

# Book Review: *Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives*

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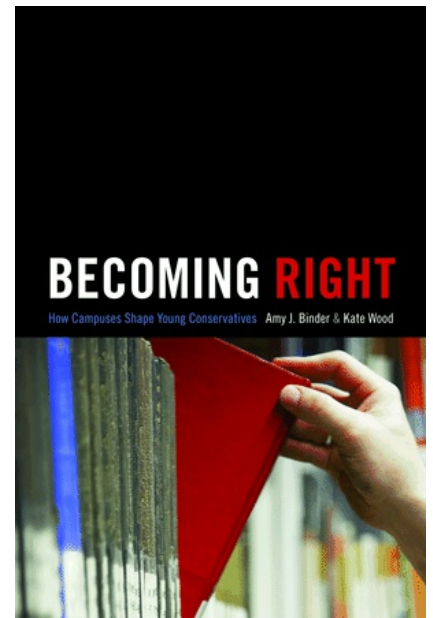
*Conservative pundits allege that the pervasive liberalism of America's colleges and universities has detrimental effects on undergraduates, most particularly right-leaning ones. **Becoming Right** demonstrates the power that campus culture has in developing students' conservative political styles and shows that young conservatives are made, not born. **Alex Hensby** finds this is a comprehensive, fascinating and accessible piece of research.*



**Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives.** Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood. Princeton University Press.

## Find this book:

During last year's US presidential elections, one of Republican candidate Mitt Romney's lines of attack was to depict President Barack Obama as an 'ivory tower' elitist who had 'spent too much time at Harvard'. It didn't take long for the national press to point out that not only was Romney himself a fellow Harvard graduate, but had actually spent more time studying at the Ivy League institution than Obama had. Whilst Romney's comments may have backfired in the minds of many commentators, his campaign team presumably saw it as a risk worth taking: after all, opposition to governmental elitism had been one of the key facets of the grassroots (albeit Koch brothers-assisted) Tea Party Movement. Romney's attempt to unite two distinct styles of conservatism ultimately failed to win him the presidential election, but his efforts reflect a polarity between Republican populism and Republican elitism that looks unlikely to desist in the near future.



Understanding the contrasting sides of American conservatism is a key aspect of Amy J. Binder and Kate Wood's excellent study of right-wing university students. Focusing on two university campuses – the private, Ivy League 'Eastern Elite', and the public, all-American 'Western Flagship' – Binder and Wood use interviews with right-wing campus activists and group leaders to uncover how these two institutions produce distinct styles of conservatism. Partly reflecting the influence of Bourdieu, Binder and Wood argue that conservative college students are 'made, not born', and that their particular political cultures derive from recurrent patterns of interaction and shared understandings which become durable over time. Certainly in relation to the separate and often self-absorbed world of the university campus, this analysis is appropriate and convincing. It is argued that Western Flagship's brand of aggressive and populist conservatism is a product of students' more general struggle for recognition within a large and impersonal main campus, whereas in contrast Eastern Elite's traditionalist, more collegial environment fosters a culture of 'civilised debate' meaning that conservative students differ relatively little in political style from their liberal counterparts.

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The experience of conservatives at Western Flagship is especially compelling reading. Overall liberal in its college culture, right-wing students talk of feeling obliged to keep their politics quiet for fear of compromising friendships with other students. They also recall regularly having to put up with professors' liberal grandstanding in tutorials on the assumption of a receptive student audience. Some students even claim that their essays have been marked down for making right-wing arguments. Consequently, student conservatives become a de facto 'underground' subculture, contemptuous of their 'tree hugging, gun taking, wealth hating' adversaries. In response, leaders of conservative student groups engage in a variety of provocative and often controversial campaigns and actions with a view to steering political debates away from the liberal consensus. Some examples, such as the online 'liberal bias' monitor (p165) for conservative students wishing to call out the predilections of certain professors' teaching practices, are understandable given the circumstances presented, though other more aggressive campaigns – notably 'catch an illegal alien day' (p2), 'empty holster week' (p170-1) to protest restrictions against guns being allowed on campus, and parodic 'affirmative action bake sales' (p1-2) which charge lower prices to ethnic minorities – might give cause for some readers to hurriedly reach for their garlic and cross. Organisers hope that such acts of aggressive provocation will start a debate rather than become a puerile end in itself, but many are at the same time conscious that they can serve to generate local and national press attention or even help build the political careers of those involved.

This desire to opportunistically plant conservative flags in liberal fields partly reflects the growing underlying influence of 'sponsored conservatism' in the form of national organizations such as the Young America's Foundation, the Leadership Institute, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. This is arguably the book's most fascinating subject: whilst specific organizations also vary in their styles of conservatism, they are united in seeking to support and supplement right-wing students and groups on campus, be it through funding right-wing clubs, offering training schemes and research fellowships, or helping to raise the exorbitant fees necessary to bring an Ann Coulter guest lecture to campus. It is quite remarkable just how much money seems to be floating around these schemes, so it is no surprise to see the familiar names of the Koch brothers among the list of YAF's beneficiaries. According to students and conservatives more generally, these sorts of opportunities provide a necessary (if ironic) form of affirmative action to protect and develop otherwise-marginalised right-wing cultures in America's colleges and universities amidst a sea of liberal consensus.

Binder and Wood's conclusions to this book are resolutely sociological, keen as they are to emphasise how the cultural and organizational properties of each campus come to play such a vital role in shaping students' identities as young conservatives. Given the evidence presented in this book, there is little to argue with this basic position. Nevertheless, one is sometimes left wondering why it was *these* students who were able to withstand the criticism and ridicule from liberals and become conservative activists when others with – one presumes – similar initial political leanings did not. This, of course, reflects research study's focus on interviewees who, through their memberships, publically *identified* as conservatives. One suspects that given the opportunity to hear the reflections of those who prefer to sit quietly on the fringes of the right, or have since rejected conservative identification completely, we might learn more about those students who have taken to conservative college activism with such gusto. The effects of pre-college political socialization are relatively downplayed in Binder and Wood's narrative, as they find most interviewees' accounts of growing up in a general 'conservative household' to be fairly unremarkable when compared to their currently well-honed political identities. This may be true, but aspects of this background might become more significant when compared to those right-leaning freshmen who have preferred to stay quiet. But this is a minor and probably unfair quibble on what is otherwise a comprehensive, fascinating and accessible piece of research. Not only will it appeal to cultural sociologists, political scientists and social movement scholars, it is also a book that one needs not to have spent too many years at Harvard to find an engaging and informative read.

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