals they follow within the room set the frame of “this is a meeting”, and thus the College Republicans know they can speak about their opinions differently than they would in other frames.

It is noteworthy to mention the reasons that I characterize these meetings as informal, despite the fact that they do consist of a few formal ritualistic elements, such as the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and discussion of important “housekeeping” items before each meeting commences and the casual banter and conversation can begin. Throughout the meetings, it is common for McKinley, Howard, and William to share humorous YouTube videos and memes, often mocking Democrats such as Hillary Clinton; during one meeting, they shared videos that called her “cocaine Hillary” and made her the butt of several jokes. Another example of informality includes the games the board creates for the group, such as one for the midterms that would award the member with the most accurate election predictions gift cards. Thus, the meetings are a

place where jokes and games are expected, and though they do have a loose structure, they are primarily a casual and relaxed space where the College Republicans can socialize light-heartedly. The students are so comfortable in this frame that several members of the College Republicans openly have very politically opinionated conversations in the presence of a stranger taking notes; though they are not speaking directly to me, they speak so loudly in such a confined classroom space that their conversation becomes everyone's conversation very quickly. An example of an informal performance occurring in casual conversation is the following; it is an anecdote told by one of the more vocal group members, Calvin, in the context of a hypothetical discussion regarding what the political atmosphere on campus would be like if Democrats won both the House and the Senate in the midterm elections:

Calvin: "There is way too much liberalism on campus already. They've even started shoving it down our throats in HUB. I was walking by the other day and they were asking for signatures for a petition about climate change awareness or global warming or something. As I walked by some girl was like "Do you care about the environment?" I turned around and was like "FUCK no."

Calvin's anecdote about his experience at the university HUB draws raucous laughter from his peers, and it is significant for a few different reasons: firstly, it is a story that directly and openly criticizes liberal ideas and organizations on campus; in formal settings, the College Republicans refer to the College Democrats and other political student group members as their friends and, as explored above, they are not explicitly

critical of social topics or issues. In this instance, that discourse is abandoned and a different, less neutral approach is adopted. Secondly, Calvin uses language that is much more crass and blunt than is normally used when discussing politics on campus; this is not an instance of practising “civil discourse” (Binder and Wood 2013). Though he is not a board member, all of the College Republicans are accustomed to interviewing when there is a significant local political occurrence as well as volunteering to represent the club at different events in State College throughout the semester. For example, the day after this particular weekly meeting was November 6th, the day of the midterm elections, and several of the members volunteered to participate in a phone bank, during which they called State College voters and encouraged them to vote for local Republican candidates. During their phone bank, some local candidates stopped by to thank them for their work toward Republican causes. Thus, they are all accustomed to engaging with the public and with politicians in formal settings as College Republicans and conforming to expectations of civility. As a result, I suggest that the frame of this meeting – this particular room with its particular rituals and familiar audience – are what encourage informal performances from the College Republicans. An additional and similar example comes from another active, vocal member, and is spoken during a group-wide conversation regarding voter suppression in certain states such as Georgia²⁰:

Rich: All the race issues in Georgia are bullshit anyway. I mean, how about we just shoot all the Democratic candidates?

²⁰ Claims of voter fraud and voter suppression, especially amongst minority races, have plagued Georgia in recent years. The allegations were a point of contention during the 2018 midterms as well. See: Shah (2018) for more on Georgia’s history of voter suppression.

Anne: How about no. Shut up.

In this example, Rich purposefully tries to get his peers riled up, and it works, as Anne cuts him off immediately and tells him to “shut up” in a forceful tone. Prior to the meeting commencing, he had also posed a question asking whether homosexuality is “bad”, which was also met by immediate annoyance from Anne and others around him. Clearly, Rich uses the frame of the meeting, which is a space where these outlandish questions and statements have less consequences than they would in a formal setting as a result of the expectation for a “back stage front” (Goffman 1952, 22), to exaggerate his political performances and see how far he can take his push-back against “PC culture”. These statements are meant to upset his peers by testing the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable, and as a result are a type of trolling performance reminiscent of the 2016 political demonstrations on campus which forced audiences to respond to performances that challenged the accepted political realities on campus. Cheng et al. (2017) define “trolling behaviour” (1217) as behaviour that falls outside of acceptable boundaries set by particular communities; in other words, trolling is a behaviour that knowingly breaks away from conventional collective constructions of reality. As a result, some of the College Republicans, including Rich, adopt this behaviour in settings where challenging collective ways of meaning making result in fewer consequences and confrontations. Rich makes provocative statements he knows are over the top and potentially offensive, but does so in a setting where, though he may receive a response of annoyance or anger from his peers, as a result of their being a certain degree of civility expected in informal

settings as well, he will not face serious repercussions. Further, in these informal settings, he is more likely to be able to renegotiate political realities amongst his peers more easily; Rich knows that several of his peers have opinions that are similar to his and will potentially buy into his construction of political realities more easily than the general public. Thus, provocation and anti-PC discourse is more acceptable in this setting even though the group does not necessarily share a homogenous definition of the political realities present in the weekly meetings. Interestingly, I invited Calvin, who was mentioned above, to join my interview with Howard and McKinley, but he refused timidly, claiming that he was not a board member and not suited for an interview, thus implying that for some of the College Republicans, the informal frame of the meeting, which allows for more provocative performances and casual “back stage fronts”, is the most comfortable frame for expressing their political opinions.

Frames and their Impact on Fronts and Performances

As I listened to these stories and statements, and several others like them, it became clear that the truthfulness of the story or the intent behind the statement is not what matters to the performers nor the spectators; the significance lies in the bravado the young men put on for one another²¹. As mentioned above, actors benefit by adapting their performance depending on the setting they are in and the audience they are addressing (Goffman 1959, 22); in informal settings, they benefit by being crass in front of their

²¹ I say “young men” here because, while there are women in the club, including Anne and McKinley, the president, approximately 84% of the meetings I attended were comprised of men: there were 3-5 women for every 18-20 men. Further, these specific examples occurred as conversations between the young men; women were present but not directly involved in the conversation from the beginning.

fellow club members, as it is often seen as both funny and a way to “own the libs”²²; a mantra that is written on the chalkboard before some club meetings and that is pinned to the top of several group members’ Twitter pages. Further, the meetings are a place where the students bond and form friendships; though several of the members have known each other for years, they initially met through the College Republicans, and partake in activities together both on and off campus. During our interview Howard mentioned that he is thankful for his time with the group in part because of all the people he has met. Thus, in meetings, the potential benefits of the performance change, and thus so do the performances themselves. Therefore, informal performances, set by a frame that allows for a “back stage front” (Goffman 1952, 22), results in a different expectation of conformity. As a result, the performances present in the private setting of the meeting have some of the qualities of the shocking performances of the 2016 Penn State political clubs; the students vie for a provocative performance and attempt to troll one another, as the expectation for respectability is not as important as the expectation for unrefined “humor” and “owning the libs” through anti-PC discourse, though both expectations are present. Binder and Wood (2013) suggest that campuses play a large role in constructing students’ political selves and influence how they express the beliefs they adopt. I suggest that among the College Republicans, it is not simply the campus as a whole that determines the expression of a political belief, but the frame of an event within the Penn State campus. This is because the College Republicans are an amalgamation of students,

²² This is a common saying amongst Republicans and is a shortened version of “owning the liberals.” To “own the libs” means to act a certain way or say a certain phrase with the sole purpose of upsetting or mocking liberal or democratic individuals. It is most often used on social media, both ironically and unironically, but is used in various settings by my informants.

some of whom are former Bull Moose Party members, who all embody, practice and perform their Republicanism differently, hence the lack of complete cohesion regarding their political realities. In these examples, the performer's peers are forced to respond to their performances like any other audience, and though sometimes these responses are not favourable, as exemplified by the exchange between Rich and Anne, the risk involved in a shocking, provocative performance that tests the boundaries and norms of the frame are much less serious than they would be in a formal setting and might result in a moment of shared humor for everyone (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

In sum, the College Republicans alter their performances and the front they display depending on the frame they are in and the audience they are addressing. When in formal settings, they revert to discussions of economics that involve statistics, so as to avoid sharing any explicit opinions on polarizing social topics and, additionally, to suggest that their ways of meaning making are legitimate and justified. In doing so, their acknowledgement of their "smartness" is evident; they believe they have accessed data and statistics that others have not. They adopt this approach in order to combat the negative stereotypes about Republicans – stereotypes they are cognizant of – which suggest that Republicans do not care about important issues such as mass shooting victims or climate change; they attempt to appear respectable and civil because, in addition to being the agreed-upon definition of the situation by all participants, regardless of political opinion, this type of performance benefits their image on campus and in the media when they appear in published interviews or campus-wide podcasts. It also notably distances them from the performances and bravado of Trump, which is often met with criticism and backlash. Further, based on William's assertion that civil discourse among

students was all but impossible during the tumultuous presidential campaign of 2016, I suggest that my informants seem eager to avoid a similar tension during the midterm elections. Moreover, this approach of respectability is less important in informal settings where the frame is one of private familiarity and my informants are friendly and comfortable with their audience; their “back stage front” allows for more personal and opinionated conversations, because the frame calls for provocation and anti-PC culture as much as it does for refinement or civility. The College Republicans become more crass in their performances because they are aware that they will receive less serious consequences as a result of their peers response to their performances compared to other people whose personal opinions are not known to them and because they know that the stereotypes that plague Republicans will not follow them into the meeting room. Further, the meetings are a place where political realities are renegotiated more easily as a result of the friendships formed amongst the students. Thus, because the campus allows for multiple frames, and because the group hosts a diverse spectrum of Republicanism, both civil discourse and provocation exist in the performances of the College Republicans (Binder and Wood 2013). These informal performances sometimes take a more specific form, and in the next chapter I will discuss how gendered performances are common in the informal settings of the College Republicans’ weekly meetings and, further, how a hyper-masculine culture impacts the College Republicans in general.

Chapter Four: Beto, Betas, and Hegemonic Masculinity among the College Republicans

Much of the political discourse that was exchanged by opposing Penn State political groups in the months leading up to the 2016 election was gendered. Specifically, the clashes between the Bull Moose Party and the College Republicans commonly involved gendered insults as a means of public communication – and attempted humiliation – as the two student groups argued uncompromisingly over their position on endorsing the controversial Republican nominee. As has already been mentioned in previous sections of this thesis, the College Republicans opted not to support Trump’s bid for presidency, and, as a result, certain members defected from the group to form the Bull Moose Party, whose sole purpose was supporting everything Trump-related. The tensions did not end with the defection, nor with their very public demonstrations on campus, as the Bull Moose Party would often infiltrate the College Republicans’ meetings, filling the last few seats and lining the walls in the already-packed room, in an attempt to shame them into changing their official position on supporting Trump’s campaign (Godfrey 2018). Examples of these clashes include the Bull Moose Party shouting the word “Cuck!” during a College Republicans meeting, directing the insult toward the then-president of the group, who refused to change his position on supporting Trump’s candidacy²³ (Godfrey 2018). Further, in an online posting of some private chat messages, which landed the Bull Moose Party in hot water²⁴, someone referred to the College

²³ The term “cuck” is contemporarily understood as a synonym for “weak” and is used as an insult for a politically liberal man. It is derived from the word “cuckold,” a term used to describe a man whose wife is sexually unfaithful. The term has problematic connotations that will be explored in more detail throughout the chapter.

²⁴ The GroupMe messages, which were leaked anonymously on Twitter, were denounced as explicitly homophobic and racist and were attributed to members of the Bull Moose Party as a result of the open condemnation of the College Republicans’ position on the endorsement of Trump in the messages. Comments made in the messages also personally attacked the College Republicans’ then-president. It was never verified that the Bull Moose Party was behind the message, however, because the identities of the

Republicans as the “CUCKlidge Republicans” (McKelvey 2016). Thus, questioning one’s masculinity through gendered insult was a common tactic used by the Bull Moose Party as a means of expressing their discontent with the leadership of the College Republicans during the tumultuous 2016 presidential campaign. It is important to note that I refer to these insults as “gendered” because they attempt to humiliate and emasculate men by policing and questioning one’s masculinity, ultimately suggesting that one is not “manly” enough in a stereotypical understanding of gender roles and presentations. These insults further call into question a man’s social and sexual prowess by using both a gendered and sexually-charged term in an attempt to demean and belittle, a discursive tactic that will be discussed in more detail below. Thus, the Bull Moose Party used the term “cuck” as a means to suggest that the men who oppose them do not display important masculine-coded characteristics and are weak as a result. This theme of gendered insults directed toward men will be discussed in more detail throughout the chapter as I discuss contemporary examples of these comments amongst the College Republicans.

Conflicts like those described above no longer occur between Republican students on campus so explicitly, as the majority of right-wing students exist officially as College Republicans once again. However, the former Bull Moose Party members still show up to the weekly College Republicans’ meetings, this time as legitimate group members, and attempt to rock the boat with different kinds of gendered insults and controversial statements. For example, in my first conversation with Howard I asked about the Bull

posters were anonymized by online screen names (including “Jihadist Hunter,” among others). See: McKelvey (2016) for more.

Moose Party, and he answered dismissively, stating that the Bull Moose Party is nothing more than a group of six guys who attend the College Republicans' meetings so they can shout out ridiculous comments in order to "stir the pot," much to Howard's dismay. The example he gave of one such occurrence was the young men's insistence on arguing that the 19th amendment, which granted American women suffrage in the 20th century, be abolished, thus suggesting that women should not have the right to vote. Therefore, making controversial, gender-specific insults is still a common occurrence amongst some members of the College Republicans.

In an appropriate coincidence, Howard shared these anecdotes as we sat next to a cardboard cut-out of Joe Paterno. Paterno, an infamously polarizing figure on campus contemporarily, is viewed by many as a figure that perpetuates the traditional, and potentially harmful, masculine-coded characteristics of strength, toughness and violence. The former NCAA football coach was no stranger to controversy over the years, and much of the time, the controversy seemed to center around his hegemonic masculine values. For example, Paterno came under fire for making "jokes" about domestic violence and beating his wife, and defended it as a part of expected aggression in "locker room talk" (Capuzzo 1991). More recently, Paterno's memory has fallen from grace in several circles at Penn State – and across America more generally – as a result of his alleged involvement in the cover-up of a child sex abuse scandal (Moyer 2016). As a result, the highly valued culture of traditional, hegemonic masculinity on campus, which Paterno represented, has been called into question and criticized by those who believe this type of culture promotes institutionalized abuse; it harmful to women as it produces an understanding of masculinity and gender relations that blatantly demeans and,

potentially, even physically hurts them and, further, it is harmful to men who do not embody this type of masculinity (Dowler et al. 2014). Arguably, this type of understanding of masculinity and gender relations perpetuates rape culture, which is defined as a space where rape is normalized as a result of wide-spread attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Thus, Paterno's detractors have attempted to move away from and alter this harmful attitude on campus. Despite Paterno's critics, there are still students at Penn State who value Paterno's contributions to Penn State's culture, both on and off the football field, including the machismo and masculinity he embodied. While I believe the conclusions of this chapter are reflective of American culture at large, it is important to note that the particular context of Penn State and Paterno's legacy on campus contributes to the students' understanding of and performance of masculinity. As a result of the aforementioned sex abuse scandal that stunned Penn State's campus, the understanding and embodiment of masculinity is more fraught and contentious than it may be at other universities. Paterno is still a revered figure, evidenced by both the frequent calls to reinstall his statue on campus²⁵ and the cardboard cut-out found in the College Republicans' club office; though disowned by some, he is still a person of monumental importance to certain students and members of the community. Because his reputation has been tarnished, his supporters are even more eager to show their respect for Paterno and his impact on campus. As a result, Paterno's version of masculinity – a stereotypically machismo version – still dominates some circles at Penn State, and

²⁵ In 2012, in the aftermath of the Sandusky sex abuse scandal, Paterno's statue was removed from outside the football stadium on campus. Since then, past and present members of the Nittany Lions football team, as well as other Paterno supporters – including Trump – have called for the statue to be returned. For more see Schilken (2016).

because of his history in football, his pointedly gendered “jokes”, and his alleged knowledge of the scandal, the performances of traditionally masculine-coded characteristics are particularly visible on campus. However, while Penn State is a distinct environment with a unique history surrounding masculine dominance, the discussion of hegemonic masculinity in this chapter is applicable to America more generally as a result of Trump’s embodiment of masculinity and treatment of women before and during his presidency: Trump’s demeaning remarks and alleged predatory behaviour toward women did not detract his supporters, and thus I argue that the hegemonic masculinity found at Penn State is not unique solely to the campus but is reflective of the attitudes of Americans more generally. This will be discussed in more detail below.

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that several of the College Republicans still value the traditional culture of hegemonic masculinity on campus, as expressed in their informal discourse. Thus, even though specific insults are not directed at other students as pointedly as they were in 2016, the comments made are still gendered in nature and are still meant to be both insulting and controversial as they are rooted in a particular, highly valued culture of hegemonic masculinity at Penn State and, arguably, in American politics and society more generally. Emasculating comments, like those described in the opening anecdote, are still an important part of the College Republicans’ discourse – especially in their weekly meetings – but the individuals on the receiving end of the insults have changed since the groups have found common ground as a single club once again. This type of discourse is permitted in their weekly meetings because the collective understanding of gender realities with regards to politics allows for emasculating comments to be hurled at certain male Democratic politicians.

In this chapter, I will explore several examples of explicitly gendered comments and insults that I encountered during my time at Penn State. I will begin with examples that display how gendered comments made by the College Republicans follow the pattern of formal and informal performances outlined in chapter 3; in formal frames, comments about gender equality and women's rights, related to topics such as feminism and abortion, are not as provocative nor as polarizing as they are in informal frames because they abide by socially agreed-upon understandings of political realities on campus. Other types of mocking comments and insults, like "Cuck!", are avoided in formal frames altogether. However, the students continue to use this frame as a means of subtly expressing their opinions on topics such as feminism and abortion and, further, refuting common stereotypes about Republican women. Additionally, I will explore gendered insults that exemplify a culture of hegemonic masculinity amongst the students and examine how they police the masculinity of male politicians: they only accept very stereotypical masculine-coded characteristics – such as strength, aggression, decisiveness, and willingness for violence – as being "manly" enough for political leadership. This is evidence in the insults they direct at male Democratic candidates they do not like. Further, I will discuss the College Republicans' rejection of modern feminism and suggest that the use of crass, gendered insults is a dismissal of liberal ideas about gender equality and changing perceptions of masculinity; contemporary feminist perspectives suggest that historically valued masculine traits, such as aggression and violence, are harmful to women's social progress and should be condemned rather than respected. I will further suggest that the rejection of modern feminism is also a rejection of contemporary political correctness that, to the College Republicans, represents

sensitive liberals who want to change not just cultural and social norms, but norms that my informants believe are rooted in the essence of women and men; they view political correctness as opposed to “scientific” understandings of gender relations and masculine behaviours, and that political correctness represents feminine authority. Finally, I conclude this chapter by examining how the hegemonic masculinity exemplified by comments and insults made by the College Republicans reflect a sense of loss similar to that discussed in chapter 2; certain gendered insults expressed through the students’ discourse indicate that traditionally valued masculine characteristics and historic gender relations are being challenged by modern feminism, and thus so is the historic position of power held predominantly by white men. If masculine-coded characteristics of strength, aggression, and violence are no longer highly valued in society and no longer widely understood as being necessary for leadership positions, a more diverse group of people have the potential to occupy those positions, presenting an opportunity for racial minorities and women to take on more political leadership roles. This results in discomfort amongst the College Republicans, a primarily white and male group, who see a position of power that was previously exclusive to them in what was a male social sphere opened up to a larger group of Americans. Thus, the College Republicans cling to the hegemonic values that secure their place in the social and political structure of America by policing presentations of masculinity by politicians and by challenging movements that are attempting to diversify these positions.

Ultimately, this chapter will argue that the College Republicans, through the use of gendered insults directed at Democratic politicians, express their discontent with modern feminist ideas that are changing perceptions of gender roles and that are changing

what gender characteristics are valued; namely, placing less emphasis on traditionally masculine characteristics. As a result of the imposition of modern feminist ideas, the students feel as though the social and political position of white men in America is changing as leadership roles become more diverse; politics is a historically male-sphere, with a historically valued type of masculinity, but this is changing more and more with contemporary social movements. As a result of the focus being primarily on the attitudes of white American men, I will also briefly explore how race and increasing racial diversity and social movements factors into the feelings of my informants. I will begin the next section by discussing public, formal performances in relation to issues surrounding gender equality and women's rights, primarily feminism and abortion.

Gender and Feminism: Discussions in Formal Settings

Gender equality and feminism are topics that make their way into both my interviews with my informants, albeit briefly, as well into their casual conversations in their weekly meetings. As a result, gender arises in both formal and informal performances and, thus, these performances differ greatly depending on whether the College Republicans are putting on a formal front in a frame that demands civility and respectability, or a back stage front in a frame that allows for a more provocative, less politically correct performance. In this section, I will analyze the discussion of topics such as feminism and abortion in formal frames and ultimately argue that the desire for respectability as well as their desire to avoid falling into common Republican stereotypes moderates their formal comments, much like it did with the examples in chapter 3. This

serves to set up the discussion in the following section, which will argue that in informal performances, hegemonic masculinity dominates as modern feminism is mercilessly attacked and anything less than an “alpha” presentation of masculinity is denounced and critiqued.

As mentioned before, in my interviews, discussions about feminism and gender equality did not come up often. Much like the social topics of gun control and immigration discussed in chapter 3, these topics are commonly avoided in favor of less polarizing concerns. In our interview, the topic of feminism is briefly mentioned by McKinley, and when asked to expand on her comment, she avoids giving a detailed answer. Further, she appeared to be annoyed with the question in the first place and therefore I did not dwell on the topic by asking additional questions. Though the query was opened to both McKinley and Howard, Howard avoids giving his opinion, despite both students having answered every question up to this point. Thus, the task of commenting on feminism is left solely to McKinley:

McKinley: Yeah, I think going off what Howard said, a lot of times [we receive] personal character attacks too, like: "Oh you don't care about poor people," or "You're complicit in the murder of children," that's my favorite. I think identity politics contributes to that, so if I'm a Republican woman, I often get: "Oh, you're a misogynist, you don't care about other women." I think that's extremely counterproductive but it's something that I'd say is a growing trend especially among people our age.



Figure 4. A cardboard cut-out of Joe Paterno inside the College Republicans' office.

Me: Yeah. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Do you consider a lot of Republican women to be feminists? Even if it goes against the grain of third wave feminism?

McKinley: Yeah, I would say that I identify with the original feminist movement.

Me: Okay.

McKinley: Getting women the right to vote. Not getting employers to fund birth control and all these radical, crazy things that, honestly, I can't even fathom. I guess I say third wave some people say fourth wave feminism.

In her answer, McKinley declares that she identifies with the early, first-wave feminist movement, but not with the goals of contemporary feminism. According to Binder and Wood (2013), rejecting contemporary feminist movements is a common theme amongst young College Republicans. Among young Republican women in particular, who tend to be more concerned with these topics than their male peers, the belief is that modern feminism does not speak for all women, such as “stay-at-home-mother feminists,” and does not promote equality, but rather promotes radical ideas that would grant women unbalanced power or privilege (Binder and Wood 2013, 276). Young Republican men tend to be significantly less concerned with feminist issues in politics; though Republican men and women seem to agree on basic conservative tenets, such as small government, young Republican women are concerned with particular gender-related issues that their

male counterparts are not (Binder and Wood 2013, 194). This perhaps explains Howard's decision to not comment. Further, this aligns with McKinley's comments from above: she states that she believes in feminism on a fundamental level, but does not associate herself with the "radical" desires of contemporary feminism such as accessible and affordable employer-provided birth control²⁶; a comment that undoubtedly goes hand in hand with her beliefs about socialized healthcare that were described in chapter 2. Further, in several of her online articles, she critiques "modern feminism" for being hypocritical of her and other Republican women's version of feminism and questions the extent of its inclusion. Thus, she clearly states that her values do not align with those of contemporary feminist movements.

At the beginning of the example outlined above, McKinley notes some stereotypes of Republicans and Republican women that she dislikes, and these come up often in her interviews with both myself and others. For example, she describes what she believes is a misunderstanding about the Republican stance on contentious topics such as abortion; she states that Republicans deserve more credit than they receive from Democrats because they are more reasonable and moderate than they are commonly perceived to be. Unsurprisingly, there is little provocation involved in these answers, as McKinley's goal is to remain respectable in public, formal frames. Even on issues that she and her peers feel very strongly about, such as a pro-life stance, she maintains that she and other Republicans want "safe, legal, and rare" abortions, despite the fact that several of her authored articles and online social media posts as well as my interviews

²⁶ This is a reference to the mandate that employers provide insurance coverage for contraception, an act that the Trump administration rolled back in 2017. For more see Pear et al. (2017).

suggest that many College Republicans personally do not agree with this. For example, both the op-ed articles McKinley pens for conservative websites as well as her personal social media pages express strong pro-life opinions. Additionally, in our interviews, she stated that she believes *Roe v. Wade* was the “most unconstitutional ruling in the modern history of the Supreme Court”²⁷. William’s views are very similar, as he states that he tends to “lean more pro-life than pro-choice”. As with all performances, my informants’ performances elicit a response from their peers across campus, and by being moderate and expressing that they are more reasonable than their stereotypes suggest, they attempt to elicit a positive reaction and, further, attempt to influence the perspectives that their peers have of Republicans and Republican values. If more students across campus believe that Republicans have a more reasonable political outlook than they initially thought due to stereotypes, their own political outlooks may be influenced as a result and they may adopt a similar point of view. Thus, though my informants seem to be pro-life, when interviewed, McKinley presents a moderate, “reasonable” front in a formal setting when discussing issues related to feminism and gender equality so as to cultivate respectability and attempt to influence opinions in a space where political realities and outlooks are negotiated. Further, because she is aware of the stereotypes that befall Republican women, such as not caring about women’s rights or having internalized misogyny, she attempts to avoid playing into these and thus adjusts her performance accordingly (Sales 2018). In these interviews, there is no discussion of gender characteristics, masculinity, or political correctness. However, the attitude of both

²⁷ Links to McKinley’s articles are withheld for privacy reasons. See: “*Roe v. Wade* Fast Facts” (2019) for more information on the history and impacts of the ruling.

McKinley and other members of the College Republicans changes significantly when they are presenting their “back stage front” in the frame set by their weekly meetings, as mocking modern feminists is common and hegemonic masculinity is exemplified through the gendered insults made by students. Though a degree of civility is expected in these performances as well, there is more leeway for students to be insulting, as the collective understandings of gender realities allows for the policing of masculinity and protection of traditionally valued masculine-coded characteristics. In the following section, I will outline gender-specific comments and insults expressed by various members of the group and explain how they are related to both a rejection of modern feminism and political correctness as well as a sense of loss of traditional masculinity and changing gender roles in politics.

Gendered Insults: Discussions in Informal Settings

In the small classroom in the Willard Building that houses the College Republicans’ weekly meetings, the “humor” and banter that comes up in casual conversation and that precedes the Pledge of Allegiance is often pointedly gendered. As described in the previous chapter, one of the benefits of the weekly meetings is social bonding and forming friendships, and one of the ways the College Republicans bond is by discussing their mutual dislike of modern feminism and feminists as well as “beta” male politicians. The gendered comments and insults that are sprinkled throughout the conversation index a particular type of hegemonic masculinity among the students that provides insight into two important details: first, the College Republicans actively reject

the political correctness surrounding gender equality that they view as being imposed on them by liberals, and specifically modern feminists, and second, this imposition of “PC culture” represents a challenge to traditional gender roles and the value of traditionally masculine characteristics, which results in feelings of loss (Robin 2018). Though this feeling of loss is expressed through a different type of discourse, it is related to the discussion in chapter 2, as a particular social position, predominantly held by white men in America, as well as traditionally valued masculine characteristics, such as aggression and violence, are challenged by social change. I will begin this section by exploring some of the ways the students reject modern feminism and “PC culture” through insult in informal frames.

One of the most significant example of comments and “jokes” that dismiss modern feminism and, by extension, political correctness, among the students is evidenced in a conversation between Ron, McKinley, and Calvin as they chat before the commencement of one of their weekly meetings. Their conversation, outlined below, is a discussion about the amount of liberalism found on campus and, more specifically, the amount of liberalism found in course-content in certain departments. Binder and Wood (2013) suggest that young Republicans tend to feel marginalized in their college classrooms as a result of liberalism being the dominant ideology on most college campuses, and this tendency is exemplified by the Penn State College Republicans. They express their discontent by mocking and insulting the liberal ideas they hear in the classroom:

Calvin: I had to take a class that asked us to write a paper on the environment and climate change, which is bad enough, but then the prof asked us to write about “environmental feminisms.”

Ron: “Environmental feminisms?”

Calvin: Yeah, right? Like, what the fuck? We had to, like, describe how feminism impacts the environment or something.

Ron: Well let’s see; they blow hot air, so that contributes to global warming ... they are ugly, so they make the environment look like shit ... they smell bad, which makes the environment smell worse ...

McKinley: You’re mansplaining! Stop mansplaining!

The conversation in this example begins with Calvin expressing his annoyance with course content emphasizing what he believes are liberal concerns, such as climate change and feminism. This is followed up by Ron, who also expresses discontent with feminism making its way into classrooms on campus, and does so by mockingly explaining how feminism and feminists negatively impact the environment, focusing largely on insulting their physical appearance. This is significant as men who reduce vocal women to nothing but their physical appearance tend to be fearful of women who speak up regarding power imbalances in gender relations in society (Eddo-Lodge 2015). Ron’s comment implies

that he is aware of the fact that modern feminism challenges structures of power in politics and society more generally. Additionally, McKinley joins the conversation in order to further mock feminist ideas by sarcastically and dramatically suggesting that the young men are mansplaining²⁸. These examples are more than just a denunciation of modern feminism, though they attack the movement quite explicitly; these examples are a rejection of the political correctness surrounding gender equality and gender characteristics that are promoted by contemporary liberal and feminist ideologies. While these topics and ideologies are currently prominent in American society at large, they are also relevant on campus as, Penn State, like most university campuses, is a predominantly liberal space. Therefore, the social context that the students find themselves in daily and the dominant discourse they are exposed to, in their classrooms and in other shared student spaces, primarily promotes liberal ideas such as feminism and political correctness. As a result, the College Republicans reject the increasing imposition of these ideologies – in American society in general and at Penn State specifically – in their own conservative space through the use of gendered insults.

Feminism and the Imposition of “PC Culture”

In late 2017, the #MeToo movement, a viral campaign meant to draw attention to the systemic sexual harassment and abuse of women, gained momentum, with dozens of

²⁸ “Mansplaining” is a term, often used by liberals, that describes a man who patronizingly and condescendingly explains something to another person, most often a woman, when an explanation is not necessary or when the person being spoken to is already an expert on the topic. The word was coined relatively recently, but the recognition of the occurrence has been discussed by feminists for several years. See: Solnit (2012) for more.

celebrities and millions of women globally sharing their stories about the sexual misconduct they face in their daily lives²⁹. This was followed by the “Time’s Up” movement in 2018, which was inspired by the #MeToo movement, and served the same purpose of drawing attention to gender inequality and sexual harassment³⁰. The goal of both movements is to demand a change in what is viewed as socially acceptable behaviour towards women and to end systemic sexual misconduct in the workplace. This means that the movements draw attention to and denounce inappropriate behaviour by men that target women and make them uncomfortable, such as unwanted touching and grabbing or crass “jokes”. However, detractors suggest that the movements, specifically the #MeToo movement, which has arguably had the largest global impact, has “gone too far” (Slippers, 2017) and is attempting to punish and penalize men in an unfounded and unjust “warlock hunt” (ibid). Further, many Republican men criticize modern feminist movements because they believe they represent an “unending war on masculinity” (Young 2019, para. 5) when masculinity and traditional masculine characteristics are, in their view, rooted in biological nature and scientific evidence (Young 2019). This perpetuates the idea that “masculine” behaviours that are harmful to women are just “boys being boys” and relates to the brief discussion of rape culture from above; these harmful behaviours and characteristics are normalized and excused as natural. The idea that gender characteristics can change with society is rejected as non-evidence based, liberal “social justice” (Young 2019, para. 3). This point of view suggests that masculine-

²⁹ The “Me Too” movement was founded in 2006 but gained renewed momentum in 2017 as a result of the viral hashtag #MeToo, under which women shared their stories of harassment and abuse. The hashtag helped emphasize the frequency of such occurrences in women’s lives. For more on the history of the movement see [About the Me Too Movement] (n.d.).

³⁰ For more on the Time’s Up movement see [About the Time’s Up Movement] (n.d.).

coded characteristics such as aggression and violence are innate in all men and it is cruel to punish men for having these characteristics. Thus, in the year leading up to my fieldwork at Penn State, feminist movements – which my informants perceive as being part of the liberal agenda – were promoting changes with regards to gender relations and roles as well as perceptions of masculinity and masculine-coded characteristics; traits such as aggression and violence are condemned rather than praised when stories of sexual misconduct and abuse towards women are shared by the thousands. My informants sense this change in the value of “masculine” characteristics and view it as an unnecessary imposition of feminist movements and political correctness that “goes against science”. Thus, the College Republicans blatantly reject the changing social perception of gender characteristics and masculinity by openly mocking and insulting “feminists” as a group, as evidenced by Ron’s initial comment on the topic, as well as by disregarding prominent feminist movements. Because feminism is mocked by most of the members of the group at different times throughout the meeting, and the mocking is not shot down the way other comments are, it suggests that there is perhaps a greater collective understanding of gender relations in political realities amongst the College Republicans.

Ultimately, the College Republicans sense that traditional hegemonic masculine values, which were previously highly valued on campus as well as across America more generally, are no longer valued or respected the way that they used to be, due in part to the rise in outspoken women (and men) who support modern feminist movements that underscore the harm that these values can cause women. As a result, the College Republicans use the space of the meeting, where less “PC culture” is expected, to uphold these hegemonic masculine values as well as to attack liberal feminist movements in

ways that they likely would be strongly condemned for in formal frames. The College Republicans further emphasize their hegemonic masculine values through the insults they hurl at Democratic politicians whose gender expression does not fit the stereotypical and narrow expectations of the students.

Hegemonic Masculinity and “Beta” Males

In this section, I will explore how the insults hurled by young men like Ron at certain male politicians exemplify the hegemonic masculinity and the stereotypical understandings of masculine leadership qualities amongst certain members of the College Republicans. In the context of this chapter, hegemonic masculinity will be defined as the legitimization of the dominance of men and of certain ways of being a man in society. Hegemonic masculinity dictates that men, and especially men in leadership positions or positions of power, should exemplify historically valued, masculine-coded traits such as strength, aggression, decisiveness, and violence, as these traits improve their political prowess and decision-making abilities (Conroy 2015). Further, hegemonic masculinity decrees that other characteristics, often described as “feminine”, are “unmanly” and those who exemplify them are unsuited to lead, as they do not display the qualities of a strong male leader (Conroy 2015). Thus, hegemonic masculinity allows for only “manly” men to be respected. Additionally, this section will examine the sense of fear and loss that surrounds the changing gender expressions and representations in American politics; I suggest that the mockery and insult of gender equality and certain gender characteristics is a result of the recognition that modern feminism and “PC culture” is upending the

notion that political power should only be obtained by a small group of men who display stereotypically “manly” characteristics. This, as a result, impacts the social position of white men in America who previously dominated the political sphere and who were the sole occupants of top political positions.

Ron is one of the most vocal members of the College Republicans and is one of the students who strongly exemplifies the hegemonic masculinity within the group; through gendered insults, he polices the gender presentation and masculinity of politicians he dislikes and, as a result, he performs masculinity as he believes it should be embodied and enacted. While there are several other vocal members, many of whom have been discussed in this thesis already, no other student makes gendered insults as often as Ron. One of the most significant statements he made during my time with the group occurred during the meeting on November 5th. As the students explored some hypothetical outcomes of the midterm elections, which were scheduled for the following morning, the conversation inevitably turned to a discussion of how the midterm elections would impact the 2020 presidential election. Several Democratic politicians whom the College Republicans do not like were mentioned throughout the meeting, including Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Warren, and Beto O’Rourke. It was surmised by several group members that if O’Rourke lost his bid for Senate to Republican Ted Cruz in Texas, he would eventually make a run for the presidency. This assumption prompted Ron to loudly interrupt his peers to make his feelings about O’Rourke known: “He can’t win... Beto is a beta!” Over the course of the 45 minute meeting, Ron ended up shouting the phrase “Beto is a beta!” a total of three times, to no one in particular. I believe that this gendered comment provides insight into the College Republicans’ beliefs about masculine

characteristics and gender equality in politics, especially considering none of Ron's peers contested his statement.

Using a term such as "beta" to describe a man that one believes is unfit to lead is reflective of one's understanding of masculinity and femininity and, further, suggests that a lack of traditionally masculine-coded characteristics indexes a lack of political and sexual prowess. In the above example, Ron questions O'Rourke's ability to be an "alpha" by labeling him as a "beta". If one is an "alpha", they are the leader of the pack, so to speak: adopted from terminology used to describe the top animal in a dominance hierarchy in the animal kingdom, an "alpha" is a socially aggressive, domineering leader. Contrarily, if one is a "beta", they are a submissive follower who vies unsuccessfully for the role of "alpha". Thus, in order to be a successful leader, one must display stereotypically "manly" traits such as dominance and aggression. According to Huddy and Terkildsen (in Aalberg and Jenssen 2007), historically masculine characteristics, such as strength, toughness, and decisiveness, are preferred in politicians over other characteristics, which are perceived negatively because they are too "feminine". As a result, anything less than an "alpha" presentation of masculinity from politicians is often perceived negatively by voters. Similarly, Matland (in Aalberg and Jenssen 2007) suggests that amongst conservative voters in particular, male politicians are perceived as better able to argue in favor of the party's policies. Essentially, voters perceive men with traditionally masculine-coded characteristics as better able to address political issues such as national security and, additionally, better able to argue for their party's ideologies; these "alpha" men possess the political strength and prowess required to be successful. Furthermore, this type of terminology is a popular way for young men to not only police

one another's masculinity, but, to an extent, their heterosexuality (Greene 2015; Pascoe 2005). Being a dominant man involves displaying aggressive sexual prowess – and, specifically, heterosexual prowess – which displays dominance over women. If a man is not sexually dominant, he is a “beta”. In this way, Ron’s terminology is similar to that used by the Bull Moose Party in 2016: “cuck” is another term that suggest that a man is not sexually dominant and, as a result, is either submissive to other men – very often, black men – or to women. Thus, Ron attempts to emasculate O’Rourke by suggesting that the Democrat is not qualified to lead because he lacks “masculine” traits such as aggression and, as a result, lacks the political and sexual prowess required to dominate over other men and women. As a result of his attitude toward feminism that was outlined above, it is likely that Ron believes masculine-coded traits in male politicians are being lost as a result of modern feminist movements that decry characteristics such as aggression and underscore the harm in the rhetoric that men must dominate over women. Regardless, Ron adheres to a particular kind of hegemonic masculinity, as he only accepts certain ways of being a man as legitimate and worthy of “alpha” status. Thus, these gender schemas that influence voters are rooted in a stereotypical understanding of what makes a strong, successful political leader, which is further rooted in historical understandings of what makes a domineering man. Additional implications of using the term “beta” will be described in more detail below, as will the traits and politicians that appeal to voters with gender schemas similar to those expressed by Ron.

Online “Alpha’s” and Strong Male Politicians

It is important to note that the language Ron relies on when insulting male Democratic politicians, such as “beta” and “cuck”, are commonplace terms in online forums that serve as safe havens for white men who support alt-right³¹, populist Republican ideas. Green (2017, 145-147) states that in the midst of the presidential campaign, those close to Trump wanted to harness masses of white men on the Internet in order to stoke a political revolution that was opposed to the changing gender and racial landscapes in America. On sites such as 4chan, an anonymous online messaging board, the alt-right was born as young men bonded over their discontent with feminism, Islam, and other concepts and ideologies that they perceived as being alien to and at odds with American ideals (Green 2017, 146). On these online forums, terms such as “cuck” are common among white nationalists who express misogynistic and racist beliefs openly; the term “cuck”, for example, is used by white men who fear a black man will take “their” woman and “pollute” or “ruin” her as a result. Thus, these words are rooted in a deep history of both misogyny and racism, and the men who use them in alt-right and populist groups online knowingly draw on these problematic histories as a means to assert that they, as white men, are superior to and should dominate over women and black men. As a result, Ron’s reliance on these terms as insults indexes these ideas and histories and, possibly, indexes his knowledge of these online circles where these terms and attitudes are commonplace. His terminology suggests he is aware of, and potentially a member of, other political spaces where these words are used in similar contexts and that he shares at least some of the attitudes expressed on these forums.

³¹ The alt-right is a white nationalist, conservative ideological group that promotes extreme political and social viewpoints, primarily through online media. The alt-right rejects mainstream politics and is often purposefully controversial when sharing their beliefs.

It is interesting to note that there is a very prominent contemporary male politician who does display stereotypical masculine qualities and acts like a “strong man” politician both with regards to politics and his relationship to women: Donald Trump. Lakoff (2016) suggests that Trump is respected by his supporters because of his “man of the house” attitude: he boasts about strong foreign policy and border defense, as exemplified by his call to “build the wall” along the Mexican border and his tendency to publicly threaten foreign political leaders, such as those in Iran and North Korea (Chapman & Scheiner 2016; Ruiz 2018; Ward 2015); he puts down any women who challenge him, calling women “dogs” and “pigs”, boasting about assaulting them, and suggesting that menstruation makes one unfit to lead (Price 2018; Makela 2016; Yan 2015); and he says what he thinks without worrying about who he may offend, such as insulting individuals with disabilities or calling all Mexicans “rapists” (Silva 2018; Spayd 2017). Through these behaviours, among several others, Trump displays the characteristics of strong male leadership, in both politics and gender relations, and unapologetic outspokenness that is opposed to modern feminism and political correctness. He further asserts that racial minorities are inferior to him as a white man. As described in chapter 3, his followers appreciate his rejection of civility and his insistence on “speaking his mind”. I suggest here that this means that they also appreciate his domineering attitude toward and belittling of women as well as men who oppose him. As with Ron’s comments regarding the appearance of feminists, Trump also attacks the appearance of women who speak out against him, thus affirming the belief that women who oppose political structures that favor white men are demeaned by those who adhere to hegemonic masculine values. Trump behaves in a stereotypically machismo, “strong

man” way by upholding the belief in the gender schema that suggests that men should be strong and aggressive in politics, dominate over women, and remain unfazed by political correctness. In Ron’s gender schema, Trump represents the “alpha” male politician, because he possesses stereotypically masculine qualities and because he upholds the historic hierarchy that suggests that “manly men” should be in power over “girly men” and women. Thus, I argue that through his gender schema as a young Republican voter, Ron views Trump as an “alpha” who is not intimidated by opponents, international or domestic, male or female, and he does not care who he offends as he makes his outrageous comments; he has not gone “soft” and thus represents a man who is in charge and dominant both socially and sexually as male politicians are historically and stereotypically expected to be. Thus, I argue that Ron’s comments exemplify hegemonic masculinity because he suggests that only a very narrow understanding of masculinity is acceptable, and further that his comments reflect his support of “strong man” politicians such as Trump.

Interestingly, based on these comments as well as those made by other members of the group, such as McKinley and Calvin, it seems that, unlike in chapter 3, where my informants wanted to distance themselves from Trump’s version of political realities, with regards to gender realities and roles in politics, the students align themselves with the values presented by Trump. This perhaps relates back to Paterno; Penn State’s hegemonic masculine culture runs deep, and several of the College Republicans are football fanatics who come from Paterno-loving families. Howard said that he has only seen his father cry on two occasions, and one of those occasions was when Paterno died. Similarly, William mentioned that if he had chosen to attend any university other than

Penn State, he would have been disowned by his family. Thus, some of my informants have spent their entire lives admiring an institution that fostered a rape culture where jokes about domestic violence and, as it later came out, years of sexual abuse were permitted and, allegedly, covered up by certain members of the institution. Further, as was mentioned above, hegemonic masculine values dominate American society at large, and thus Paterno and Penn State are representative of these pervasive cultural values. As a result, though my informants do not always agree with Trump's political approaches, when it comes to gender realities in politics, they do appreciate his stereotypical masculine-coded values and attitudes towards his opponents and detractors, and they seem to use their own emasculating insults toward men and demeaning insults toward women to express this, and this is perhaps, at least partially, the result of Paterno's impact on Penn State's culture. In the next section, I will explore the sense of loss that arises in certain young Republicans as feminist movements attempt to alter the perception of gender characteristics and lessen the value placed on traditional masculine qualities such as aggression and violence.

Changing Traditional Masculinity and the Resulting Sense of Loss

The desire to emasculate others for a perceived weakness is rooted in a fear that something – namely, a prominent social position – is being taken from a privileged group, and not enough is being done to protect it. Schwartz (2016) suggests that men who attempt to insult or emasculate other men with gendered insults are fearful that their social position is being taken out from under them and that they are losing their

privileged status in America. Using the term “cuck” as her example, the same insult that was used frequently by the Bull Moose Party in 2016, she writes: “the word “cuck” resonates with white nationalists who feel as though their country has been taken away from them, and not enough had been done by the cuckservative establishment conservative party to protect it.” (Schwartz 2016, para. 11). She suggests that progressive social movements are the culprit that has been taking social privilege away from white men: “They have watched the first black president elected into office twice become a positive symbol for the progress and promise of our nation, both domestically and overseas; they have watched women join the workplace and become empowered enough to speak out at the injustices they face. They have watched as a “politically correct culture run amok” has made it socially unacceptable to be racist in public.” (Schwartz 2016, para. 12). Thus, as described above, I argue that the prominence of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements in recent years have resulted in a change in public perceptions of gender relations and masculine-coded characteristics that condemn traits such as aggression and willingness for violence as a result of the harm and discomfort they cause women. These stereotypical traits impact men too, as was explored above; men who do not possess these characteristics and whose masculinity is called into question can face backlash or degradation from those who believe in this narrow definition of masculinity. The “strong man” politician who threatens other politicians, assaults women, and makes crass public accusations is not respected by these social movements that desire to underscore the problems these characteristics present to men and women alike. As a result of these prominent social movements and the wide-spread support they have

received the College Republicans show their support for masculine-coded characteristics in politics in informal, private frames.

Beyond the changing perception of the types of characteristics that should be valued, there is also a change in the demographic of traditionally male spheres; Hochschild (2016, 202-203) states that some conservative men believe that traditionally male areas of life, including but not limited to politics and the U.S. military, need defending from the “cultural erosion of manhood” (203). There are fewer and fewer spaces in society where men can prove themselves as men in a way that used to be commonplace as a result of the push for equal integrated spaces and professions throughout society. White men believe that they are victims of a cultural attack that is polluting and harming both masculinity and American culture; they do not believe gender or racial minorities belong in these historically white, male-only spaces and, by being there, they are somehow perverting the space (Hochschild 2016, 203). This perceived attack comes in the form of modern feminism and PC culture not allowing “men to be men” in the sense that they are no longer the ones in charge of prominent social and political spaces; these liberal-imposed social movements are welcoming a diverse group of people, most notably racial minorities and women, into the political sphere, which was once a place where only aggressive white men, such as Trump, were allowed. Contemporarily, however, more traditionally marginalized demographics are occupying these political leadership positions. As a result, white men in America sense that their privileged status as the dominant social and political group is slipping out from under them, a feeling that is compounded by growing economic pressures, and nothing is being done to stop it; on the contrary, feminist movements are encouraging it. Thus, these men

push back against these social changes in a number of ways, one of which is to support Trump's "strong man" politics and, further, to emasculate male politicians who do not adhere to traditional masculine gender performances by calling them "cucks" or "betas". They further insult and attack the feminist movements at the center of the push for diversity in positions of political power by dismissing the movements, attacking women's appearances, and reducing the movements to nothing more than a "warlock hunt" (Slippers 2017). The demographics of prominent social and political positions in America are changing, and as a result, the privileged group that historically had a near monopoly on these positions, white men, feel as though nothing is being done to protect their spot on top.

In sum, the College Republicans, in public, formal frames, uphold expectations of civility and respectability and do their best to avoid falling into common Republican stereotypes by maintaining they are moderate with regards to topics such as feminism and abortion. However, in private frames, where it seems that many of the College Republicans share similar gender realities regarding feminism and the importance of masculine-coded characteristics, they mock feminist issues and use gendered insults as a means of policing the masculinity of male Democratic politicians. Further, they reject the changing social perception of masculine characteristics imposed by modern feminist movements. They do so as a result of feeling that masculinity is under attack by these movements and that men are being punished for simply "being men"; in their perspective, masculine-coded characteristics are a part of "science", not socially learned behaviours that can be changed. Further, the students police masculinity and reject feminism as a result of feeling the loss of power; in a group that is predominantly white and male, the

College Republicans sense that the social and political positions previously restricted to white men in America is under the threat of becoming increasingly diverse as a result of movements that push gender equality and downplay the importance of masculine coded characteristics in politics. Ultimately, traditionally male spheres are expanding their demographic, and this results in feelings of fear and loss among young College Republicans, specifically young men, and thus they cling to “strong man” politicians and characteristics, such as Trump.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to provide insight into the lives of young College Republicans at Penn State and emphasize the ongoing social and political issues in America that influence political decision making and meaning making in their daily lives. I have argued, ultimately, that political correctness and social change has impacted their class and privilege position in America and, as a result, the College Republicans rely on different discursive strategies to both attempt to maintain the status quo in America, which preserves their spot on top, and to performatively influence their peers to adopt similar political outlooks. In this section, I will summarize the most significant findings of this thesis, focusing primarily on the centrality of their sense of superiority, the importance of “front” and “back stage front” performances, and the reliance on hegemonic masculinity to the conservatism of the Penn State College Republicans in a moment when society is strongly emphasizing political correctness and social diversity. Further, I will explore potential directions future research on a similar topic may take.

Thesis Summary

In chapter 2, I explored the importance of fiscal conservatism to my informants and argued that their focus on economic concerns and their aversion to “socialism” – a term they use as a catch all for any liberal policy or politician they dislike – is the result of their claim to privilege as white, middle-class Americans. As Robin (2018) states, conservatism is borne of a sense of loss, and thus, the College Republicans’ focus on the threat of socialism displays their recognition that the privileged position they occupy is being challenged by the influx of minority groups entering that same privileged status. Ultimately, though my informants primarily discuss the importance of fiscal conservatism and their admiration for the values of the American Dream, through their discourse, it is clear that they believe they are superior to those around them and, as a result, are deserving of the privilege they possess. My informants suggest that they examine political data and understand information in a way that Democrats and other non-Republicans around the country do not. As a result, they display their “smartness”, or their superiority, with regards to their position as young, white, middle-class Republicans. Further, they underscore the “fear” they feel as a result of their privileged status expanding to include more than just white middle-class Americans, though they are not blunt when sharing this perspective. Their covert approach is the result of their desire to maintain civility and respectability in their discourse on campus and in interviews. The themes of superiority and respectability are prevalent throughout the thesis, and played an important role in the analysis of their political performances in chapter 3.

In chapter 3, I discussed my informants' public and private political performances, and ultimately argued that they rely on the frame of the situation to determine which "front" they will display: when using their interview "front", which is one of respectability, they rely on discursive strategies, such as referencing scientific rhetoric, to maintain civil discourse on campus. They further use this front to subtly suggest that they and their opinions are superior to those around them; they know that referencing "science" is both reputable and valued in political debates and discourse. They adopt this front in order to influence the creation of political realities on campus in a way that is viewed as acceptable within the collective understandings of political performances at Penn State. By performing within the boundaries of what is acceptable, the students actively avoid aligning themselves with Trump's outspoken, brazen style of political performance. Contrarily, when presenting their "back stage front" in the more private setting of their weekly meetings, the students are less concerned with respectability and are able to be more provocative in their performances. Though still expected to be respectable to a degree, the students are able to push the boundaries of what is an acceptable political performance because when they troll their peers, they are less likely to face serious consequence and are more likely to be able to influence political opinions. Ultimately, all performances force an audience to respond and, as a result, force an audience to reflect on the performance in front of them, thereby shaping and reshaping collectively understood realities (Fischer-Lichte 2008). The College Republicans' performances do this in different ways depending on the setting they are in and the audience they are addressing. The students' performances are also a significant

part of chapter 4, which emphasized the centrality of hegemonic masculinity to their political realities.

In chapter 4, I explored the centrality of hegemonic masculinity to my informants' political realities and argued that hegemonic masculinity and the dismissal of modern feminism is the rejection of political correctness that the College Republicans believe is resulting in a "warlock hunt" (Slippers 2017) that is not allowing men to be men in spheres of society where only men have traditionally been allowed, such as politics. Modern feminism and political correctness are changing what is viewed as acceptable behaviour from men and doing away with the "boys will be boys" mentality that has dominated cultural understandings of gender characteristics and relations for centuries in order to argue that this attitude is harmful to women – and some men – and perpetuates rape culture. As a result, my informants cling to historical understandings of masculine characteristics and gender that dominate at Penn State as a result of Paterno's legacy, and choose to insult feminism and "weak" male politicians by using terms such as "beta". In doing so, they suggest that only "manly" men belong in politics and that strong male leaders should dominate over other, weaker men and women. Thus, my informants align themselves with Trump's display of masculinity, as he has infamously threatened other male leaders and insulted, and allegedly assaulted, women. Further, the students' attitudes toward feminism and masculinity suggests that they are aware of online spaces where terms such as "cuck" and "beta" are used to reject the influx of gender and racial minorities in politics and in America more generally. Ultimately, the students recognize that the racial and gender landscapes of the nation are changing and recognize that this has consequences for traditionally masculine-coded characteristics and male behaviour in

society. More minorities are able to gain political power and the mistreatment of women is not tolerated as it was in the past; as a result, the students react against these changes, primarily through their choice of insult.

Several themes connect these chapters, the most significant being the College Republicans' desire to maintain respectability in the midst of Trump's presidency while simultaneously rejecting the political correctness that they believe is taking away their rightful position as a privileged class of Americans. Through discursive strategies, the student's display their belief that they are a superior group of people who, based on the tenets of the American Dream, deserve the privilege afforded to them. They further suggest that their understanding of social phenomena is "more correct" than the opposition, once again emphasizing their belief that they are higher-ranking than those around them. Much like how the inclusion of black American families in suburbs after WWII caused a cultural unrest that resulted in "white flight", the liberal push for the inclusion of minorities – including women, racial minorities, immigrants, and LGBT+ individuals, among others – in predominantly "American" spaces that were reserved for white men has resulted in the fear of both economic and social loss (Robin 2018). Ultimately, there has historically been an intersection of traits – maleness, whiteness, and middle or upper-classness – that resulted in a certain amount of economic opportunity and social power in America that has now been extended to groups beyond just those with these few characteristics. As a result, this sense of loss is incorporated into conservative ideologies with the hope that, by voting for a particular candidate or political party, that exclusive sense of economic and social power can be recovered (Robin 2018). I argue that this feeling of loss is clear with respect to racial minorities and

immigrants as a result of the discussion in chapter 2; my informants' insistence on their "smartness" and superiority as white, middle-class Americans suggests that they are eager to maintain their economic and social capital in the midst of a diversifying middle-class. Further, I suggest that their sense of loss with regards to gender is made explicit throughout the discussion in chapter 4, as young white men periodically lash out at liberal and feminist movements that promote gender equality in politics and society at large. Thus, my informants sense that the social landscape of America is changing, which may lead to changes in their opportunity for economic advancement, and as a result they reject political correctness and other social movements that attempt to diversify positions of privilege. Because of their desire to maintain a civil, dignified political appearance, the students express their concerns both implicitly and to different degrees in different frames on campus; Binder and Wood (2013) suggest that college campuses shape one's political self and performance, but throughout this thesis I have attempted to explain that different spaces on Penn State's campus result in different displays of conservatism from the students. As a result, their "back stage front" becomes a more blunt, forward performance where their discontent for the changing racial and gender landscapes of the American middle-class and political spheres become clear.

I will conclude this section by emphasizing that the College Republicans, like many people in America, are currently struggling to understand and define what conservatism means to them and how they should embody the values they hold in the midst of Trump's presidency. As has been made clear in each chapter of this thesis, the College Republicans express and perform their conservatism differently depending on the setting they are in, the audience they are addressing, and the topic at hand. Regardless of

the situation, the students resolve the conflict that arises between traditional conservatism and new-age Trumpian-style politics with a variety of discursive and performative tactics. They use these tactics, which draw on either classic conservative discourse or contemporary political strategies, in order to negotiate and define their understanding of conservatism on an ongoing basis. The synthesis between these two political styles is important for understanding conservatism in American society today, and is a topic that will benefit from additional future research.

Future Research

In future research among College Republicans, it will be worthwhile to explore the role social media and anonymous online spaces play in shaping the embodiment and expression of conservatism amongst college students. Though briefly addressed in this thesis, more attention can be given to the impact online forums have on shaping the political realities of young people in America. Green (2017) emphasizes that those close to Trump during the 2016 campaign stoked the anger of young white men on the Internet in order to gain momentum for Trump's campaign by demonizing feminism, immigration, and religious diversity in America by framing these movements as a threat to masculinity, Western values, and Christianity. Online communities are largely credited as the birthplace of several contemporary conservative movements, including the alt-right, and are credited with the creation of racist and discriminatory dog-whistles, including memes such as Pepe the Frog (Green 2017, 147). Coupled with the sudden influx of "fake news" making its way onto mainstream social media, these online spaces

are significant contributors to the construction of political outlooks and realities amongst young Republicans in America. These online circles have different rules and expectations with regards to civility and respectability, and thus shape and instill political outlooks in a very different, though equally important, way compared to public and private spaces on college campuses. As meme culture grows and anonymity on the Internet persists, online circles are likely to continue to impact the political realities and values of young Americans. Thus, studying the importance of social media and meme culture in the creation and expression of political opinions will be an important part of understanding Republican political performances in the future.

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Appendix

Overview of Participant Information

All three of my primary informants – McKinley, Howard, and William – were born and raised in Pennsylvania by Republican parents, and while they are all interested in pursuing a career related to politics in some capacity after graduating, they hold unique goals and aspirations.

McKinley, a senior at the time of my fieldwork, was completing a double major in political science and journalism. Hailing from a family of life-long Republicans, she planned on leaving her native Pennsylvania for Washington D.C. after graduating, hoping to do communications work in a Republican think-tank or for a news media outlet.

Howard, a junior, stated that his career aspirations changed as a result of his time with the College Republicans. An economics and political science double major and a self-described analytical conservative, he was initially on the pre-law track with the ultimate goal of returning home to rural Pennsylvania upon graduating to eventually run for State Representative as a Republican. However, as a result of the tensions involved in contemporary political debates, his new goal was to become an economic consultant because, he explained, numbers and graphs are less emotional than politics.

William, also a junior, was interested in pursuing a career in law, and specified his interest in appellate litigation and civil law. Coming from a family that he described as moderate on social issues but still Republican, he stated that he would consider a career in politics later in life, but while at Penn State, was focused on his career in law.