

Paper Workshop

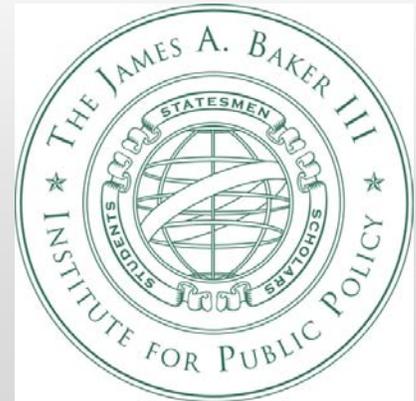
By James W. Phillips, Rice University Sociology PhD Student

On Friday November 4, 2011, the Religion and Public Life Program co-sponsored a roundtable discussion with Amy Binder, an associate professor in the Sociology department of the University of California at San Diego. Her presentation addressed work from her forthcoming book *Creating Conservatism: How Campuses Shape Political Discourse and Style*, co-authored with UCSD graduate student Kate Wood. Binder described the role of culture in shaping the styles of conservative political discourse within two American universities. By using ethnographic research comparing a western public university and an eastern private university, she found that conservative college students' stances on various political issues are similar, yet their styles of expressing those stances is quite different. Conservative students at a western state university use a "provocative style" which is characterized by more sensational and public expressions. Students at an eastern private university express conservatism through "civility norms" which include more interpersonal discussion led by civil discourse.

As a student in the Rice Sociology PhD program, I was most impressed by Binder's rationale for these different styles of discourse. At the western public university, the environment is less cohesive. Students often commute to campus, do not interact together as much, and overall "have a weak set of community norms." For example, a more depersonalized faculty-student ratio and a lottery system of class registration also add to the notion of student distrust of faculty and higher education in general. These factors, together with a "fun school" culture, promote a system of provocative, populist attention-seeking behavior among conservative students.

At the eastern private university, students often had a future career in mind. For example, one student Binder interviewed said that promoting an anti-abortion bake sale "just doesn't look good on the CV." Rather, such students were more likely to do things like publish newsletter editorials on a conservative issue. Also characteristic of a private elite university, the students were more interested in knowing and interacting with one another, often to the end of advantageous social networking. This and having more access to available faculty who engage in professional discourse and experience more seminar-style classes further reinforced norms of civil dialogue.

From Binder's presentation and from subsequent interactions with her during the other events of this special week, I learned more of the power of social structures in shaping human behavior, and in this case, political expression. Indeed, "Campuses create pathways to expressions of conservatism."



Upcoming Events

Our programming theme for the Spring 2012 semester will be "Religion and Politics." We will have various events on the Rice University campus and in the greater Houston community that will discuss topics related to this theme. Our first event, a panel on "Religion in the 2012 Elections" will be held at the Baker Institute for Public Policy on January 25, 2012.