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Politics and Non/Partisanship: Is College Student Government a Neutral Space?

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ABSTRACT

College student government is a form of student involvement in higher education, and one that has evolved over time. But student government is not without politics, from legislating on campus to making statements on local, national, and international issues. This article illuminates data from a phenomenological study of nineteen former student government officers who ran for or served in post-college public office (e.g., mayors, city councilmembers, state senators, and more). Two major themes are rendered in this article: *student government and non/partisanship* and *student government and decision-making power*. Questions and recommendations are left as a way to better understand college students and student government and serve as a calling to further interrogate this topic and form of student–and political–engagement.

Keywords: student government, college, partisanship, politics, student affairs, post-college office

Is college student government a neutral space? While students do not identify their candidacy alongside a major United States political party (e.g., Democrat, Independent, Republican), there is something about the politics and non/partisanship of college student government that is worth exploring. For example, in an early study that surveyed fifty former student government leaders (including elected, legislative, judiciary, and in class office) 8-11 years after their college graduation, Fendrich (1973) found that former student government leaders frequently followed political events in the media and voted regularly in elections. Further, former student government leaders had a preference toward a "moderate position" political identification (Fendrich, 1973, p. 164). Years later, Templeton et al. (2018) found no

significant differences between student government presidents based on political ideology among other identity factors. Still, there is discourse that higher education is a liberal enterprise (Abrams & Khalid, 2020; Kurtzleben, 2016; Parker, 2019). For example, in one study examining 42 colleges and universities in five different states, Ardoin et al. (2015) found that Democratic candidates received greater electoral support in college precincts and that barriers to college student voting would benefit Republicans mostly. Students' ideological shifts on abortion, affirmative action, and same-sex marriage were issues where a "liberalizing" effect was found in higher education (Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2020, p. 663). Thus, the question remains: *Is college student government a neutral space?*

COLLEGE STUDENT GOVERNMENT: POLITICAL, (NON?)PARTISAN, AND… "NEUTRAL?"

At face-value, *yes…*or, at least, some argue *they should be*. In 2016, UCLA Vice Chancellor Jerry Kang wrote in a campus publication about the "importance of being neutral" regarding student government, and suggested, "I'd be very concerned if an elected student government, at a public institution, using mandatory fees, could discriminate on the basis of political viewpoint" (para. 3). Student government at Oakland Community College, as another example, has a section in their constitution about "neutrality," in that student government should be neutral on political and religious matters (Student Government Constitution, n.d., p. 5). Further, organizations like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) call on student governance groups to legislate in viewpoint-neutral ways (Greenberg, 2021). For example, in 2021, the student government at Wichita State University grappled with granting organization registration to Turning Point USA, a conservative student group; in 2017, the same student government denied recognition to Young Americans for Liberty (Greenberg, 2021). But FIRE reiterated the First Amendment, and posited, "Personal animosity to the group's viewpoints, and the potential offensiveness of the group's ideology, are impermissible bases to deny recognition" (Greenberg, 2021, para. 8).

But it is more complicated than this. Literature on college student government reveals this form of involvement as one that enables high-level decision-making (Goodman, 2021a; May, 2010; Smith et al., 2016; Templeton et al., 2018), and allows individual students to contribute to the welfare of their greater college community (Komives, 2019; Kuh & Lund, 1994). Student government leaders are deeply involved in committee work on campus (Goodman, 2021a), and frequently bear the responsibility of funding various student organizations (Smith et al., 2016). However, while college student governments often support the financial needs of student organizations (Smith et al., 2016), the responsibility can be political and contentious. For example, at the University of Oregon in 2020, student government leaders attempted to cut off funding and remove recognition of the College Republicans (Schow, 2020); similarly at Stanford University in 2022, College Republicans fought back against a decision by the student government to reject a funding request for an event featuring former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence (Viloria & Tati, 2022).

Outside of student government, identity politics are prominent on college campuses more broadly, yet there is limited research on the development of a student's social and political identity (Morgan, 2021). Woessner and Kelly-Woessner (2020) found the same ideological identification between students' first and fourth year of college. However, students who were centrist in their first year were twice as likely to move left rather than right (Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2020). The exception to these findings were shifts regarding social and political issues related to abortion, affirmative action, and same-sex marriage, which showed students drift left from their first to fourth year of college (Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2020). Consequently, Curtis et al. (2019) found that students displayed *political cynicism* as it related to their disengagement from politics and fear of how their political ideologies would be accepted by peers. Further, the authors suggested that college students experience a "suspended political bubble," wherein they navigated norms around political engagement, which led to obstacles that prompted them to disengage altogether (Curtis et al., 2019, p. 501). Further, recent college graduates had a negative view of politics and often felt constrained or unable to advance their civic identity within their careers (Johnson & Ferguson, 2018).

Still, there are nuances with the individuals who hold leadership positions. For example, in a study on openly gay undergraduate men in elected student government, Goodman (2021b) described participants' experiences through an expectation to be unbiased. One participant recalled the diverse political ideologies in his swing state, and that he was told early on that if candidate Donald Trump came to campus, regardless of disagreeing with his politics, he would be expected to shake his hand like any other political candidate visiting campus (Goodman, 2021b). Despite the shift away from student leadership as solely positional in higher education (e.g., Dugan, 2017), in the present study on former student government officers who recently ran for or served in post-college public office (e.g., mayor, city council, school board, state-wide roles), I found that college student government was a significant form of public service (Goodman, 2022). Within that public service, notions of politics and non-partisanship were mentioned by participants, and make up the present article.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

To do phenomenology in the way of applied research aligns with Moran's (2000) belief that this methodology is both a "method and a general movement" (p. 3), and a practice rather than a system. Here, *doing* phenomenology allows the researcher to be an "active ingredient" in the research process, interpreting rather than solely observing (Arminio, 2001, p. 241). According to van Manen (1997), the researcher turns to a phenomenon that interests and commits them to the world; in the context of this study, my own consideration for the (or any) connection between college student government and post-college public office. One major contribution of phenomenology is the protection of "the subjective view of experience as a necessary part of any full understanding of the nature of knowledge" (Moran, 2000, p. 21). As

such, implicitness is brought to be explicit through deconstruction, reflection, and recovery (Arminio, 2001).

This study was guided by the phenomenological research question: *What are the lived experiences of former student government officers who recently ran for or served in post-college public office?* This study received Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Maryland, College Park for research involving human subjects, and all participants signed a consent form to declare their commitment to participate. From two conversations with nineteen participants, some who were in partisan roles (e.g., state senators) and some who were not (e.g., school board members), this article extracts data regarding elements of politics and non/partisanship as related to the experiences of former college student government officers. Participants must have been eighteen years of age or older, formerly elected to their collegiate student government (in any elected capacity, from Executive Branch to legislative), and ran for or served in elected public office during 2018-2021 (Table 1). Participant identities are masked through self-selected pseudonyms and limited descriptions (Kaiser, 2009). The larger phenomenological study engaged van Manen's (1997) six research activities for conducting human science research, and themes were brought forward with a hermeneutical consciousness (Gadamer, 1975).

To arrive at a phenomenon and then put into words its understandings and insights is "an enormous challenge" (van Manen, 2017, p. 779). As a result, some scholars enlisting qualitative methods, including phenomenology, may engage with data analysis programs and technologies to assist in the challenging process of generating insights into the structures of lived human experience (van Manen, 2017). To analyze these data, I drew out key themes by examining participant conversation transcripts in a line-by-line manner, and in consideration of van Manen's (1997) thematic analysis (i.e., drawing out themes based on interpretation). In the end, I leaned on van Manen's (2017) rendering(s) of phenomenology to best guide my methodological approach; he stated, "Genuine phenomenological inquiry is challenging and satisfying precisely because its meaningful revelations must be originary and existentially compelling to the soul" (p. 779). Here, there is a consciousness of not relying on my own experiences, and rather, remaining attentive to the phenomenon itself (Willis, 2001).

RELEVANT THEMES AND KEY INSIGHTS

Two themes from the larger phenomenological study are brought forward as related to the politics of college student government: *student government and non/partisanship*, and notions of *student government and decision-making power*.

Student Government and Non/Partisanship

Henry named his city-wide role as "*actually similar*" to student government, in that they are both "*not partisan*." He quoted a sentiment attributed to former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, that there is not a Democrat or Republican way to "fix a
Table 1: Participants

Pseudonym	Ran or Served	Office Type	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Amy*	Ran/Served	City-wide	Female	White
Charles	Ran/Served	State-wide	Male	White
Christian*	Ran/Served	County-wide	Man	Latinx
Cici*	Ran/Served	City-wide	Female	Multiracial
Cyndi Shin	Ran/Served	State-wide	Female	Asian
Henry	Ran/Served	City-wide	Male	White
James	Ran/Served	City-wide	Male	White
John Brown*	Ran	City-wide	Male	African American and Latino
Karina*	Ran	City-wide	Female	Black and Latina
Mark*	Ran/Served	City-wide	Male	Black
Michael*	Ran/Served	County-wide	Male	Asian
Nelson*	Ran/Served	City-wide	Male	White
Patrick Mitchell*	Ran	National	Male	White
Paula*	Ran	State-wide	Female	White
Rufus	Ran/Served	County-wide	Male	White
Shirley*	Ran/Served	State-wide	Female	White
Ta-Nehisi Obama*	Ran/Served	City-wide	Male	Black
Theo Kennedy*	Ran/Served	County-wide	Male	Multiracial
Yvonne	Ran/Served	State-wide	Female	White

Participant served as student body president while in college

pothole." Similarly, Cici shared that the student government's "*purview was neutral, just like for that matter,* [this city-wide role] *is neutral.*" However, there was still tension in student government. Cici posited, "*I'm trying to serve all students. And yet, there was still like, you know, you need to go and you need to advocate to the trustees for this, this, this. And that was, again, the far left, the far right.*"

The *far left* and *far right* were known entities. In college, Nelson suggested that students all knew the political "*affiliations*" of people running for student government. He recalled waking up the morning of his election to an endorsement from a local conservative elected leader, as well as endorsements from other "*liberal figures.*" For Nelson, this meant his student government work spoke for itself, and he was pleasantly surprised to receive support from someone of a different political affiliation. When Theo got to college, he recalled, "*most of the leadership in our student government were more conservative leaning,*" which led his College Democrats to brainstorm ways to get involved in student government. Theo became "*very, very*" involved in College Democrats when he ran for student government president. In Theo's experience, this meant "*the other partisan party wanted to be just as equally engaged in the election for a representative which usually is very non-competitive.*" Theo identifies as a moderate Democrat, and one challenge for him in both student government and his elected post-college role was that he viewed his

leadership approach to be very pragmatic. For example, he described his deep concern for procedure(s), and even if he thought something was a good policy, he "*may not necessarily go in favor of it if it didn't follow the right procedural mechanisms*." Mark was also part of his political party while in student government and led those in the opposing political party. "*And so that created a friction, created conflict right there*," he shared, as he viewed himself seeing the world "*totally different*" from peers at the time.

Working *alongside* one another, with parties in tow, was a something most participants were aware of, and in some ways more so than others. For example, when James, a Democrat, was student government vice president, he served under a president who identified as a Republican; both serving at a "*very liberal college*." While partisanship was at play in student government, there were also relationships and friendships being built. Patrick, a lifelong Democrat, recalled that two of his best friends were individuals he met in student government – one a "*super conservative Republican*," and the other a moderate, libertarian. He reflected:

> *It made me realize the importance of listening to each other in on, on a number of things, we weren't far off from each other in terms of what our what our values were, and what we cared about, maybe we've looked at it, how to get there differently, but at least, you know, we could, we could talk about things. And that has stuck with me.*

Patrick further reflected on experiences where he and his peers separated their "*political, liberal, conservative*" identifiers and bonded based on other, additional shared values and passions. Conversely, Karina recalls a time where she was threatened by a "*gun-toting conservative*" while she was student government president, and reflected, "*Are you seriously threatening me over a student government bill, like, hello*." In professional and personal ways, each of these identifiers and knowledge of political identity were salient to these leaders.

Student Government and Decision-Making Power

Awareness of partisanship and politics were present when participants recalled experiences with decision-making. When Charles' state government legislature considered concealed carry on campus, he found student government members who were associated with the Young Republicans supportive of the student government's stance that universities should have control over allowing weapons on campus. He shared, "*It was certainly not as partisan, as you know, the legislature is, but we also prided ourselves, I think on bringing together all the different perspectives before making a decision*." Similarly, Cici processed nuances associated with decision-making in her college student government:

> *Well, Planned Parenthood and abortion is not an issue that you should be voting on as a student. At the same time, that is an issue for some of the students that are on campus, and how do they access the health care they need?*

Similarly, Michael saw issues from his time in student government that could have been perceived as partisan today but did not feel it at the time. Michael identified with an older generation and assumed students and student governments today are fighting "*climate change*" and are "*against gun violence*." From a similar generation as

Michael, Ta-Nehisi saw his student government as political, though would not necessarily frame it as "*progressive and liberal or conservative.*" Some of this emerged in his institution creating ethnic studies departments, and also through labor politics on campus. In one example, Ta-Nehisi shared that statewide politics dominated some of his time as student government president. He recalled a time when student fees and tuition were increasing and felt "*pressure to be engaged politically.*" This led Ta-Nehisi to build and develop coalitions with other student government presidents in his state.

While in college, Nelson's student government created a diversity and inclusion position, which initially failed to pass through the representative body. Nelson recalled the dissenting votes as "*white males who have to be fairly conservative*" who made statements that came from Republican talking points. Having been involved in student government for several years, Nelson reflected on the experience and shared, "*We've never really waded into that water, as a student* [government]. *We'd never really gotten there. And it was never my intention to muddy those waters. But it was an issue that was so inherently political.*" In this case, Nelson cited decisions related to diversity and inclusion as inherently political, which was also brought forward by other participants. Cyndi recalled religious undertones and pressure at her institution, where leaders carried Bibles, hosted Bible studies, and "*constantly encourage*[ed] *religious activities.*" In these examples, identity was also political (e.g., race, religion, and more).

Patrick recalled a major decision made by student government when he was in college, during a "*national conservative movement to push to make college campuses, you know, more 'patriotic.'*" Patrick shared with his peers that he would veto one bill in particular, and his peers suggested that he was "*un-American,*" so much so that some members of his Cabinet resigned. Many other participants talked about making decisions during specific periods of time, including war, national elections, local disasters, and 9/11. Nearly all mentioned COVID-19, and both Paula and Amy reflected on the change in their most recent campaign strategies, and the politicization of COVID-19 response(s) (as well as the lack thereof in their respective states). The conflation of politics was not always so clearly divided. For example, in addition to the "*two major political parties*" holding many seats in Theo's student government, he also saw Turning Point USA as a presence, and one that "*caused a lot of drama*" on his campus and in his student government. More than the others in the student government space, he saw Turning Point USA as (most) partisan with specific issues and decisions and believed that "*they shouldn't be.*"

Finally, Theo and John mentioned Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS). Theo watched similar institutions as his vote on BDS resolutions before, during, and after his time in student government. He stated, "*There are Dems and Republicans that are super pro-Israel, but this BDS thing is something that goes beyond just your typical partisan line, but it is something that is so divisive.*" While considering the politics of this topic, and his own feelings/beliefs, Theo vowed to not have a resolution addressing BDS or divestment from Israel. He shared, "*Because first of all, we are a student government, we shouldn't be getting involved in international politics. Like it's not our job.*" While he could not control what legislation was written by representatives, he worked "*very hard*" to "*make sure it wouldn't even be considered*

up for debate." Similarly, John saw the Israel-Palestine conflict and the BDS movement on campus as one that read, "*You're either with us or against us*." He commented on "*how quick people are to draw lines in the sand*," and suggested that partisanship regarding these types of decisions has only intensified on campuses.

DISCUSSION

It is worth returning to the initial question at hand: *Is college student government a neutral space?* Well, *it's complicated*, may be a more reasonable answer. Instead, some questions may help guide the path forward for students, administrators, and stakeholders as they grapple with the politics and non/partisanship of this form of student involvement. Specifically, what does it even mean *to be* neutral in student government? What issues are neutral? And is *non*partisanship even a possibility in today's political climate? This is a continued issue taken up by those associated with college student government, and as college and university leaders (including student leaders) determine the role partisan groups play in student government. To determine such a *role*, per se, is not to *limit* one's voice or presence, and instead, may aid in better understanding how, and with which ideologies, students show up. Can one hold both identities and do each space justice? The power and pressure(s) present in both student government and partisan spaces is worthy of continued exploration. What power do each have on campus? And how is that power perceived by campus leaders and stakeholders (including those elected to public office outside of the institutional context)?

While parts of this may be external in some instances (e.g., due to campus-specific decisions), for others it might appear as personal beliefs and/or salient identities—much like the political and identity development of college students illuminated by Curtis et al. (2019), Johnson and Ferguson (2018), and Woessner and Kelly-Woessner (2020). For example, at the University of Florida in 2019, student government senators initiated impeachment proceedings of the student government president, Michael Murphy, who invited Donald Trump, Jr. and Kimberly Guilfoyle to speak on campus (Langlois, 2019). Specifically, students questioned Murphy's "conflicts of interest and fiscal responsibility" of $50,000 in mandatory student fees (Langlois, 2019, para. 11). Several conservative politicians spoke out on Twitter, including a U.S Senator from Florida, Rick Scott (Langlois, 2019). The relationship of students' political identity and belief to their elected position(s) is one that may be at odds with the very peers they work alongside in student government. Some of this might even be the political identity one brings with them into college, and informed by family, pre-college experiences, and more (Morgan, 2021).

So, can students hold both political identities and beliefs, *and* represent their peers in elected student government positions? There is potential value in having a diverse range of candidates on a ticket; perhaps this is the path toward neutrality, that it becomes more about political balance. For example, in one platform campaign at Louisiana State University (LSU) in 2021, the president candidate, Mia LeJeune, shared, "There are republicans, democrats and independents on our ticket…The governor is a democrat, and if I have a connection there, I'm going to use it for the

betterment of the LSU community" (Savoie, 2021, para. 32). It is one thing to have Republicans, Democrats, and Independents as LeJeune suggested; and it is another to engage with groups outside of these *traditional* partisan identities. What about representation from Turning Point USA, Run Gen Z, or Campus Socialists? Do these (types of) groups change the *balance* that LeJeune, and others, seek to engage in their cabinet? What is political about the latter groups that changes the representation and voice as it relates to college student government? Further, such as in the case of Nelson being endorsed by a local leader, what does it mean for external leaders to get involved in college student government elections (e.g., see Rick Perry weighing in on Texas A&M's student government election of Bobby Brooks [Perry, 2017])? Might the very involvement of those outside of higher education be signaling the investment, relevance, and even utility of these roles, and their impact? If not inherently or explicitly partisan, perhaps, these roles imply such value to outside stakeholders and/or community members.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Both non/partisanship and decision-making in college student government have valuable implications as it relates to both practice and research. As participants described knowing about and being affiliated with political parties, such an engagement can and should be considered by college administrators and student government advisors. For example, student government advisors can engage students in leadership training and development that allows them to think critically about neutrality, non/partisanship, and *representation*, and with case studies that may be useful in exploring any/these personal and professional conflicts. Drawing from current examples of this tension may help illuminate the potential challenge faced by student government officers (e.g., Michael Murphy at the University of Florida, or Wichita State University and Turning Point USA registration status). This includes engaging students in reflective exercises to explore their personal/political evolution (e.g., Morgan [2021] found that students' salient social identities were "necessary guide rails to their acquisition of political fluency" [p. 18]). Administrators and advisors can attend to the exploration of students' social identities as reflected in or in conflict with current political discourse (e.g., students passing legislation and resolutions regarding Chik-fil-A's removal from campus, calling on universities to sever ties with city police, unionizing for graduate students, and more [Goodman et al., 2021]). Leadership training in this way might also be executed in retreat-style experiential learning (Egan et al., 2021; Eich, 2008), where students can learn alongside one another, and at the same time, develop relationships with each other outside of professional boundaries.

Finally, participants reflected on their experiences with being in or running for in-college and post-college public office during major and significant periods of time (e.g., 9/11, elections of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, COVID-19). In his leadership development, Michael was inspired by the 2000 U.S. election, and at that time "*saw the fragility of government*." He felt both concerned and inspired to "*roll up my sleeves and get involved*." Future research on college student government may

include the experiences of students leading during significant periods of time, or local/national and political moments and/or crises (and examined through the lens of partisanship as related to such periods of time). For some students this might mean leading in natural disasters (e.g., student government officers at institutions in New Orleans, Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina, or student government officers at the University of Alabama during the 2011 tornadoes in Tuscaloosa, Alabama), and other local or attention-garnering incidents (e.g., the shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007, or the Pennsylvania State University Jerry Sandusky abuse scandal). Further, to better understand how societal issues are being mirrored in student government is worthy of exploration. For example, in what ways might students enact similar practices as those happening in society (e.g., U.S. Congress and impeachment proceedings), milestones and notable elections (e.g., first Muslim U.S. Congresswoman), or even third-party influencers (e.g., Turning Point USA, political action committees)? These research endeavors may further reveal elements about college students, student government, and leadership development more broadly.

CONCLUSION

Elections in the United States are politicized and highly partisan (Warshaw, 2019), and it is reasonable to presume such politics and partisanship to exist in college student government. But is it *neutral*? Can it even be neutral? Is it even supposed to be neutral? Ta-Nehisi shared that over time he saw many peers "*make that same transition*" from student government to post-college public office, and many in very partisan roles (e.g., working on campaigns, working for a party directly). "*These are people who have been debating about this and about that, on campus, they're not going to stop debating. They're going to find another place to go continue contributing to public discourse*," he shared. It is these sentiments that best capture this connection between participants' experiences in college as tied to post-college public office. Perhaps, then, this very question of politics, non/partisanship, *and* neutrality is itself a contribution to public discourse – that pending the institution, the issues, and the students themselves, neutrality is not necessarily called upon as a 'gold standard' of student government; instead, neutrality is a helpful middle space amid the, still necessary, Republicans and Democrats, Independents, and even the Turning Point USA candidates.

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