

College Republicans and Conservative Social Identity

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Abstract

Through participant-observation and interviews, I explore the conservative social identity of College Republicans at a midsize, midtier public university in the United States. Using the concepts of repertoires and frames, I analyze how individuals make claims to political social identities. Specifically, I show that symbolic appeals to the free market were an essential aspect of the conservative repertoire at my field site. Furthermore, the shifting and contradictory frames used by the College Republicans in this study demonstrate that their discursive political practices were not primarily about policy preferences; they were about affirming a conservative social identity. Understanding how stated policy preferences and identity intertwine in everyday political talk has important implications for American democracy.

Keywords

cultural frames, repertoires, partisanship

Introduction

In the book *The Big Sort*, journalist Bill Bishop (2008), with the help of sociologist Robert G. Cushing, shows that Americans have increasingly clustered into communities segregated by party affiliations and ideological attachments over the last several decades. Bishop argues that a desire to live among like-minded others inadvertently pulls people into divergent social worlds (also see Hunter 1991). As benign as it may seem, the choices people make about where to move, who to associate with, and what television channels to watch have dire consequences for democracy. Namely, the pervasive sorting of people by lifestyle affinities drives the escalating partisan rancor in Washington (see Mann and Ornstein 2012). Furthermore, while both Democratic and Republican parties have polarized in recent years, the American polity has steadily drifted to the right (Edsall 2006; Hacker and Pierson 2005). In other words, the political homophily detailed by Bishop has profoundly reshaped American conservatism—producing an ideological echo-chamber reverberating from Main Street to K Street.

Margaret R. Somers and Fred Block (2005) connect America's conservative shift to the hegemony of what they call market fundamentalism—a “quasi-religious faith in the capacity of self-regulating markets to solve all social and economic problems” (Block 2009:68; also see Block 2007). This neoliberal vision of capitalism has become a cornerstone of the Republican Party

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(Hacker 2006). As Mark A. Smith (2007) shows, since the 1970s, conservative elites have *reframed* their policy preferences away from the importance of individual freedom and toward the pecuniary benefits of such positions. Most importantly, this new fiscal rhetoric of the right successfully taps into the economic insecurity experienced by a growing portion of the electorate in the wake of American deindustrialization (e.g., see Beck 2000; Hollister 2011; Kalleberg 2011).

Missing from this literature on conservatism is an adequate account for how the economic rhetoric of the Republican Party and concepts like market fundamentalism influence nonelites. Of course, there is little doubt that the discourse and ideological frames of conservative elites help shape the ways ordinary people talk about politics (Gamson 1992). At the same time, though, the day-to-day conversations of nonelites do not perfectly reflect elite interests or perspectives (see C. L. Turner 1995). For instance, it is unclear how much strict ideological adherence to market fundamentalism actually compels voters.

Far from finding support for a rightwing agenda, Larry M. Bartels (2008) describes an electorate filled with would-be progressives voting for Republicans through misinformation. Conversely, Monica Prasad and her coresearchers (2009) show that while many conservative working-class voters were misinformed about the distribution of George W. Bush's tax cuts, learning the correct information had no impact on their support for the president. Instead, Prasad and her team show that voters sidestep instrumental policy assessments altogether and weigh a politician's moral character. In fact, numerous political scientists have stressed that ideological beliefs are less significant than self-identifications in explaining how people interpret information and evaluate policy positions (Conover and Feldman 1981; Malka and Lelkes 2010). Which is to say, first and foremost, people confront new situations by considering how their response to them will reflect on their understanding of themselves as "liberal" or "conservative."

To make sense of the contemporary American politics beyond the cloistered sphere of elite interests, researchers must incorporate a sociological approach to culture within their analyses. Culture—understood as a repertoire (or toolkit) of problem solving strategies (Swidler 1986)—provides a crucial missing link for connecting the ideological frames of politicians and pundits (conservative or liberal) and the political self-identifications of ordinary voters. In this article, I hone in on the right side of the political spectrum. Specifically, I build on the concept of conservative social identity (Gross, Medvetz, and Russell 2011) to study how College Republicans at a midsized, midtier state school articulate their ideologies and policy preferences in everyday social interactions. As previous research predicts, I find that political discourse at my field site was *not* primarily about desired policy objectives or even adherence to ideological principles. I add to the existing literature by showing *how* the discursive political practices among the College Republicans at my field site were chiefly about social identity claims (e.g., I am the type of person who supports X; I am not the sort of person who supports Y). I do this by integrating Swidler's (1986, 2001a) perspective on strategies of action in individuals' uses of cultural resources with McAdams' (2001) emphasis on the importance of life stories in constructing meaningful narratives of the self (also see Bruner 1986, 1990).

College Campuses and Conservative Students

There are several reasons College Republicans are an empirically and theoretically interesting social group for studying politics, culture, and identity. First, while college freshmen might be the single most researched segment of the population (especially among psychologists), there are strikingly few studies focused on right-leaning university students.¹ Sociologists have been more enamored with studying the left, and we need additional research into this highly significant segment of the population (see Gross et al. 2011).

Second, as emerging adults (Arnett 2004), university students (left, right, or otherwise) provide fertile ground for exploring the formation of self-identities. Dan P. McAdams (2001)

contends it is during the emerging adult years that individuals begin to construct coherent and unifying life stories. These life stories, or narratives, are how the self is actually formed. Specifically, in this article, I focus on social identity. Social identity refers to an individual's attachment to a social group that is conceived of as distinct from (and often superior to) other social groups (Tajfel 1974; J. C. Turner 1975; J. C. Turner et al. 1994).² The self-narratives I focus on, therefore, are discursive practices that are intended to bind conservatives together (against liberals).

My focus on conservative social identity also highlights a third reason College Republicans are an interesting social group to study. Academia is a stereotypically liberal environment (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006; also see Binder and Wood 2013). While much of academia's reputation as an incubator of left-wing indoctrination (e.g., Horowitz 2007) is unfounded, Neil Gross (2013) shows that American college professors *are*, indeed, more liberal than the population at large, and this is the result of self-selection. Which is to say, liberals pursue academic careers because the university seems to be an inviting place for left-leaning ideals while conservatives avoid the academy for the very same reason (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2009).

Because the university is a liberal place—and is generally believed to be even more radical than it actually is (see Gross and Simmons 2007)—this makes the self-narratives of college conservatives particularly valuable for the study of conservative social identity. As Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood (2013) show, right-leaning students on campus often feel outnumbered by their classmates and outgunned by their professors (also see Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006). Accordingly, their social identity as conservatives—to the extent that such an identity is highly salient (Stryker 1968)—is not something that can be taken for granted or ignored. Conservatives within the university see themselves as taking positions often at odds with the norms and expectations of their peers. As such, the College Republicans in this study continually stressed that to “dare to be right” on campus forced them to support and defend their identities.

Finally, today's conservative college students represent one possible future of the Republican Party. As several writers have noticed (e.g., Martin 2014; Saulny 2012; Zernike 2010), the GOP is increasingly characterized by deep generational divides.³ Like young people more generally (see *Pew Research Center* 2011, 2012), younger Republicans are unlikely to support the homophobia, overt racism, religious fundamentalism, or xenophobia that energizes the party's older base (see Crespino 2007; Frank 2004; Zernike 2010). Instead, the individuals in this study argued for conservatism primarily through the symbols of the free market—as described in Smith's research (discussed above). Thus, studying the conservative social identity of College Republicans provides important glimpses into what *could* be the new dominant shape of American conservatism.⁴

Repertoires, Frames, and Identities

As I will show, when the College Republicans in this study discussed politics, they were *not* engaged in any sort of consistent dialogue about the types of legislation they wanted to see enacted. Instead, they were primarily attempting to affirm to others (and themselves) that they were conservatives. Specifically, their discursive practices were about *claims* of supporting laissez-faire capitalism—Block's market fundamentalism (discussed above). I focus my analysis on how cultural repertoires and frames are utilized—often in shifting and contradictory ways—in the construction and maintenance of a conservative social identity.

Cultural repertoires are instantiated in what Ann Swidler (1986, 2001a) refers to as strategies of action. Strategies of action are practices that resolve problems, and people use their cultural knowledge and skills to successfully guide these actions. For example, for emerging adults, constructing a coherent life story represents a problem (because the self is not fully formed), and an individual's cultural repertoire will provide the possible tools for resolving it. This can involve

what McAdams (1984) calls *imagoes*—idealized personifications of the self. An individual's cultural repertoire offers the resources that shape how this idealized version of the self can be framed (e.g., Is it courageous to have burned one's draft card or to have served in Vietnam?). In turn, frames represent how a given situation is understood (Goffman 1974; also see Bateson [1955] 1972; Snow et al. 1986). Frames are used to bracket what is important within a given reality, and people vary in their knowledge and skill at using frames (e.g., linking war protest to patriotism or military service to the fight for freedom). And any one frame that a person uses can be at odds with other cultural frameworks in his or her repertoire. Overall, it is not the consistency of frames that is important (for people can use them quite erratically); it is the ability of a cultural frame to sustain a given strategy of action that matters.⁵ In other words, a coherent sense of self can be supported through a discordant set of frames.

Ultimately, I am proposing that beyond the ostensible ideological content of a given political position, an analysis of the repertoires and frames of the College Republicans in this study reveals a strategy of action primarily about declaring a conservative social identity. That is, market fundamentalism was a ubiquitous part of their self-narratives, but the stated policy preferences attached to this economic rhetoric ebbed and flowed. Thus, a lawmaker would be unable to actually craft laws based on these discursive practices about policy preferences. However, the repertoire and framings of the College Republicans were an effective strategy of action for asserting their conservative social identity. The analysis presented here extends beyond noting that party identifications involve deep emotional ties to the self (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) or that voting decisions can be expressions of abstract values inconsistent with concrete preferences (Brennan and Lomasky 1993). Instead, my interest is in uncovering the ways individuals *actively* construct their political social identities in everyday life.

In presenting my analysis, I first provide an overview of the College Republicans' conservative repertoire (i.e., the toolkit from which they draw cultural resources). As will become apparent, the existence of the College Republican group on campus offered a highly valued context for both affirming and refining their identity as conservatives (see Binder and Wood 2013; also see Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Second, I deconstruct the shifting and contradictory frames used by the right-leaning students in this study as they discussed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (commonly shortened to the Affordable Care Act or ACA; also known as ObamaCare). I focus on the ACA because it was (and continues to be) a particularly contentious law. Most importantly, debates about the ACA (both at my field site and within the larger national dialogue) touch on many of the most pertinent challenges confronting American democracy—from the role of government and the power of markets to questions about personal responsibility and compassion for the less fortunate. Furthermore, the complexity of the law, and the fact that no one in this study could reasonably be expected to fully understand all aspects of it, provides an analytic opening for exploring the *ways* the College Republicans chose to voice their disapproval (i.e., there were myriad opportunities for different framings).

At the outset of this article, it is absolutely essential to stress that the inconsistent use of frames is—in and of itself—not notable. Most people do this quite frequently (see especially Swidler 2001a). And, most importantly, I am by no means claiming that conservatives are in any way unique in their discrepant framings or their inconsistent use of ideology in self-narratives. All the same, I am arguing that an analysis of these College Republicans' discursive practices provides insights into the *meaning* of conservatism on campus (and beyond). Specifically, I contend that espousals of rightist ideology is a strategy of action less about the material outcomes that could be generated through legislative changes (i.e., the supposed goal of political action) and far more about claims to a social identity as conservatives. The implications of this last point are particularly important because they cast a foreboding shadow on the potential of reasoned public debate within civil society (Habermas 1984)—as information and rational discourse are subsumed by affective attachments to identity (an issue I expand on in the final sections of the article).

Data and Method

Heartland State University (HSU)

Data for this research come from a three-year ethnography of College Republicans at a university I refer to as HSU. Between 2010 and 2013, I attended numerous events sponsored by the group. This included six general meetings (held roughly once a month during the middle of the semesters), six group gatherings (e.g., to watch presidential debates, go bowling, etc.), two university-sponsored debates with other political groups on campus, two political events connected to the College Republicans (e.g., a commemoration of Ronald Reagan), and an end of the school year party for members and friends. I also interviewed 10 of the group's most active current and former members from the research period. These were individuals who consistently attended organizational meetings, held elected positions within the group (e.g., chairperson, treasurer, etc.), or regularly participated in other activities associated with the HSU College Republicans or local Republican Party.⁶

HSU enrolls approximately 22,000 students (17,000 of which are undergraduates).⁷ The campus is situated in a small rural town, which I will call Farmton. Farmton is several miles beyond the suburban sprawl of a much larger city, which I will call Bigville. HSU is considered a residential college (approximately 25 percent of the undergraduates live in student housing), but there is a common perception among many faculty and students that it is a "commuter school." The Carnegie Foundation ranks HSU as a high research activity institution, and some departments have PhD programs. However, *U.S. News and World Report* ranks HSU toward the bottom of its national universities category.

Compared with Heartland's flagship state school (as well as the prominent private institutions nearby), HSU has markedly lower admission standards. For example, at the flagship university, more than 95 percent of incoming freshmen are in the top quarter of their high school class. At HSU, less than 35 percent of the incoming freshmen share this distinction. After six years, 54 percent of HSU students have graduated; at the flagship school, it is 82 percent. Thus, it is a school vastly different from the top-tier public research and elite private universities studied by Binder and Wood (2013; also see Aries and Seider 2007; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Stuber 2011), and its middling qualities make it far more emblematic of the contemporary face of higher education in the United States (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

The overall student body at HSU is reasonably diverse in terms of class, race, and ethnicity (e.g., the proportion of white, black, Latin@, and Asian students roughly mirrors the percentages of the state as a whole). The gender ratio of students is perfectly split. The vast majority of students come from counties surrounding the university (i.e., small towns, suburbs, and struggling former industrial cities). In total, 10 percent of the students come from within Bigville, and another 15 percent come from Bigville's immediate suburbs. Just under 40 percent of the matriculants are the first in their families to attend college, and a sizable portion is nontraditional students (e.g., older veterans). Perhaps most notably, 45 percent of HSU's incoming freshmen receive Pell Grants (i.e., need-based federal assistance)—indicating the modest means of many HSU students and their families.

HSU's College Republicans were almost all white and predominately male (also see Binder and Wood 2013). Like the majority of the student body, most grew up in towns or suburbs not far from Farmton, and they came from working- and lower-middle-class families. Somewhat surprisingly, despite the preponderance of white males in the group as a whole, some of the most dependable and engaged members defied the stereotype. In 2010, for example, three women were highly involved with the group; one would later serve briefly as the chairperson. At different points between 2010 and 2013, two Asian American men served as chairperson, an Arab American held an elected position, and there were occasionally one or two Latin@ attendees at

various events.⁸ However, there were never any African Americans significantly associated with the group, and after the active women from 2010 graduated, others did not take their place in leadership roles during the course of the study (see Table 1).

Studying HSU's College Republicans

In studying HSU's College Republicans, I was always forthright about my position as a researcher interested in the activities and beliefs of politically engaged college students. I never attempted to conceal my identity or pass myself off as a fellow Republican. I did, however, try to blend in, but my age (mid-30s), along with my style of dress and mannerism, always marked me as an outsider to the group. Some members were quite supportive of the project and open to my presence among the College Republicans. Others were highly distrustful of my motivations. For example, one member of the group would later admit that when I first started studying the organization, he was worried I was a "Democratic [Party] operative." Thus, the data presented here are undoubtedly biased. First, the students most willing to talk with me at social events and eager to take part in interviews were probably different (in any number of ways) from those that avoided me. At the very least, I believe my interviewees and other key informants represented the less anti-intellectual segments of the group (see Hofstadter 1963; Mooney 2005). That is, my sample is probably skewed toward those who did not have a knee-jerk aversion to professors (see Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006; also see Binder and Wood 2013; Gross 2013). They seemed to enjoy sharing their views with people possessing different political leanings than themselves. Second, because I was an outsider (even among those with whom I established a healthy rapport), I was marginalized in regard to certain types of gatherings (e.g., going to a bar for a drink after the meeting to let off steam) and certain types of discussions (e.g., criticizing professors).⁹

As an ethnographer, my initial goal was simply to adequately capture how the College Republicans went about being conservatives on campus. Like many qualitative researchers, I did not enter the field with a specific theory to test or even an overarching paradigm I was intending to work from (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; cf. Burawoy 1991). Instead, I was simply *curious* (Anderson 2003: 218; Duneier 1999: 340-341) about politically active college students. Attending meetings and events provided me access to the parts of political life that were both mundane and sometimes antithetical to the high-minded ideals that people were more apt to report in interviews (Khan and Jerolmack 2013; Venkatesh 2013). At the same time, conducting semistructured interviews (which lasted between one and two hours) allowed me to ask questions and probe for more information in ways that would have been disruptive in the field (Lamont and Swidler 2014). Specifically, I used the interview setting to encourage respondents to elaborate on the topics common in my field notes (e.g., capitalism, firearms, unions, etc.). Conversely, I also used the interview setting to inquire about issues supposedly important to conservatives, but were sparse or absent in my field notes (e.g., abortion, affirmative action, religious fundamentalism, etc.). In addition, I used the interviews to ask pointed questions about identity (e.g., I had respondents place themselves, the "average" HSU student, and prominent politicians along a continuum from extremely liberal to extremely conservative and elaborate on their reasoning; see Figure 1), as well as gather background information (e.g., age, college major, and parents' educations and occupations).

After concluding my data gathering, I coded my field notes and interviews for recurring themes and patterns (Lofland et al. 2006; also see Corbin and Strauss 2008). This included noting the importance of socialization, tensions with the university, as well as a list of ideological talking points from the right (e.g., probusiness perspectives, critiques of Democrats, frustrations with college life, and the like). These initial codes were then organized into conceptually relevant categories and coded more selectively. For the analysis presented in this article, I use data connected to stated policy preferences (e.g., "repeal ObamaCare") and status claims related to social

Table 1. Key Respondents' Background Information (at Time of Interview).

Name	Age	White	Education status	Occupation	Hometown	Father's education	Father's occupation	Mother's education	Mother's occupation
Carl	24	Yes	Grad school	Campus work	Bigville suburb	Some college	Factory worker	Some college	Office assistant
Danny	31	Yes	Graduated (2012)	State gov.	Small city	Some college	Small business owner	Some college	Office manager
Dwight	24	Yes	Graduated (2011)	Industrial safety	Bigville suburb	BA	Insurance agent	BA	Service work (part-time)
Eric	27	Yes	Senior	Office work	Rural area	High school	Factory work	GED	Homemaker
Manny	27	No	Grad school	Campus work	Bigville	Some college	NA	BA	Nurse
Nathan	26	Yes	Graduated (2009)	Real estate	Bigville suburb	High school	Research technician	High school	Office assistant
Pat	20	Yes	Sophomore	Maintenance work	Rural area	NA	Civil engineer	NA	Public school librarian
Paul	21	Yes	Senior	State government (temp.)	Bigville suburb	Some college	Service worker	MD	Psychiatrist
Steven	18	No	Freshman	NA	Bigville suburb	BA	Project manager	BA	Accountant
Ted	25	Yes	Graduated (2011)	Real estate	Bigville suburb	Two-year college	Factory worker	MA	Public school teacher

Note. GED = General Educational Development.

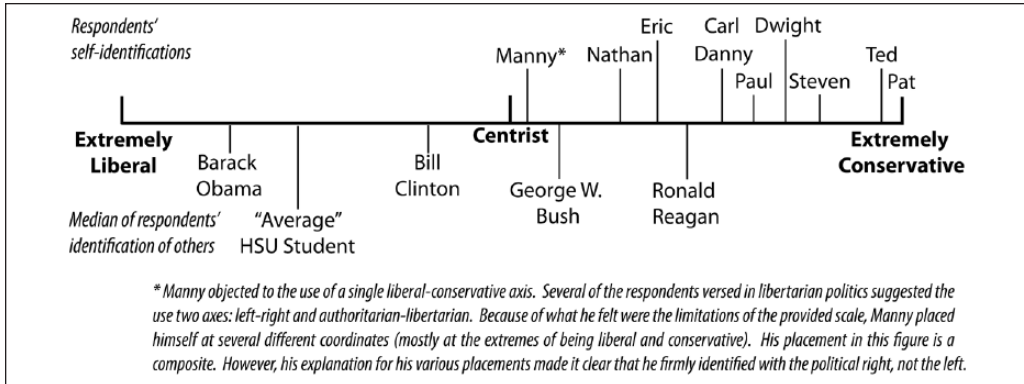


Figure 1. Key respondents' self-identifications and identification of others.

Note. Respondents were asked to place themselves and a list of others along a continuum from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Reported here is the location each College Republican placed himself (shown above the axis) and the median response for where others were placed (shown below the axis). HSU = Heartland State University.

identity (e.g., "as a believer in the free market"). It is through this systematic analysis of the data that the College Republicans' conservative repertoire and framing becomes more visible. Furthermore, it is only through systematic analysis that their use of culture can be connected to the construction and maintenance of a conservative social identity.

I use pseudonyms and obscure identifying information to protect the confidentiality of my informants. Because much of the data from this study is derived from interactions in the field without the aid of a recording device, many of the quotes cannot be replicated verbatim. Following Anselm L. Strauss and his coresearchers (1964), I use standard quotation marks for passages that are verbatim. I use single quotation marks for passages that are nearly verbatim. I use no quotation marks when the writing in my field notes only captured the general gist of what I heard. All block quotations are verbatim.

Daring to Be Right

The Best Party on Campus

The HSU College Republicans were 1 of nearly 300 officially recognized student organizations on campus. Members frequently referred to themselves as CRs. The manifest goal of the College Republicans was to help elect party affiliates to local, state, and national offices. Monthly meetings frequently provided forums for campaigning politicians to give stump speeches. Various events sponsored by the group could occasionally draw upward of 60 attendees. Conversely, in the doldrums following President Obama's reelection, CR events rarely rose into the double digits. The College Republicans also marched in community parades in support of candidates and staffed call centers during election season. When interviewed, the CRs were always quick to stress these pragmatic functions of the organization.

The College Republicans at HSU, however, did more than offer logistical aid to the GOP. They maintained an organization in which conservative students could take comfort in knowing they were surrounded by other adherents of the right (see Armato and Marsiglio 2002). Ashton, for example, told me that, while he felt the CRs did not make a real difference in influencing campaign politics, he participated with the group because, 'I can make a joke and look over and see [Ted, another senior member of the group] and know he knows exactly what I mean.' Or, as Nathan reflected on his time with the group:

It was largely a social organization [of] like-minded people getting together. The thing that united us was that we're all Republicans. . . . There's a thread that united us all. You felt a sense of belonging in that group. We did a lot of social events. We had a lot of parties.

There is no way to ascertain whether HSU's College Republicans hosted more parties than other campus organizations, but it was important for the members of the group to emphasize that they *liked* to party. In fact, a much-used slogan among College Republicans across the United States is "the best party on campus." Living up to this motto, during the 2010 election of CR officers for the following year, the group was most lively when the various candidates started talking about their favorite beers. Years later, Ted scoffed at a different election that resulted in a chairperson who did not drink. Incredulous, he told me, "We had a chairman who didn't even drink! For me, that's a big part of [the social aspect of the CRs]." Illustrating Ted's emphasis on alcohol, during one meeting, Danny announced a plan for a CR-sponsored pub crawl. This was explicitly to show other HSU students that "we're more than just prudes." To this, another member in the audience shouted in approval, "the best party on campus."

More than anything, the existence of the HSU College Republicans helped make being a right-leaning college student seem feasible to its members. For example, Carl discussed feeling isolated as the lone conservative in his major department. "Everybody [else] seems in agreement [with liberal politics]. It makes you feel stupid almost. It makes me feel stupid." By contrast, Dwight (echoing the same sentiment as Nathan above) told me, "Mostly [the College Republicans are] a group of like-minded individuals." This was important for Dwight because, "On campus you don't find too many [Republicans]." In addition, Manny explained, "I couldn't do [political action by] myself. I could have, but I'd be the only person." In other words, Manny felt the support of the group was integral. Thus, as Ashton alluded to above, knowing other people shared their views was highly significant for the CRs. It gave them a "sense of belonging" that felt absent in other areas of university life. And, without the College Republicans, these students would be less likely to form social ties with other conservatives.

(Re)Defining Conservatism

Reflecting the increasing polarization of American political parties (Bishop 2008; Mann and Ornstein 2012), College Republicans at HSU treated "Republican" and "conservative" as generally synonymous terms. They also conflated "Democrat" and "liberal." By placing themselves on the right side of the political spectrum—usually the far right—the CRs asserted a drastic ideological rift between themselves and what they felt were the beliefs of average students at HSU. However, as their emphasis on partying shows, good portions of the stereotypes about younger Republicans (e.g., moral prudes, religious zealots, teetotalers, etc.) do not apply at HSU. In fact, only 4 of the 10 College Republicans I interviewed self-identified as *social* conservatives. Among less active members (i.e., attendees at various CR events), there seemed to be an even sparser interest in public discussions of religiosity. And it does not appear that HSU is an anomaly in this regard (see especially Martin 2014).

At the group meetings and social gatherings I attended, discussions never stumbled onto the rocky shores of traditional moral values. Individuals within the organization held differing views on issues like abortion, gay marriage, and religion, but those with less libertine outlooks accepted that the group as a whole was not going to make such matters focal points. As Manny, a former chairman of the group with explicit libertarian leanings, told me, "Conservatives shouldn't care what other people are doing with their lives, but we always try to force upon them: religion this, religion that, 'what would Jesus do?'—all this stuff."

Alternatively, the four self-identified social conservatives I interviewed were deeply religious. Two were Catholic, one was Muslim, and one was part of a fundamentalist Christian sect. With the exception of the fundamentalist, these students made direct references to their faith in

Table 2. Overview of Key Respondents' Political Views.

Name	Self-description of political views	Support ACA	Outlaw abortion	Allow gay marriage	Pro gun rights	Immigration reform	Reduce taxes on rich	Support unions
Carl	Social conservative	No	Yes	In some form	Yes	No	Yes	No
Danny	Social conservative	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	No
Dwight	Libertarian-leaning	No	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Eric	Fiscal conservative	No	Partially	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Manny	Libertarian	No	No	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	No
Nathan	Libertarian-leaning	No	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Pat	Social conservative	No	Yes	In some form	Yes	No	NA	No
Paul	Libertarian	No	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Steven	Social conservative	No	Yes	In some form	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Ted	Libertarian	No	Partially	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

Note. ACA = Affordable Care Act.

justifying their political beliefs during their interviews. In particular, they saw links between religiously oriented family values (especially stances against abortion) and the Republican Party. At the same time, though, they discussed supposedly contentious moral issues with a sense of resignation. Danny, thinking in terms of electoral strategy asserted, “. . . We need to stop focusing so much on [social issues].” Thus, even though Danny claimed the outlawing of abortion as a primary political goal, he did not want politicians to stress the issue, “You don’t need to come out and say [it].” The other social conservatives, however, seemed less concerned with (disingenuously) appealing to voters and just expressed a loss of interest with trying to enforce religious morality through the government. With regard to gay marriage, for example, Carl explained:

For me, it’s almost a nonissue. I would vote for somebody who supported it, or didn’t. I almost don’t care because I have my beliefs about what marriage is. . . . I have a Catholic belief in what marriage is. Already things that have happened, that are legal to do, are not in line with my beliefs in regards to marriage. That issue has almost been lost already. That fight is almost over. They can define marriage however they want.

Likewise, Steven told me:

I’m not happy about it, but I do believe gay marriage is going to be legalized across the United States, and we can kind of drop it now . . . It’s going to become less and less of a controversial issue as gays are accepted more and more into mainstream society.

In sum, the College Republicans at HSU maintained a conservative repertoire largely devoid of religious moralism. Social matters were relegated to the realm of personal (as opposed to public) concerns (“I have my beliefs,” “I’m not happy about it, but . . .”). None of this, though, is to say that the College Republicans I studied were not guided by a moral compass. All of the CRs had exceptionally strong views on what was right or wrong in the world and where they stood in relation to others (see Hunter 1991), but the ideologies to which they laid claim were primarily economic (à la Smith 2007) and not perfectly aligned with traditional social values (see Table 2).

Economic Conservatism at HSU

“Do You Support the Free Market?”

In place of religious fundamentalism, the CRs at HSU (even the self-proclaimed social conservatives) dogmatically advocated for neoliberal economics—Block’s (2009) market fundamentalism.

This is what comprised the bulk of their conservative repertoire. In other words, when they described their personal situations or sought to interpret world events, they continually relied on tropes of capitalist competition and meritocratic advancement within the economy. For example, during my interview with Ted, I brought up the ACA's insurance exchanges, and he quickly shut down that line of discussion. "What does mandating that everyone has health insurance have to do with the free market?" Ted went on to explain that "[Obama] wouldn't say [the ACA is] about supporting the free market. He would say 'it's about the rights of people . . . to have whatever.' And, for Ted, this was problematic because the federal government was distorting how markets "really work." In fact, time and again, the CRs positioned the economy as the *raison d'être* for the right. Which is to say, despite their own meager means and the structural impediments to attaining wealth, the CRs were *unanimous* in being economic conservatives.¹⁰

To this end, Manny asserted, "If you want to be a full-blown conservative you have to be fiscally conservative, but you don't have to be a social conservative." Likewise, Dwight told me:

I [am] definitely closer to the libertarian end of the Republican . . . Party. . . . I [am] an economic conservative—a hundred percent on that. The social conservative part of it, there [are] so many things that I can't agree with.

Underscoring the impact his involvement with the group had on his thinking, Nathan described gradually becoming less socially conservative throughout college. Discussing his family, for example, Nathan stated:

I think the fact that I'm becoming more socially libertarian [will increase the disagreements with my family]. A lot of that has to do with the fact that I have several gay friends now, actually people that were in the College Republicans. That's kind of played a role in that. I don't have as much of a stance on gay marriage anymore. If people want to be with somebody, I think they should be able to.

However, according to Nathan, as his social conservatism waned, his economic conservatism became solidified:

Coming into college I think I was more socially conservative, but then coming out of it I'm probably more social libertarian. I have my beliefs, but I really don't care what you do in your life. People should be able to do whatever they want for the most part and be free from government intrusion. I tend to be more of an economic conservative. That's something that's remained constant.

What these examples show is that front-staging rightist notions on how economies should work, while downplaying the relevance of state-mandated morality, is a fundamental part of the CRs' group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; also see Binder and Wood 2013). In other words, for the College Republicans, to assert a conservative social identity meant framing political talk around economic concerns—because it is one's position on capitalism that was assumed to truly define conservatism. And, by extension, one's position on capitalism distinguished the CRs from others (most notably Democrats, other college students, and their professors). The free market, therefore, was used as a symbol of membership (Collins 2004), and ritualistic deference to the principles of *laissez-faire* capitalism was a means of publicly professing one's political identification with the right. Conversely, failing to show deference to the free market designated one as an outsider (or, more drastically, an opponent).

One poignant example of the free market's use as a membership symbol occurred during a CR meeting in August of 2010. Various political candidates for state and local offices came to give speeches. Several made it clear they supported forms of deregulation. A nonconservative in attendance (playing a bit of an agent provocateur) questioned whether the free market was the best method for achieving a just society. In a tone of utter contempt, Ashton (much like Ted did to me

during our discussion of the ACA) ruled such a question a nonstarter: “Could you *not* say that in this room?” In another instance, two CRs curious about the intentions of my research inquired, “Do *you* support the free market?” There was no context for this question. It did not arise from a discussion about economics or even a discussion about other things I may or may not believe. Instead, it was directed at me—point blank—as a test of my character. And my qualified support for the innovations fostered by competition got a lukewarm reception from my interlocutors.

Alternatively, visiting politicians (like the ones described in the previous paragraph) knew how to deftly use the membership symbol of the free market. One guest speaker gave an overview of his political beliefs as being for “low taxes” and “freedom.” Another repeatedly mentioned his background in business—“someone who’s signed the front of checks, not just the backs of them”—and in this context derided Democrats for pushing industries out of the region through excessive regulation and taxation. In the exact same vein, another candidate told the group, “[Democratic lawmakers] send a signal to our businesses, ‘we can’t balance our budget, and so we’re going to penalize you.’” Another guest speaker started off by explaining, ‘Today in this country we have a growing conflict between socialism and the free market.’ And, this speaker explained that supporting capitalism was really about ‘supporting the individual’s right to succeed.’ Reflecting these same themes, during the 2010 officer elections for the CRs, Ted emphatically supported Morgan, a freshman candidate, specifically because Morgan had previously attended a neoliberal economic workshop. Ted assured the group that Morgan “*knows* what he’s talking about,” and having someone so knowledgeable about the functioning of the free market would be a boon for the CRs.

Framing the ACA

Given their party affiliation and their purported preference for laissez-faire economics, it is not surprising that the College Republicans at HSU unanimously said they were against the ACA. Polls show that support for the ACA is mainly a partisan issue (*Pew Research Center* 2013). When I asked Eric, for instance, about his feelings toward the law, he told me, “I’m a strong proponent of the free market, and I believe there were so many better things we could have done . . .” Likewise, Carl asserted, “I think the right answer is a completely private solution.” More starkly, Pat stated, “[Obama]’s just aligning himself with this very socialist mentality that I decided to stop subscribing to.” For his part, Danny acknowledged the need for compassion without losing the economic potency of capitalism:

I guess the question fundamentally . . . is, does someone have a right to health care? . . . As a compassionate conservative, in the words of George W. Bush, . . . I don’t want my fellow countrymen dying on the street because they can’t afford something. At the same time, believing in the free market, it’s this hard kind of dynamic to put myself in. What do I believe? Where does it end? Where does it begin? . . . Why is [our health care system world renowned]? Because it’s been a free market system where [. . . getting a medical degree costs a lot of money], but you’re going to [make] a lot of money. There’s going to be a lot of gain in that. You start changing that, that’s the part that scares me. When we don’t reward people for their work, that scares me.

During our interviews, however, the CRs’ complaints and critiques often contradicted their initial support of free market principles, and their inconsistencies highlight something extremely important about nonelite politics. Specifically, the CRs’ rhetorical framing of the ACA should not be understood as voicing actual policy preferences. Instead, their inconsistencies reveal strategies of action primarily about affirming a conservative social identity (i.e., as being individuals *against* the ACA, and, by extension, against the Democratic Party).

To begin, it is worth noting that the College Republicans (like many Americans) were misinformed about key aspects of the ACA (see Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2013). This is

despite the fact that nearly all the CRs actively followed politics and believed themselves to be highly knowledgeable about the pertinent issues of the day. For example, Pat claimed that the ACA prevented people with preexisting conditions from obtaining medical insurance. Repeating a claim made in various conservative outlets, Dwight also chided the law for shifting the administration of his health care coverage over to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS; see *PolitiFact* 2012a, 2013). Similarly, Danny insisted the ACA included a hidden tax on all home sales (see *PolitiFact* 2012b).

In terms of criticism about the ACA based on the actual facts of the law, Steven asserted that solutions to health care must be dictated from the state, not the federal, level. Deference to states' rights has long been a conservative rallying cry. The modern argument for state's rights congealed during the Civil Rights era as segregationists resisted federal efforts to break up Jim Crow laws, but the frames developed during this period have been extended to cover a wide range of issues (see Crespino 2007; Kruse 2005). Steven, however, was the only CR to couch his critique of the ACA in these terms. Conversely, Eric and Dwight proposed that the ACA fails to provide a viable solution to health care because it does not allow insurance policies to be sold *across* state lines. Eric's and Dwight's suggested policy change would reduce states' rights (as states currently have different regulations governing medical coverage). And, reducing the barriers to trading across state jurisdictions aligns with the libertarian (i.e., market fundamentalist) principles of many HSU College Republicans (e.g., that there should not be barriers to trade and that regulations distort markets).

Interestingly, despite his generic affirmation of deregulating state insurance markets, Dwight also voiced his support for the ACA's mandate for insurance companies to accept people with preexisting conditions. Danny voiced the same position. Danny and Nathan also endorsed the provision for extending parental coverage for adult children. These two parts of the ACA, of course, are extremely popular (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2013; Pinto 2012). However, these aspects of the law represent distinct government regulations of the private insurance market. In other words, they run counter to the market fundamentalism and economic rhetoric otherwise so prevalent in the College Republicans' discourse. Interestingly, Dwight noted this incongruence during our interview:

To force the private sector to take a loss, it's not private sector anymore. . . . We have Medicaid for the poor. Expand [some government program to] allow [those with preexisting conditions to be covered]. There is nothing right about saying you can ban people from health insurance because they did nothing wrong. They just got sick. To leave them out in the cold to die is just inhumane, I think. But, to force a company to take them is wrong for different reasons. . . . That's a cost I believe our country [i.e., the federal government] should be willing to take.

In this part of the interview, Dwight's "fiscally conservative" critique of the ACA transformed into an appeal to *expand* welfare provisions, not just to the poor (which the ACA does), but also to people with preexisting conditions (a potentially huge portion of the population). Carl made a similar suggestion:

[There is] the idea of giving waivers for people that are uninsured. I like that idea. I think it's nice. It's a smaller number of people that you're talking about. . . . It's still . . . borderline too much for me, but I think that would be an okay solution. It's kind of a compromise, I guess, extending waivers to people who couldn't afford insurance with these private plans. . . . Typically I'm against [government subsidies], but that, for me, is where the humanitarian in me comes out a little bit. I think everybody should be able to see a doctor.

Thus, while Carl insists the answer is a "completely private solution," he concurrently wants to provide government waivers to the uninsured—a proposal that would actually incentivize

employers to drop their employees' coverage and deincentivize individuals from seeking out private insurance plans.

To summarize, none of HSU's CRs offered support for the ACA; they were all vehemently opposed to it—even if, like most Americans, they liked specific parts of the law. Notably, none the College Republicans I interviewed acknowledged that the ACA relies on markets to work. Instead, they focused their ire on federal regulation of the marketplace in general terms, which they viewed as an impediment to capitalism. Simultaneously, they championed two of the *least* free market aspects of the law—extended coverage for young adults and the inclusion of previously existing conditions. Two CRs even proposed alternative plans that would actually involve *greater* government intervention into the free market by expanding Medicaid.

The reason for the discordance in their professed policy preferences is that their tropes about capitalism's potential (or in Steven's case, states' rights) were not sufficient to address the complexities of social life. No single frame can do all things. This can be seen in Danny's, Dwight's, and Carl's quotes. While they support market fundamentalism (as an abstract ideological principle), they equally want to be "compassionate" and they don't want to be "inhumane."¹¹ Discussing these sorts of inconsistencies, Swidler (2001a:31) writes:

[A] person operating within one set of assumptions . . . may jump from one frame to another. This does not signal a loss of confidence in the first vessel, but simply a temporary abandonment of one craft while one navigates choppy waters in another.

In other words, Dwight's and Carl's shift to socialized medicine is not a refutation of their previous claims about the free market. Instead, they are concurrently held (but contradictory) beliefs that speak to conflicting cultural values (human life vs. capitalism)—the "hard kind of dynamic" expressed by Danny.

Most importantly, their discussions about the ACA make clear that the CRs did not have definite policy preferences or even a clear direction for moving forward. They wanted to "repeal the law" because, as Ted rhetorically asked, "What does mandating that everyone has health insurance have to do with the free market?" (see above). But the CRs also wanted to keep some of the least free market aspects of the law in place. Most CRs only spoke in vague terms, and those that were specific offered up a variety of "solutions" (i.e., more state control, less state control, less government intervention, more government intervention, etc.). Certainly, there are plenty of conservatives (in college and otherwise) who have consistent policy objectives, but that is not what I found in talking with HSU's College Republicans. Alternatively, the CRs' inconsonance over policy is less problematic if their comments are not considered as policy claims at all. Rather, if we consider their strategies of action as declaring their social identity as conservatives, then they were totally consistent. Because most ordinary people lack the knowledge and resources of political elites, the ability to support accordant ideological framings easily breaks down.¹² The meaning of the symbols in their self-narratives, though, remains unscathed—the speakers demonstrate that they *are* conservative.

Symbolic Politics and Conservative Social Identity

Misinformation versus Self-narratives

The preceding sections have shown that College Republicans at HSU emphasize a political rhetoric underscored by asserting a strong faith in the power of the free market. At the same time, as implacable as their ideological positions may seem ("If you want to be a full-blown conservative you have to be fiscally conservative," "[Obama]'s just aligning himself with this very socialist mentality," etc.), the CRs used shifting and contradictory frames in articulating their stated policy

preferences for repealing the ACA. One option, of course, is to conclude that these young people were misinformed and misguided in their political information (Bartels 2008; Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Caplan 2007). Certainly, some of the College Republicans' beliefs about the ACA were factually incorrect (e.g., that the law is funded through a tax on all home sales), and others might argue that their dislike of the law goes against their material interests (e.g., Bartels 2008; Frank 2004; Hacker 2006).

Although not denying these points, I contend that a sociological appreciation of culture allows researchers to better utilize a second option—analyzing how the CRs employed a conservative repertoire in the formation of meaningful self-narratives (as opposed to expressing a steadfast ideological bulwark for evaluating policy options). For starters, the young men (and a few women) in this study were not policy wonks with direct political goals. That is, they were very different from the elites study by Smith (2007). Instead, they were individuals engaged in the process of forming a coherent sense of self (see McAdams 2001), and their political discourse needs to be understood first and foremost as part of this process. From this cultural sociology perspective, what would otherwise be inchoate and antipodal policy preferences become creatively selected frames used in a strategy of action for publicly affirming their political identification with the right.

But what do the College Republicans get out of publicly affiliating themselves with the right? For starters, conservative ideology has long been connected with reactionary rhetoric (Hirschman 1991)—to efforts of resisting progressive social change. In Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall's (1991) famous critique of American politics, they describe a white backlash against civil rights and social welfare (also see Feagin 2006). In this view, conservatism represents the ideological justifications behind the inequitable distribution of resources to suburban whites—an inequity that has shaped urban development from Bigville outward to Farnton (see Mollenkopf 1983). In addition, Gross and his coauthors (2011) argue conservatives and liberals increasingly represent two competing *status groups* in contemporary American society (also see Green et al. 2002). Unlike struggles over economic resources or political access, status competitions are symbolic (e.g., Gusfield 1963; Luker 1984; also see Edelman 1964). This does not mean that there are not material rewards for the winners of these conflicts, but the battles themselves are waged on symbolic grounds. Which is to say, status groups struggle over the estimations of honor and prestige allocated to themselves and others (Weber [1925] 1946).

Building from the insights of status groups and symbolic politics, I propose that HSU's College Republicans' emphasis on the free market connects them with sacred notions of individualism in public life. To quote Robert N. Bellah and his coauthors (1985:142):

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture. . . . Our highest and noblest aspirations, not only for ourselves, but for those we care about, for our society and for our world, are closely linked to our individualism.

Similarly, Ann Swidler (1992:606) writes, "It's part of common wisdom among those who study the United States that America is 'different.' One of the most important ways it is different is culture. Americans are distinctively individualist; their collective culture is 'voluntarist.'"

Market fundamentalism is part of this voluntarism—belief in the power of each agents' free will. It links individuals with the potential for economic success, provided they are willing to work hard. In other words, conservative economic rhetoric posits the free market as a proving ground. As one of the visiting politicians told the CRs, capitalism is about 'the individual's right to succeed' (see above). Or, as Danny previously indicated with regard to the proper functioning of markets, "When we don't reward people for their work, that scares me." Incorporating conservative economic interpretations into their self-narratives, therefore, allows the CRs to align themselves with the sacred in public life by positioning themselves as autonomous actors (see Alexander 2006).

Before continuing, it is important to note that the sacredness of individualism in American public life does not inevitably result in unequivocal support of market fundamentalism or the disavowing of health care reform. Clearly, that is not the case. My argument is that individualism is *one* of many values held in high esteem in American public life. It is a trope that—because of both its salience and sacred quality—can be integrated into one’s cultural repertoire. But belief in individual free will and the value of personal drive are not only tropes for the right. Voluntarism can (and does) serve liberal and conservative ends. Ideally, researchers of American politics should strive to uncover the causal factors for *why* different individuals and groups draw on voluntarism to support leftist or rightist agendas. The ethnographic data of this article, though, cannot be used to make causal claims. However, by qualitatively studying the CRs, we can see how American individualism and conservative economic rhetoric *are* linked in the self-narratives at the field site I studied.¹³

Connecting to the Sacred

Eric provides a pertinent example of incorporating conservative economic rhetoric with the voluntarist outlook in his self-narrative. According to Eric:

[My great grandfather] came here with nothing but a couple of packs on his back. He died a multimillionaire. That just really goes to show what you can do in America. . . . He worked up from being a milkman to purchasing one plot of land, and just all of the sudden it all took off.

But, while Eric proudly spoke of his family’s mythic past, his own upbringing was quite modest. Neither of his parents went to college.

[My dad farmed] for a while, and then [he] went out of that and bought a trucking company and he also started a lawnmower dealership . . . Both of those didn’t pan out and now he’s working [as a laborer in] a factory . . . So, he kind of went in the opposite direction.

Eric’s older brother also had a menial factory job. Despite these experiences, Eric was optimistic about his own future plans:

. . . I’m working to start my own business. I believe that is my future. I don’t believe much in working for other people. I believe you should be in business for yourself. . . . As an aspiring entrepreneur I’m always thinking about anything I can do to start something—the next big thing. I’m going to build up [my real estate business] brick by brick, if you will. Someday, hopefully, my dream of having a condo tower will be realized.

Similarly, Steven arrived for our interview in high spirits. He was excited from having just attended an information session about managing a painting business over the summer. Steven touted, “I plan on having a bright future. Personally, I think I’m going to be able to get rich, and I yearn to get rich.” His personal motivation notwithstanding, Steven also described coming from a family on a rocky financial journey. Both of Steven’s parents moved to the United States before he was born, and they received bachelor’s degrees at American universities. However, when Steven was in high school, his father became unemployed and over the last several years has tried several unsuccessful attempts at becoming an entrepreneur. The most recent effort was selling medical equipment in areas ravaged by military conflict.

My dad lost his job in May 2009. He tried starting a business. . . . It didn’t work out. . . . The first one he tried starting was a restaurant. It didn’t work out. The second one [was selling] beauty products made from resources from the Dead Sea—soaps, salts, mineral baths. We tried selling that. That

didn't work out. . . . The economy is just totally in shambles. We looked around for a little opportunity but nothing really came up. Right now my dad's working as a project manager for a company. That's where he's working now. He has his medical business on the side. . . . That's the American spirit. My dad moved to this country and that's the thing he came here for. He didn't come here for government benefits. He didn't come here for welfare. He didn't come here for food stamps. He came here because this really is the land of opportunity.

Of course, Eric's and Steven's family employment stories are probably a bit more tumultuous than most of the CRs. Danny, for example, describes coming from a stable working-class household. Both his biological parents attended college, but never graduated. Both Danny's stepparents, like himself, spent time enlisted in the military. On numerous occasions, Danny boasted of his wealth. As he told me the first time we met, "I'm a capitalist. I like having money and I like being able to go buy the things I want to buy." Unlike the privileged university students described by Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton (2013), however, Danny's expendable income came from working various jobs—sometimes concurrently.

That's why I got fat. I got to take time for myself. . . . I had four jobs. When I first got [to HSU] I got a job driving [for the university bus system], first job. Then that summer I got a job driving charter buses across Illinois and all over the U.S. . . . Did that for a summer. . . . I [had a paid position in the university's student government], but then I was also campaign manager for [a candidate for state representative]. . . . The hardest one of them all was driving [the university bus] because once I was there, there was no doing other things. Back then I used to have meetings, I'd tell them to jump on the bus and I'd talk to them while I was driving. I couldn't leave. That's when that job was really not good for me because my schedule changes, and I needed to be able to adapt, and that didn't work very well.

Danny stands out in the extent to which he juggled different jobs, but he embodied the general spirit that the CRs cherished—hard work. Dwight, for example, explained to me that:

I went through school [and] I was self-employed. . . . I made less than \$15,000 a year . . . That's why I worked harder. That's my motivation to work harder, so I can get more discretionary income [and] more income to put [into] savings. I look at [being broke] as more motivation to get out of that [situation].

Furthermore, more than just envisioning themselves as hard working, Eric's and Steven's idealized images of their future selves—McAdams' (1984) *imagoes*—bring forth the notion that through their efforts they will rise through the ranks of America's status hierarchy.

Despite their drive to succeed, Danny's, Dwight's, Eric's, and Steven's stories also underscore the economic reality undoubtedly faced by most students at HSU. That is, they are living at the brunt end of postindustrial capitalism—falling wages and unstable employment (see Kalleberg 2011; J. M. Silva 2012). This is true even for Danny, because his money came at the price of combat duty in Gulf War II and numerous full-time jobs while taking a full course load at school. For many working- and lower-middle-class students (which is the majority at HSU), college itself may be a forced choice—a decision driven not by the quest for knowledge or even skills, but pecking orders within the job market and increasing credentialization (Collins 2013). And, in contrast to Eric's and Steven's grandiose visions for their future, the CRs close to graduation tended to be far more diffident about their immediate job prospects. For example, Paul told me, "I have absolutely no clue what I'll be doing after college. No clue." Likewise, Carl was nearly despondent thinking about what comes next, "I need a job." Perhaps most telling, the recent graduates I interviewed were openly ambivalent about their work—satisfied mostly with not being unemployed than with the actual content of their labor or even the pay it offered (see Fogg and Harrington 2011).

Smith (2007) argues that the GOP has reimagined itself as the party of growth and prosperity (see above; also see Bartels 2008). This is part of a bid to placate the economic insecurities brought about by the restructuring of the American economy. While the College Republicans may be driven by economic insecurity, it is equally important to acknowledge how the Republican Party's economic rhetoric can be used by conservatives to announce a positive sense of self. From this perspective, the free market is membership symbol. Supporting it designates that one belongs to the status group of conservatives (Gross et al. 2011). More importantly, though, appeals to market fundamentalism (see especially Block 2009) also connect the College Republicans with the sacred in American culture. That is, belonging to the status group of conservatives is symbolically imbued with the cherished ideal of individualism. In Dwight's words:

Just get out of my way. I want to do my work. I want to make my money, provide for my family, and live my life. I don't want to deal with, "what's the best way to work around the government on this one?"

In essence, the College Republicans were stating that as conservatives, they were the sorts of people ready to achieve the American dream.

Conclusion

Nearly everyone shifts frames as they speak, and often these frames clash with others (Swidler 2001a). While inconsistency itself is not notable, researching how people are inconsistent can reveal the meaning behind strategies of action. Beyond simply observing that voters are frequently Janus-faced in what and whom they support, the analysis of political discourse needs to be understood within the context of self-narratives. When people discuss their political preferences (whether it is on a college campus, at the workplace water cooler, or in a public opinion poll), they may be talking less about desired policies and more about their desired life story (McAdams 2001)—making a claim that they belong to a valued status group. In this regard, stated policy preferences are primarily symbols of membership.

As we have seen in this article, the ACA underscores the partisanship that not only divides Washington but also, increasingly, sorts Americans into distinct (and sometimes hostile) social worlds (Bishop 2008). And, in the bifurcation of public life, the political landscape has steadily shifted to the right (e.g., Edsall 2006; Hacker 2006; Hacker and Pierson 2005). This sorting and shifting has dire implications for how nonelites incorporate political ideologies into their self-narratives. For example, Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza (2013) show that (contrary to theoretical expectations) Americans have not uniformly responded to the Great Recession by demanding greater regulations of financial markets or redistributive economic reforms (also see Lutttig 2013). Their explanation is the rising role of partisanship in people's support of public policies. Which is to say, as Gross and his coauthors (2011) hypothesize, voters are not evaluating legislative choices based on material outcomes; they are making their ballot decisions based on their self-identifications with political parties (also see Green et al. 2002). And, for Republicans, this means doubling down on free market principles—at least symbolically.

A striking example of the connection between symbolic politics and conservative social identity is the Republican Party's flight from the key principles underlying the ACA. As many commentators have observed, much of the ACA borrows ideas first proposed by Republicans in 1993 as a *conservative* response to President Bill Clinton's proposed health care reforms (Cooper 2012). Speaking in 2010, former Republican Senator and supporter of that conservative response, Dave Durenberger, claimed, "The main thing that's changed is the definition of a Republican" (quoted in Mertens 2010). Or, to be more precise, while the ACA's reliance on insurance

exchanges *could* be interpreted as adhering to market fundamentalism, it is a policy now connected to Democrats—making it something antithetical to conservative social identity.

In this study, I have analyzed the process by which College Republicans utilize various frames in their self-narratives. In doing so, sociologists get a better understanding of the meaning of politics in everyday life (and the ideologies that are sporadically employed to buttress them). Primarily, we see that even in matters involving direct material consequences (and even among people ostensibly versed in such facts) people wage *symbolic* battles (see especially Edelman 1964). Which is to say, who people see themselves to be (and who they want others to see them being) snakes its way into political discourse. Thus, if Americans hope to move past the partisan divide currently stymieing much of the political process, there must a conscientious effort to incorporate a sociological appreciation for the role of culture within quotidian policy discussions. Part of the reason partisans (especially nonelites) seem to be talking past each other is that they are not just debating facts and figures. They are also not simply adhering to ideological precepts. More than anything, they are displaying *symbols* embedded with meanings for self-identity.

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Notes

1. Binder and Wood's (2013) research into how institutional structures shape different types of conservative activism on college campuses offers a notable exception.
2. In contrast to social identity, personal identity defines the individual as unique in relationship to relevant others (J. C. Turner et al. 1994). Thus, personal identity differentiates the self while social identity establishes boundaries in which the self belongs vis-à-vis in-groups and out-groups.
3. GOP stands for Grand Old Party, and is another term for the Republican Party.
4. There are obvious limits to how confidently anyone can speak of future party priorities or the future voting behavior of individuals. As the younger Republicans in this study age, they may very well become invested in *social* conservatism. Regardless, the available evidence indicates that (at least for the time being) economic conservatism has gained increasing traction among the American right, and, in this respect, it is younger Republicans who represent the party's vanguard.
5. Swidler (2001a) argues that Western notions of romantic love allow for various framings. Love is often positioned as a matter of voluntary choice (i.e., love is meaningful because we freely choose our partners). Alternatively, love can be positioned in terms of sacrifice and commitment (i.e., love is also meaningful because it obligates us to selflessly put the interests of our partners before ourselves). Swidler contends that these frames (and the repertoires they are part of) can be used to support differing strategies of action (e.g., staying married, getting a divorce, having an affair). From this

perspective, culture is not a unified system, but a toolkit providing individuals with a variety of options for meaningfully framing practices.

6. My key informants constitute nine of the interviewees (i.e., they were the individuals I frequently interacted with in the field). These nine key informants represent a significant portion of the total population. HSU College Republicans never had more than 15 consistently active members during any single period. The cumulative number of consistently active members during the entire study period was approximately 20. Due to students graduating and moving away, not all key informants from the beginning of the project could be tracked down for interviews. The tenth interviewee was a referral from one of my key informants. He had not attended many of the events during my participant-observation, but was active with the group (and the local Republican Party) in other ways.
7. Except where otherwise indicated, information about HSU is compiled from various public reports produced by the university.
8. The reasons for this overrepresentation of women and minorities in leadership roles are beyond the scope of this article and outstrip the available data on the group. Beyond anomalies caused by random chance, there are probably two main factors at work. First, because women and nonwhites are a minority in the group, to make the initial step of involvement might indicate a higher dedication to conservative ideology (e.g., see MacDonald 1991). Alternatively, many of the white men who periodically filled up the seats at events might just have a passing curiosity. Second, the College Republicans were extremely conscious of their group's image as an organization for "rich white men," and they frequently spoke of the need to combat such "misperceptions." In fact, during 2010 elections for the next chairperson, an Asian American candidate explicitly referenced his status as a minority by promising that if he was elected leader, "The race card won't work on me." He was elected.
9. Ethnographers, of course, strive to develop an experience-near understanding of their field sites. For myriad reasons, researchers are not always able to develop the same level of rapport as an insider (e.g., differences in age, ethnicity, income, legal status, etc.), and, by extension, researchers cannot always take part in all aspects of the social world under investigation. However, a failure to be totally accepted as a full member of the group does not indicate an inability to gather valuable data (exemplars include Blee 1991; Duneier 1999; Snow and Anderson 1993). By attending meetings and socializing with group members on and off campus, I became an accepted part of the College Republicans' milieu. This allowed me to be submersed in the day-to-day activities of the group (see especially Becker 1996: 62)—not just their highly filtered public presentations (e.g., doing interviews with the campus paper or representing the group in town hall meetings).
10. It is worth noting the number of respondents in this study that describe themselves as libertarian. Binder and Wood (2013) also observe a strong libertarian influence on the campuses they refer to as Western Public. They attribute this to geographic location (the American West) and the "laissez-faire attitude toward social life" at the universities. However, HSU is in the Midwest and is not generally considered a party school. Thus, the salience of libertarianism among the College Republicans points to the increasing prominence of economic conservatism within the younger segment of the party. The large number of CRs identifying with libertarianism also highlights the tensions between ideological principles and the compromises viable political parties have to make (even in an age of partisan rancor). Space concerns prevent this matter from being adequately addressed here, but many CRs felt torn between supporting fringe candidates (with extreme views they found inspiring) and the more moderate (and electable) politicians fielded by the GOP. Libertarian critiques were also behind many CRs' views of George W. Bush as a rather centrist president. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were seen as fiscally irresponsible and contributing to government bloat (i.e., violations of economic conservatism). Interestingly, Ronald Reagan's legacies on these matters have been polished much smoother by the sands of time (see Figure 1).
11. One is reminded here of Bellah and his coresearchers' (1985) contention that American culture is unhinged by the conflict between the high value placed on individualism and the inherent need for communal attachments in human life.
12. Eric Orion Silva (2014), for example, shows that while elites in the intelligent design movement have meticulously crafted frames for creationism that do not involve religion, nonelite supporters continue to battle the teaching of evolution with religious framings—sometimes to the detriment of their cause.
13. The point here, following Swidler (2001a), is that culture is piecemeal. There are diverse values and

competing ways in which to use them. For the College Republicans, individualism is a constitutive rule (Swidler 2001b; also see D'Andrade 1984)—it helps define how social life is understood (e.g., hardwork garners financial success). Most importantly, the conservative aura the CRs give to individualism is anchored (Swidler 2001b)—made resilient and taken for granted—by the collective discursive practices detailed throughout this article.

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