

Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives, by Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 422 pp., \$29.95 hardbound.

Campus Conservatives in Style and Substance

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Conservatives often criticize liberals for their aggressive, in-your-face style of activism, but the truth is that plenty of right-wingers like a good protest, too.

As the Iraq War approached, I joined a group of conservative Northwestern University students—led by a young Dave Weigel, as it happens—to counter an antiwar demonstration. We made pro-war signs, and even brought a boom box so we could play “I Can Change,” a song from the *South Park* movie in which Saddam Hussein promises he’ll behave better.

Several years before, another cohort of Northwestern conservatives had handed out free pizza next to a group of hunger strikers who were demanding the creation of an Asian American studies department.

That’s not how they do things in the Ivy League, apparently. In *Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives*, University of California sociologists Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood interviewed numerous conservative students and alumni from Harvard and the University of Colorado Boulder (UC Boulder) and satellite campuses. (The authors refer to these schools as “Eastern Elite” and “Western Flagship,” apparently to please the research-review board at Harvard, but it only took me a bit of Google searching and a few emails to unearth the schools’ identities.) Binder and Wood report numerous differences between the groups—to some degree in beliefs, but most strikingly in their styles of activism—and try to explain them. Their question boils down to this: Why are UC Boulder conservatives so feisty and Harvard conservatives so refined?

Of course, this type of research is closer to journalism than it is to science. There are so many differences between the schools

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that it's impossible to determine, from basic reporting, which of them cause conservative students to act the way they do. UC Boulder is a large state school in the West, and most of the students are from Colorado; Harvard is a medium-sized private school in the Northeast that cherry-picks its students from all over the country and the world. Whenever Binder and Wood claim that some factor is especially important, it's hard not to be skeptical, however plausible the claim sounds. But their book is a fascinating look at conservative life on two different campuses.

UC Boulder's conservatism is not unlike what I experienced at Northwestern (both a member of the unofficial "Midwestern Ivy League" and a Big Ten school). At UC Boulder, right-leaning students work through clubs, in particular the College Republicans, to get the attention of their fellow classmates and the media, with help from national organizations such as the Young America's Foundation. If liberals overreact in response, all the better: In 2004, an affirmative action bake sale—in which customers are charged different amounts for baked goods based on their race—propelled Boulder into the national spotlight when protesters and the school's administration tried to stop it. The

College Republicans enjoyed this enough to repeat the event a few years later. Some students focus more on campaigning for candidates than on raising hell, but the essentially rambunctious nature of Boulder conservatism cannot be denied.

Binder and Woods's Harvard interviewees made it quite clear that such behavior does not fly on their campus, where the authors found three different styles of conservatism. Most conservative Harvard students are committed to civilized discourse and respectfully challenging their professors and peers when it is appropriate to do so. Some also work to get their favored candidates elected, a strategy encapsulated by the Harvard Republican Club. And the closest thing to conservative rebellion at Harvard is the *Salient*, a student-run paper that specializes in what Binder and Wood call "highbrow provocation." *Salient* writers have a knack for offending their left-wing classmates but deny that this is their intention, and they strive to provide wit and serious argumentation. (Binder and Wood almost always stick to dry academic prose, but it's hard not to smile when they describe the writing style of the *Salient's* twenty-year-old aspiring William F. Buckley as "bemused high self-regard.")

Also fascinating, and considerably more surprising, are the authors' findings on conservative women. While conservative women on both campuses were more likely to talk about their gender than were the conservative men, they had very different things to say. UC Boulder women mainly criticized feminist orthodoxy on such issues as abortion, and sought to make their own decisions about balancing work and family. Meanwhile, Harvard women were religious and concerned about moral laxity on campus; some even participated in an abstinence-advocacy group. They were also fairly defensive about their desire to place a strong emphasis on family despite being on track for high-powered careers.

In their quest to explain these differences, Binder and Wood hit on a number of factors that almost certainly play a role. For example, Harvard has a small campus, and most students live there, a situation that fosters the sense of a university-wide community. By contrast, on UC Boulder's large campus students tend to divide into smaller groups, and many students live in off-campus apartments. There's less danger in offending peers with affirmative action bake sales and other controversial displays in such an environment.

Region matters, too. To the extent that conservatives on the two campuses held different policy beliefs, they could be explained by the fact that Boulder is situated in the libertarian West.

Of course, one cannot talk about Harvard without addressing its elite status. Harvard is always in the national spotlight, and lucrative jobs are waiting for its students when they graduate. Students are highly aware of the attention their behavior could bring to the school and fear the prospect of an employer learning of undergraduate escapades, and thus do their best to maintain a polite culture on campus. In such an environment, lowbrow antics just don't work. When one Harvard student tried to protest abortion with graphic pictures, for example, his efforts didn't gain any traction and he got the message that this style of expression was inappropriate. By contrast, UC Boulder students tend to shrug off the idea that their eyebrow-raising behavior could have repercussions, and most plan to stay in Colorado rather than pursuing riches in big coastal cities.

Nevertheless, the authors seem hesitant to grapple fully with the fact that Harvard students are just plain smart. Their SAT scores (averaging about 1500 out of 1600 for combined reading and math) put

them in the top 2 to 3 percent of all students who take the test; UC Boulder student scores (around 1200) place them a little above average. Whether there's a link between IQ and personality is far from settled, but at least some research indicates that people with high IQs tend to be more introverted—and getting to Harvard probably requires a certain amount of bookishness in addition to raw processing power. This could help explain the preference among Harvard students for lower-key discussions.

Class is another issue that Binder and Wood touch on but downplay. While they report that Harvard conservatives are not a homogenous, upper-class group, the overall trend is clear: Harvard students come from well-to-do families. As noted in the *Harvard Crimson* in 2011, nearly half of Harvard's students have parents who make more than \$200,000 a year, and only about 4 percent of students have parents in the lowest income quintile. Many Harvard students also come from elite private high schools. Meanwhile, the UC Boulder interviewees often cited in-state tuition (of only \$5,500, compared with tuition north of \$30,000 at Harvard) as a reason for attending the school, though comprehensive

income numbers for parents are hard to acquire. Do rich kids come to college equipped with certain cultural sensibilities—and do they arrive in sufficient numbers at Cambridge, but not Boulder, to infuse the campus with those sensibilities? It certainly seems possible.

Yet another explanation to which the authors give short shrift is the presence of instructional bias. Binder and Wood report the extent to which students “perceive” such bias—Harvard conservatives see their instructors as consummate professionals, whereas UC Boulder conservatives tell stories of professors who go on left-wing rants utterly irrelevant to the class topic, even though the leftward tilt of the student body is much more pronounced at Harvard. Some UC Boulder students even voice suspicion that grade discrimination occurs.

Binder and Wood are reluctant to admit that the students might be onto something. The closest they come is positing—after cautioning that they did not witness any of the alleged instances of bias—that the “depersonalized” setup of the UC Boulder campus might “encourage this type of behavior by some instructors.” A more blunt theory, and one more relevant to why conservatives at UC Boulder protest the way they do, is the lack of

professionalism among many faculty liberals. The off-topic rants reported by UC Boulder conservatives set a low a standard for political debate across the campus.

As stated above, anyone who turns to *Becoming Right* for a full explanation of why some conservatives are more in-your-face

than others will be disappointed. Interviews at two radically different schools cannot provide much of the nuance one would need to answer this question. But the book succeeds as a journalistic profile of right-leaning activists who will be contributing to local and national political debates for years to come.