

Contemporary Conservatism and Identity Politics: How American Identity Animates Conservative Identity*

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Abstract

Donald Trump took the Republican party by storm when he announced his presidency in June 2015 and, despite strong party insider opposition, he swept the primary and became the figurehead for the contemporary Republican party. Economic and social conservatives shed their differences and coalesced behind the politics of Trump, forging a new conservative identity. I investigate the meaning of conservative identity to those who are intensely engaged in the conservative movement by attending the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Using a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and data from an original survey from CPAC in 2019 and 2020, I evaluate the extent to which contemporary conservative identity makes claims on American identity and what it means to be an American.

1 Introduction

The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) is the largest annual meeting of movement conservatives, youth activists, conservative media elites, and politicians in the country sponsored by the American Conservative Union. Speakers include everyone from

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cultural conservative celebrities like Sebastian Gorka¹ and Brandon Straka² to politicians like Representative Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) and President Trump himself. A strong showing is made annually by young conservatives, brought into the fold by organizations like Turning Point USA³ that organize budding conservative thinkers and activists, especially on college campuses nationwide. The conference is an annual litmus test for the direction of the conservative movement as perceived by those who are deeply involved.

The annual meeting of the American Conservative Union was established in the 1970s in order to build movement conservatism by providing a space for politicians, activists, and public intellectuals to come together. In recent years, it has become an important annual political conference for those who are plugged in to both the conservative movement and the Republican Party, and indicative of the conflicts and compromises animating the joint party and movement. Before Donald Trump, the annual gathering of conservatives included different interests making claims on conservatism (Nguyen, 2018). In 2016, then-candidate Trump spurned the conference because the speaking slot came with time limits and the requirement to answer questions (Bash and Kopan, 2016). In both 2019 and 2020, President Trump's firm grasp of the Republican Party and the conservative movement has been evident: so-called "Never-Trumpers" are no longer invited as the movement has coalesced behind his masthead.

This paper analyzes the function of political identity within the conservative move-

¹Sebastian Gorka is a conservative political analyst, podcast host, and former advisor to the Trump administration who is also a spokesperson for Fish Oil company ReliefFactor.

²Brandon Straka is a conservative activist who founded the #WalkAway social media campaign to encourage voters to leave the Democratic party.

³Turning Point USA (TPUSA) is a non-profit organization with the stated mission to "identify, educate, train, and organize students to promote the principles of freedom, free markets, and limited government."

ment by evaluating how deeply engaged conservatives who attend the annual meeting perceive and define conservatism and what it means to be an American. I use a qualitative approach to understanding political identity among engaged conservatives, attending CPAC in 2019 and 2020 to conduct interviews, participant observation, and field an original survey. I make no claims to generalize these findings to Americans more broadly, but this research is nevertheless useful for understanding the contemporary conservative movement. By attending the conference, I spoke directly with core members of President Trump’s base which gives insight into the messaging and issues that animate the Trump-era conservative movement. In this paper, I argue that strong conservatives perceive their American identity to be inherently tied to their conservative identity. This has a number of political implications: language evoking the nation can be used to divide between “us” and “them,” and the stakes of political elections can be tied to a more fundamental battle over the meaning of American identity.

2 Literature Review

While CPAC is an ideological project, its close ties with the Republican party make it an important function of the modern party ecosystem. The two party system is a defining feature of American political life, and thus parties are characterized in a number of ways. Parties solve collective action problems for both citizens and elected politicians—it is much easier to accomplish policy changes with the institutional backing of a party, and easier to understand vote choice within the context of parties (Aldrich, 1995). Another view suggests

that parties are solely interested in gaining power and therefore choose policies based on what will attract the median voter to obtain a plurality of votes and therefore win elections (Downs, 1957). Alternatively, parties can be viewed as collections of interest groups and activists who are seeking to capture the government in order to further their interests (Bawn et al., 2012). CPAC provides space for interest groups and activists with shared conservative commitments to exert pressure on the existing party system.

Because parties are central to American politics, partisan identification one of the central organizing principles of political attitudes in the United States. Partisan identification is developed in early life, usually influenced by parents' partisan identification, generally stable throughout adulthood, and tends to shape other political opinions (Lewis-Beck, 2008). Even events like scandals, recessions, and landslide elections do little to shake the stability of party ID in American voters (Green et al., 2002). Those who attend CPAC are generally strong Republican identifiers with stable commitments to conservative values.

Differences between parties have consistently grown in recent years. The Republican party is increasingly characterized as an ideological movement with supporters who favor ideological purity, while the Democratic party is a coalition of different social groups for whom purity would be divisive (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016). In congress, interparty conflict is expressed on a spectrum from liberal to conservative, which reflects the ideological heterogeneity of the Democrats and decreasing moderation of the Republicans (McCarty et al., 2016). For regular Americans, this results in fewer independents, more party loyalty and more straight ticket voting (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016).

Another effect is that partisan identification is increasingly felt to be a social identity. As parties split cleanly along racial, religious, and cultural divisions, the identification with party becomes more social and changes how voters think and feel about their political opponents (Mason, 2018). Many Americans also feel a strong identification with the nation which is similarly tied to other social divisions like race, place, and class. This identity is rooted in principles that are abstract and sometimes contradictory like individualism, small government, strong work ethic, equal opportunity, and freedom (Schildkraut, 2014). Conservative attendees of CPAC make claims on these principles which results in a sharp line between “us” and “them.”

Parties and ideologies are increasingly polarized in American politics while becoming more aligned: ideologies serve as the basis for political parties and exert control over the core values and principles of each party (Noel, 2013). The American Conservative Union is representative of this, serving an important role in Republican Party politics since the 1970s. CPAC, the annual conference, acts as a meeting ground for different interests within the conservative movement to come together and build a coalition in part motivated by opposition to modern liberalism (Parker, 2015). Conservative media elites similarly positioned themselves in opposition to “liberal media bias” as early as the 1940s with alternative publishing companies, radio broadcasts, and news platforms (Hemmer, 2016). Two major players in Hemmer’s narrative, Regnery Publishing and the National Review, continue to have a major presence at CPAC to this day.

Race is another fundamental organizing principle of American politics that is implicated in contemporary partisan and ideological divisions, having long been tied to the party

system. Many scholars argue that the current alignment of parties and political interests is fundamentally tied to positions on racial policy. One view holds that mass issue realignment in the mid-20th century was shaped by elites and population replacement that ultimately resulted in the tight linkage of racial attitudes and political ideology (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). Another narrative suggests that state parties, activists, and rank-and-file Congressmen drove racial issues to the top of the political agenda, forcing national political leaders to carve out a stance on racial issues that had previously been avoided and cemented the association of the Democratic party with racial liberalism (Schickler, 2016). In both accounts, the 1964 Civil Rights act stands out as a defining moment for race in the American party system. Despite the reality of some black republicans pushing for a broader racial agenda on the right, most African Americans today vote based on racial group interests which are at least marginally better represented by the Democratic Party (Rigueur, 2016; Dawson, 1994). However, this representation is often more symbolic than substantive: even the first black president neglected the core concerns of the black community despite achieving historic electoral victory with the help of unprecedented minority support (Harris, 2012). The figure of President Barack Obama on the American political scene ultimately served to further racialize partisan and ideological divisions. While race has long structured public opinion on a wide range of policy positions, it is increasingly consequential for how Americans think about ostensibly non-racial policy realms like health care (Tesler, 2012).

Race in contemporary public opinion is shaped by the expression of socially undesirable racial attitudes through non-racial language. This racial prejudice is conceptualized as based not on objection to minorities on racial grounds but on minority violations of core

American principles like individualism and hard work which shapes subsequent policy positions on things like welfare and affirmative action (Kinder and Sanders, 1996). These policies in particular are important because they reveal how race influences who is perceived as a true citizen and is deserving of government aid. This more subtle expression of racial animus, termed racial resentment, has been steadily increasing in significance since the late 1980s, associated with a range of policy positions about government services (Enders and Scott, 2018). Some evidence suggests that Obama's presidency catalyzed a return of old fashioned racism among white Americans along partisan lines (Tesler, 2013).

Partisan identification and political ideology are increasingly comparable in American politics, and both continue to be powerfully shaped by race. These political attitudes are often expressed through principles of the American ethos including individualism, liberty, and hard work. Attendees of the Conservative Political Action Conference with strong Republican party identification and ideological commitments to conservatism both perceive and express their identity with American values.

3 Research Design

Political Scientists who study public opinion usually rely on large scale survey data sets to understand what regular Americans think about politics. This does not capture the whole picture as Americans have little ideological constraint (Converse, 1964) and answer survey questions based on passing fancies (Zaller, 1992). Recent studies have focused on sampling using online surveys, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, and found that they are

reliable sources of data although they tend to be more liberal on average than the population (Clifford et al., 2016; Lovett et al., 2018). Instead, I propose a qualitative approach to understanding public opinion. When researching public opinion and political identity among a specific subset, in this case conservatives, there is value in speaking directly to members of the subset, despite the ultimate limitations for population level inferences.

The qualitative data collection for this project took place over two years of attending the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). I conducted in-person semi-structured interviews with CPAC attendees in both 2019 and 2020. Interviews were generally brief, lasting between 5 and 35 minutes total. I recruited respondents who attended the conference by introducing myself as a researcher studying the conservative movement. Recruitment was non-random as most attendees that participated in interviews were standing alone or with just a few others in the main hallway of the conference or in the exhibit hall. The interviews were open-ended but followed three main topic branches: first, how to understand and define conservatism; second, questions about political and social identities; and finally, how to understand American identity and define what it is to be an American.

In 2020, I introduced an online survey using Qualtrics to supplement my in-person interviews. I passed out QR codes to attendees of CPAC 2020 who were gathered in larger groups or declined to speak for an interview. Only 23 attendees completed the survey, which they took on their smart phones during the conference. This survey asked respondents about their political identities and asked them to choose in several cases whether one is more important than another (i.e. conservative versus republican). I also asked respondents to choose the top three values that they see as most central to the conservative movement.

Finally, I asked respondents to choose between classical conservative values and Trump-era conservative values. Participation in the online survey and in-person interviews was entirely voluntary. Data collection for this project included 35 semi-structured interviews, 23 online survey responses, and participant observation from 5 total conference days over the 2019 and 2020 annual meetings of the American Conservative Union.

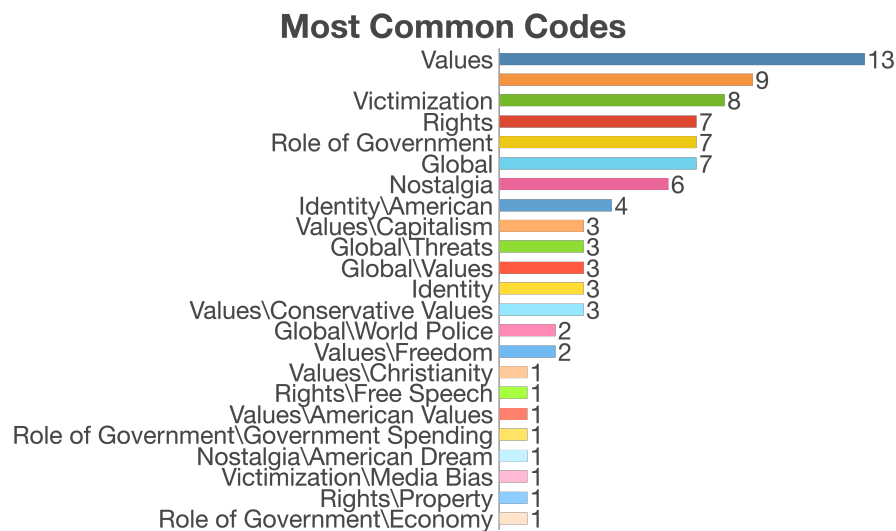
Each of the interviews were digitally recorded with consent and I transcribed them myself with the aid of an artificial intelligence software. Conducting the transcription and coding myself was an essential part of the analysis as it allowed me to capture information like tone of voice and other data that would be missed from reading the transcript alone. I used the constant comparative method of coding (Glaser, 1965) that favors the development of a theory based on a priori coding combined with integration of themes through inductive coding. The a priori themes that I developed were based on the structure of the interview protocol and are as follows: values, identity, role of government, rights and privileges, and defining “American.” The inductive themes build upon the a priori themes and were developed throughout the analytic process.

Inductive themes

- Values
 - Freedom, both economic and individual.
 - Conservative values with an emphasis on family values, diversity of thought, and Christianity.
 - Market values including references to capitalism, socialism, and free trade. -Political values like nationalism, patriotism, and populism.
- Identity
 - Conservative and/or Republican identity
 - American identity
 - Regional or ancestral identities.

- Role of Government
 - Size of Government and enforcement duties, rule of law.
 - Global role addressing immigration, foreign aid, “world police,” and spreading values of Christianity, humanitarianism, and capitalism.
 - Protection from threats, maintenance of safety, supporting the military.
- Rights and Privileges
 - Political rights like voting, free speech, movement, and safety.
 - Economic rights like capitalism and property.
- Defining “American”
 - American Exceptionalism
 - American dream: hard work, individual responsibility, melting pot
 - Nostalgia-based definitions referencing constitutionalism and the founding fathers.

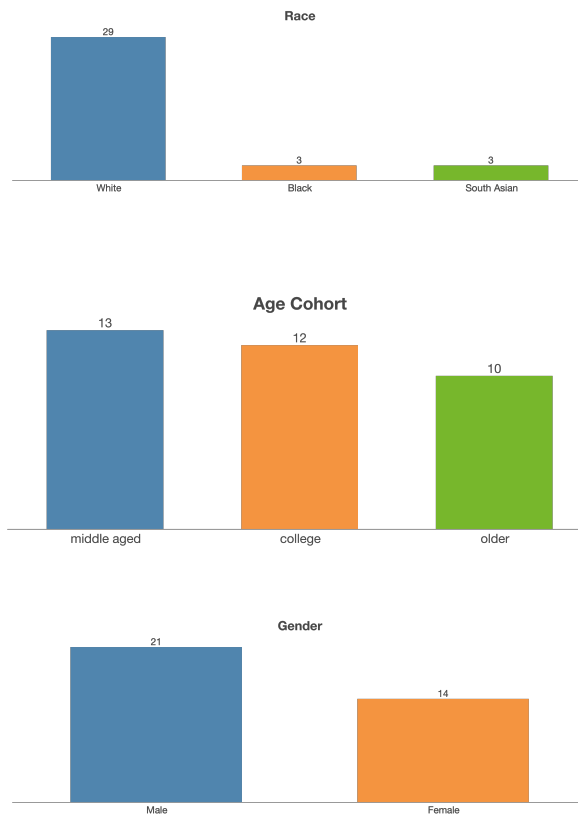
Due to resource constraints, I undertook all of the coding myself using MAXQDA software for qualitative data analysis, making at least two passes through the data. Ideally I would have another researcher apply the same a priori and inductive coding schemes to the data to calculate an inter-coder reliability score as a test of consistency and validity. The most common codes across both years followed a similar pattern with a strong emphasis on political values that animate conservatism and Americanism, commitment to ideas on rights, the role of government, and a sense of political identity.



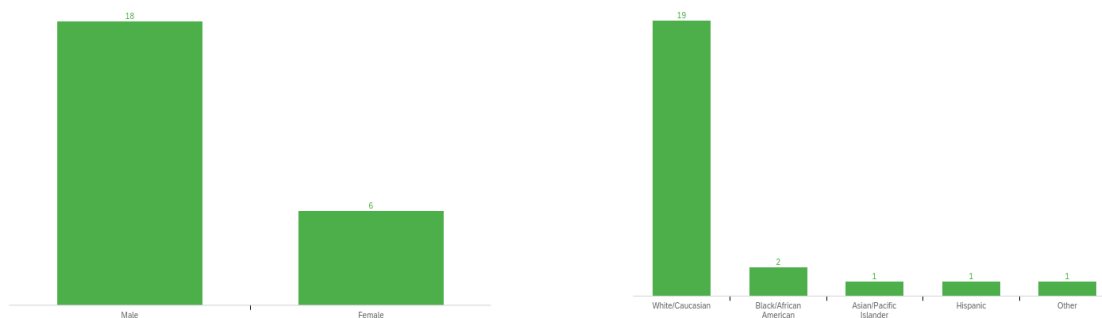
4 Data

4.1 Summary Statistics

According to the American Conservative Union, there were 19,000 attendees at CPAC in 2019 and nearly 20,000 attendees in 2020. I do not have access to demographic data for conference attendees as a whole. Attendees that I interviewed were mostly white and generally older. interviewer effects could be to blame for the gender breakdown in respondents: while I approached as many women as men at the conference, fewer women consented to participate.



The Qualtrics survey administered during the conference in 2020 had similar demographic characteristics to the in-person interview sample, although it was substantially younger. Of 23 respondents, only 5 were over the age of 35. This is likely in part due to the way the survey was distributed—through scanning a QR code that linked to the Qualtrics survey on the web, a technology that is not particularly accessible to older respondents.



4.2 Analysis

What defines conservative identity? I asked both interviewees and survey respondents to indicate the components of conservative identity that they find most important. During the interviews, many respondents expressed that they believe their American identity to be linked to their conservative identity through adherence to the same core values and principles.

Individualism in particular is central to how respondents define both conservatism and Americanism, often expressed in tandem with Christian values. A college aged white male in 2020 expressed that “the number one responsibility of the government is to ensure Liberty. Liberty doesn’t come from the government. It comes from God.” An older white female respondent in 2019 highlighted these same values, saying “the country protects the

individual. They think the individuals are made in the sacred image of god and so my body is protected, my freedom of speech is protected, my property is protected, I can say what I want [...] freedom to set a goal and achieve it, and freedom to worship however you want.”

While individualism and Christianity are important for the conservative movement, it is also what some respondents felt makes conservatism uniquely and inherently American. In 2019, a college-aged white male listed values that are central to conservatism which included “Christianity, Judeo-Christian values, that baseline, and the rule of law and the constitution ... you know individualism versus collectivism, maximizing freedom for the individual.” These values are not inherently specific to conservatism—the constitution belongs to all Americans—but they are closely held among strong conservatives. The perception that American values are in fact conservative values was common among interviewees. An older white male in 2020 argued that “conservative principles to me are American principles. I mean, you’re conserving the principles that were established when this country was formed.” These principles are imbued with a level of nostalgia for the founding fathers, but persist as central guidelines for the contemporary conservative movement.

In the online survey, I asked respondents to pick what they think are the three most important values to the conservative movement. Their responses mirror what interview participants said, prizing individual freedom and small government as well as Christianity. The top professed important value is capitalism, likely because the conservative movement is positioning itself in opposition to socialism as an economic system.

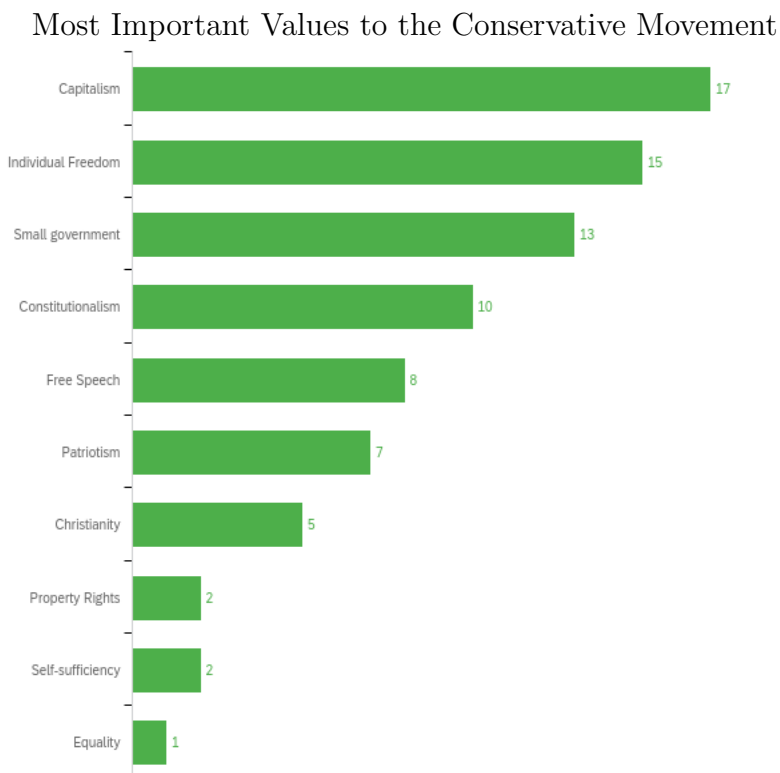
Literature about contemporary racial attitudes in public opinion suggests that these

opinions are expressed in ostensibly race neutral language due to social desirability and instead expressed through violation of core American principles such as individualism and hard work that are important for CPAC. Very few interviewees mentioned race directly through the course of my research, instead opting to speak about racial others in masked language. [example] One black female interviewee spoke about race as something used by liberals to keep blacks down: “quote”. Her commitment to conservatism is based in resistance to this pigeon-holing of the black community by the political system.

Race was also mentioned through the lens of victimization. Several attendees acknowledged the racist and white supremacist individuals who operate under the broad umbrella of conservatism, but indicated that they saw themselves as different. Quote about nazis. Perhaps because of this association, explicit mentions of race were cause for concern for some attendees. One survey respondent expressed displeasure that I included racial demographics and racial identity questions in the brief survey, saying that it should not matter.

One black woman attending CPAC stated that her political ideology is shaped by the fact that liberals “tell black people that they are. they are less than. and, you know, you poor thing so let me build this welfare structure because you can’t take care of yourself. it’s very condescending and paternalistic.” She believes that being conservative means being empowered to have individual liberty, but that it sets her apart. She added “personal responsibility is a big Republican tenet, and it’s not well shared in my community. I wish I could say different, I wish I could tell you that personal responsibility was you know, a pillar of the black community.”

Some white CPAC interview respondents were self-consciously aware of the lack of diversity among participants. In 2020, an older white man said “I’m asking myself why aren’t more minorities here and yeah, that concerns me a little bit. I haven’t seen so many Latinos. I see some Asians. I don’t see any blacks here and that, that concerns me.” But still others believe the lack of diversity is a product of being painted with a broad brush: “people call conservatives and republicans racist and homophobic, and xenophobic, and Nazis, and no, we are just regular Americans.” Conservatives sometimes feel persecuted for their beliefs, saying “now your political view is kind of like a scarlet R on your chest if you’re a conservative or republican, people assume that you’re racist.” These conservatives believe that they are already engaging in a battle for the meaning of America, and they are being unfairly construed as racists because of their support for small government, individualism, work ethic, and Donald Trump.



Multiple respondents perceive Donald Trump to have a role in making the core conservative values of individualism and freedom important to the Republican party. An older white male attendee from 2020 said “I mean, until Trump came around, there was little conservatism [sic] being reflected in Republican policies and activities and, and Republican platforms. But now the president has reinvigorated conservative principles. And that’s why you’re seeing so much enthusiasm and support and love for the man.” People who attend CPAC are strong supporters of President Trump and see him as a leader who highlights their deeply held values of individualism, freedom, and Christianity and makes them central to being American especially in contrast with President Obama. A middle-aged white male argued that “the predecessor of the president Trump diminished our stand in the world as a country and basically started this socialist movement here with the healthcare that he passed and all that. So thank goodness that Donald Trump got elected and is our president because he’s trying to, as he said all these years, make America great again.” However, many respondents recognized Trump’s vulnerability on race, suggesting that people who use his remarks as justification for racism are a few bad apples and not indicative of the conservative movement writ large.

When conservative identity and American identity are synonymous, it becomes possible to draw boundaries of American membership based on ideological and partisan divides. In interrogating what it means to be American, what is perceived to be un-American is also revealed. Many respondents argued that Democrats, liberals, and “leftists” are un-American because they do not show support for President Trump and symbols of the United States like the flag and the Constitution, and core values like individualism and freedom. Even a

self-professed moderate attendee in 2020 stated that “as a movement, the left has moved away from the idea of individual sovereignty and individual Liberty to a more group dynamic, which is I think, kind of anathema to the American cause.” These values are central to the contemporary expression of racial attitudes, so drawing boundaries of membership based on adherence to these values implicitly creates racial membership qualifications.

The strong correspondence between conservative identity and American identity also means that Republican and conservative political elites can frame political conflict as identitarian in nature rather than disagreements about policies, processes, and the role of government. This is particularly evident in the messaging around socialism at CPAC and the attitudes of respondents about socialism. While the 2019 conference theme was “Keep America Great” as a way to highlight what the Trump administration had accomplished, the 2020 theme served as a call to action: “America vs. Socialism.”

Even in 2019, some respondents expressed fears about the direction of the country based on the diminishing importance of individualism and freedom, putting socialism in the same breath. A college-aged South Asian interviewee expressed these fears, saying that “economic freedom is the most important for me and I think that should be an American principle not a conservative principle but in today’s age it has become a conservative principle because most Democratic party members are turning against capitalism and supporting socialism.” Similarly, a college-aged white female worried that “the value of hard work has been definitely lost and definitely especially the growth of socialism, I think not what it used to be at all [...] so kind of nerve wracking.” This plays into ideas about laziness in opposition to individualism and self-sufficiency that not only animates conservative values but justifies

racial prejudice against “lazy” welfare recipients and minorities.

In 2020, America vs. socialism was more pronounced. A middle-aged black attendee felt the call to action: “when I think of my country, which I do love, I will make a thing of it getting into the hands of socialist mongers who wish to destroy it.” Another attendee, a middle-aged white man, felt similarly that socialism would spell the end of America, arguing that it had already begun to degrade his home state: “we lead the lead every negative statistical category, and we’re last in every positive statistical category. It is the result of the progressive liberal, socialist communist agenda. And we’re sick of it.”

5 Conclusion

The Conservative Political Action Conference represents only a small portion of the American electorate, but those who travel to National Harbor, Maryland each year and pay to attend are intensely engaged in politics. These attendees comprise the most ardent of President Trump’s supporters, and therefore present an optimal sample for studying the conservative movement seen through the eyes of regular Americans. Based on two years of fieldwork attending CPAC, I found that most of these attendees perceive their conservative identity and American identity to be overlapping, animated by principles of individualism, freedom, and in some cases Christianity. This perception of conservatism and Americanism as synonymous means that conservatives and movement elites can use their political identity to draw boundaries of membership around what it means to be American. This is particularly important as the 2020 general election approaches and conservative and Republican elites

can frame the election as a battle for the very meaning of America.

Just a week after CPAC 2020 wrapped up, the American Conservative Union sent out an email blast to inform members that a VIP conference attendee was diagnosed with a confirmed case of COVID-19. This was just the beginning of the novel coronavirus outbreak in the United States, fundamentally altering daily life and the 2020 election cycle. Responses to the pandemic have been highly politicized. Preliminary evidence suggests that exposure to conservative Fox News television shows *Hannity* and *Tucker Carlson Tonight* is associated with more COVID-19 cases and deaths in the early stages of the pandemic (Bursztyn et al., 2020). Statewide responses to the pandemic have been largely shaped by the partisan leaning of the Governor—states with Democratic governors have issued shelter in place orders and taken precautions to slow the spread, while many Republican governors have undertaken minimal measures or none at all (Adolph et al., 2020). Individual behavioral responses to these restrictions are also tied to partisanship, with Democratic counties reducing movement more than Republican counties (Grossman et al., 2020). Protests of the shutdown orders are driven by citizens who feel that such drastic measures are fundamental violations of American principles and especially their individual rights. The American Conservative Union gave the 2020 CPAC the theme of “America versus Socialism” to frame the upcoming election as part of a larger conflict over the meaning of America, and COVID-19 is just the latest battleground.

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