

ELECTION 2016

College Republican Chapters Are Trying to Keep Trump From Tearing Them Apart

By Arielle Martinez

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JOE MAHONEY, GETTY IMAGES

Donald Trump spoke last month at the U. of Colorado at Colorado Springs. But with the fall semester starting and the November election fast approaching, College Republican chapters on other campuses are divided over the nominee, withholding endorsements, focusing on down-ballot races, and sometimes even splintering.

It was a familiar scene: Students in the Pennsylvania State University chapter of the College Republicans, returning from summer break, gathered on Monday for the first meeting of the new academic year. In past presidential-election years, members would've discussed how they planned to organize in support of the party's nominee.

But this year, Penn State's chapter had voted against endorsing Donald J. Trump for president. And that extraordinary step did not sit well with everyone. Members of a rival group, We Are for Trump (or, as they are listed in the university's student-organization directory, the Bull-Moose Party), arrived at the meeting to condemn the College Republican chapter's refusal to endorse Mr. Trump.

The Trump supporters at first called for the College Republicans to reconsider the decision. Then they demanded that the chapter's leaders be removed from their positions. Both motions were rejected by the College Republicans' membership.

All told, the gathering was "a highly polarized, highly politicized, highly contentious meeting where not even a motion could be submitted without an objection for anyone," according to Michael Straw, the chapter's president.

The national College Republicans organization has chapters on more than 1,800 campuses, according to its website. Now, with the fall semester starting and the November election fast approaching, the candidacy of Mr. Trump has proved a massive elephant in the room. The nominee's unpopularity on many campuses has prompted chapters to take actions that, four years ago, would have been unthinkable: withholding endorsements, focusing on down-ballot races, and sometimes even splintering.

“We hope that College Republicans will support Republicans that they believe in, up and down the ticket,” said Alexandra Smith, chair of the College Republican National Committee, in a written statement. “With respect to endorsements and grass-roots support, there is more than one way to be a College Republican, and we leave it to our states and chapters to govern themselves in a way they best see fit.”



Michael Straw, president of the Penn State College Republicans, described a recent meeting of the group as “highly polarized, highly politicized, highly contentious.”

Members of We Are for Trump, some of whom are also members of the College Republicans at Penn State, took issue with how the Penn State College Republicans had come up with a stance on Mr. Trump. The chapter sent an online poll to its voting members during the summer.

Mr. Straw said that 65 percent of the voting members filled out the poll, and of those, 72 percent did not support an endorsement for Mr. Trump. We Are for Trump asserted that by not staging an in-person vote, the College Republicans had violated its constitution.

“Our goal is to hold the government and the university and basically all large institutions accountable,” said Christopher Baker, the spokesman for We Are for Trump.

Mr. Trump’s campaign did not respond to *The Chronicle’s* request for comment.

‘Vote Your Conscience’

Several Republican groups on college campuses have drawn national attention this summer for releasing statements detailing their stances on their party’s candidate. The Yale and Notre Dame College Republicans endorsed him; the Harvard Republican Club did not.

[Donald Trump and Higher Ed](#)

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But some chapters are trying to avoid alienating current and potential members by not only not taking a position on Mr. Trump but also refocusing their campaigning away from the presidential election.

Last week the George Washington University College Republicans did something it hadn't done before: It released a [statement](#) saying that it would not take a definitive stand on Mr. Trump.

“We’re supposed to be a forum for College Republicans on GW’s campus to feel comfortable to discuss their various beliefs,” said Allison Coukos, the chapter’s spokeswoman, “and to not be creating and fostering an environment where people feel like their views are being marginalized or ignored.”

The Princeton University chapter of the College Republicans also released a [statement](#) this month with a neutral stance on Mr. Trump.

Sofia Gallo, the chapter’s vice president, said the club had felt pressure to take some sort of stand after their counterparts at other Ivy League institutions released their own statements on Mr. Trump.

“We thought, given all the controversy in this election, it was better for people to just — as Ted Cruz, who went to Princeton, said — vote your conscience,” Ms. Gallo said.

Ms. Coukos, Ms. Gallo, and Mr. Straw all said that their chapters don’t usually issue endorsement statements because it’s assumed they support the party’s nominee.

“In the Republican Party, it’s very vocal, the anti-Trump support, which you didn’t see as much in the party when you had Mitt Romney or you had John McCain” as nominees, Ms. Coukos said. “And because our membership was so vocal about this, we felt it was very important to make this position known.”

The George Washington chapter's leaders decided to clarify its stance on Mr. Trump after the university's College Democrats [slammed](#) the College Republicans for [acknowledging Mr. Trump's nomination](#) on the College Republicans Facebook page. The College Democrats mistook that acknowledgment for an endorsement, Ms. Coukos said.

Splinter Groups

The statements from the Princeton and George Washington chapters both said that they would focus on advocating for core conservative values and campaigning for Republican candidates in local, state, and congressional elections.

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"We want to do debates. We want to do panels. We want to go on trips to the Capitol building," Ms. Coukos said. "So even if our membership doesn't want to be discussing the national election, we're going to make sure that they're engaged politically and civically."

The Princeton chapter is now focusing on recruiting new members. Ms. Gallo said the group had sent emails to freshmen who expressed an interest in joining the chapter at Princeton Preview, an annual event for admitted students. The chapter also plans a fall social and events centered on congressional campaigns.

“Hopefully the people who are political will join us anyway, regardless of the divisiveness, but you just never know how that’s going to affect things this year,” Ms. Gallo said.

Several members of Yale’s chapter have left the group because of its endorsement and formed new groups, including Yale New Republicans and Yale Undergraduate Conservatives Against Trump, but Ms. Coukos and Ms. Gallo said that they hadn’t seen such divisions in their own groups.

Mr. Straw said that he doesn’t want the Penn State chapter to split in two. He quoted Condoleezza Rice, the former secretary of state who is now a professor at Stanford. In a speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention, she said: “It does not matter where you came from; it matters where you are going.”

“It doesn’t matter if we support Donald Trump or not,” Mr. Straw added. “It matters that we’re all either Republicans or conservatives, and that we’re looking to promote conservative or Republican values in the end.”

A version of this article appeared in the [September 9, 2016, issue](#).

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STUDENT LIFE



