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COLLEGE STUDENT GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS AND THE ESPOUSAL OF NEOLIBERALISM IN CAMPAIGN AND PLATFORM DISCOURSE

Michael A. Goodman, The University of Texas at Austin
Sarah Simi Cohen, The University of Texas at Austin
Alexa Lee Arndt, University of Georgia
Ben Parks, University of Maryland, College Park

In this critical discourse analysis, we examined 18 college student government campaign platforms from 9 institutions in the state of Florida. We used neoliberalism as a conceptual framework to examine platforms and, in particular, the way(s) students running for office described neoliberal agendas, policies, and thought. Findings revealed concern for student finances and increasing student fees, proposed private sector solutions, an unacknowledged political climate, communications trends, and notable differences by institution type.

Each year, college students launch multifaceted campaigns in an effort to serve their student body as elected student government officials (Falvey, 1952; Goodman & Briscoe, 2022; Klopf, 1960). Because student government leaders have significant power on a college campus (Goodman, 2021; Klopf, 1960; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011) and student government is a microcosm of U.S. politics and post-college public office (Avalos, 2019; Goodman, 2022a, 2022c), it is important to understand the role elections play in furthering students' involvement in university operations. Given the range of issues found on college campuses, it is not uncommon for students to campaign on espoused values that are neoliberal and capitalist in nature. For this study, we understand neoliberalism as a predominant Western ideology that seeks to uphold the privatization of goods and resources while enforcing individual responsibility and capitalism as the prioritization of "free markets," increased labor, and "consumer choice" (Museus & LePeau, 2019, p. 2).

Given that higher education is inherently a political enterprise (e.g., see Parker, 2019), we approached this research with an understanding that college student government, too, is anchored in politics and with related questions about non/partisanship and neutrality (Goodman, 2022b). For instance, early examples of student government and class councils were created to mirror the U.S. political system (May, 2010). Much like the political system, student governments have multiple branches of governance (May, 2010), vote on contentious initiatives and university matters (Goodman, 2022b; Goodman et al., 2021; Terrell & Cuyjet, 1994), and even have a seat on university boards of trustees (Lozano & Hughes, 2017; Templeton et al., 2018). To guide this study, we enlisted the following research questions:

1. What ideas and efforts do student government candidates espouse in campaign and election materials?

2. How do student government candidates describe neoliberal agendas, policies, or thought in campaign and election materials? How are student government candidates furthering a campus's neoliberal agenda, policy, or thought?

This study adds to the literature on student government, and, more importantly, scholarship about campaigns and elections. To further ground our study, we offer the following literature review on undergraduate student government.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student government is a form of collegiate involvement where students maintain significant influence on campus (Goodman, 2021; May, 2010; Miles, 2010, 2011; Miles et al., 2008). Student government presidents, specifically, are often afforded heightened access to administrators and lawmakers, campus committee work, and decision-making processes in university governance (Goodman, 2021; Goodman et al., 2021; Hardaway et al., 2022; Jittrikawiphol, 2020; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Smith et al., 2016; Templeton et al., 2018), as well as leadership and skill development (Goodman, 2021; Klopf, 1960; Kuh & Lund, 1994; Smith, 2018). While student body executives have been researched in different ways, there is scant recent literature on student government campaigns and elections specifically.

One notable thread among the limited volume of student government literature concerns low voter turnout. In 2018, Templeton, et al. found that, on average, 22.1% of students vote in student body elections. The low number of students voting in the campus democratic process invites questions about the legitimacy of shared governance (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). Miles and Miller (2006) even suggested that student governance mirrors faculty governance in terms of participation, election turnout, diversity, and decision acceptance. While student government has the potential to play a significant role in shaping student life, conflicts like internal power struggles, apathy, and disorganization often take up time and attention of officers (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). One challenge is that many issues taken up by student governments, particularly those impacting students, can span many student government administrations over multiple years (e.g., new buildings on campus, raising student fees) (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006).

Low numbers might also bring to the forefront the question of what student governments actually do. Smith et al. (2016) described the work of student government to be mostly comprised of efforts involving student fees and allocations. Goodman (2022c) suggested that student fee allocations and work with major campus budgets were helpful preparation for roles in post-college public office. Goodman (2021) also found student government presidents spent time doing committee work alongside administrators (e.g., hiring, fees, building construction). More recently, student government work has involved an increased focus on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and in some instances, positions students against administrators who have incongruent values as those espoused by representative leadership (Goodman et al., 2021; Goodman & Briscoe, 2022). For example, Goodman et al. (2021) described the many ways student governments address issues of social justice in local, state, and international contexts, from Emory University student government allocating funds for copies of "The New Jim Crow" in 2020 to the University of Minnesota student government president calling on the institution to sever ties with the Minneapolis Police Department after the murder of George Floyd. As such, many questions about neutrality exist for student government, as well as an inquiry around the role politics and partisanship play in these spaces (Goodman, 2022b).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Though a number of conceptual frameworks could have shaped our thinking (i.e., democracy, liberalism), neoliberalism, both a political and economic ideology and paradigm for conceptualizing U.S. policies and agendas throughout the West since the early 1980s (Duggan, 2003), was selected. Duggan (2003) posited that the global rise of neoliberalism in the West happened "primarily in the U.S., and secondarily in Europe, in response to global changes that challenged the dominance of Western institutions" (p. X11). This change resulted from the lack of functionality of Keynesian economic policies that were considered to "take away" individuals' freedom to be their own entrepreneurs. It brought forward liberal social policies such as the New Deal (Raimondi, 2012, p. 41).

Neoliberalism became prominent in the U.S. through the Reagan administration as a wave of thought that prompted dangerous ideals promoting individual, competitive work under the guise of meritocracy, resulting in social stratification (Maher & Aquanno, 2018). According to Duggan (2003), Reagan used neoliberalism as a way to push against the former Keynesian policies, like the New Deal, to lessen the government's responsibility

in social welfare programs while cutting taxes for the rich and restructuring the K-20 education system from a public to a private good. Neoliberalism seeks to uphold capitalism through interlocking systems of oppression, highlighting the ableist, classist, cis-heteronormative, and white supremacist underpinnings of our systems (Duggan, 2003; Kalish Blair, 2016; Museus & LePeau, 2019). Maher and Aquanno (2018) identified how U.S. education systems are organized and suggested that it is "not merely a state policy paradigm or corporate asset portfolio, but rather a trend in the institutional organization of power" (p. 33); this speaks to the ways hegemonic socialization impacts and effects neoliberalism within higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions use neoliberalism as a tool to recreate hegemonic norms, often stifling work that falls out of line within these ideals (Museus & LePeau, 2019). Student governments, specifically, are not void of neoliberal effects. They echo the political system in the U.S. as well as the politics of higher education (e.g., see Avalos, 2019; Goodman et al., 2021). Aside from political ideologies, student government candidates are tasked with navigating their college's neoliberal sphere. Furthermore, student government presidents have a large task of living up to campaign promises, which, as seen in the broader political context, can be problematized, as neoliberal agendas appear to be more promise than action (Duggan, 2003; Museus & LePeau, 2019). We use neoliberalism as a framework to uncover how student government elections are used as tools to further perpetuate the ideals neoliberalism espouses and examine how students are affected and used as tools of neoliberal agendas.

METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by critical discourse analysis (CDA) tenants, which focuses on how language constitutes and reproduces relations of power and inequality (Blackledge, 2012). As such, our work and analyses critically examine how student government campaign platforms name or fail to name oppressive systems they are attempting to address in both explicit and implicit ways. Fairclough (2010) described, "Discourse is shaped by structures, but also contributes to shaping and reshaping them, to reproducing and transforming them" (p. 59). It mattered to us to explore the relationship between ideology and language (Fairclough, 2010), as well as what the tickets (claimed to) say and (hoped to) do (Graham, 2011). To do this through the lens of CDA, we also draw from Woodside-Jiron's (2011) work on CDA and policy-making and policy documents; the author posited, "Critical analyses of policy include inquiry into underlying issues of power and ideology embedded within the definition of the perceived problem and solution" (p. 155). Specifically, we attempt to show how power is generated, as well as the role of individuals within that power structure (Woodside-Jiron, 2011) in Florida, specifically with neoliberalism in mind.

Florida

Florida as a site is a unique case with a range of institution types and political implications for student government elections. For example, student government presidents in Florida gain a seat on their institution's board of trustees (Lozano & Hughes, 2017; see State of Florida Regulations of the Florida Board of Governors). Further, the relevance of college student government has also bled into large state elections. For example, Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture, Nikki Fried, was student government president at the University of Florida in 2002 (Florida Department of Agriculture, n. d.) and even referred back to that experience while campaigning for Florida Governor (e.g., see Fried, 2021).

Examining student government platform discourse in Florida provides higher education administrators and student government advisors with a better understanding of how students describe challenges on campus and, subsequently, their leadership vision to address those challenges. After all, Florida is the locale of the Parkland High School and PULSE Night Club shootings and the recent "Don't Say Gay" Bill legislation on how schools and workplaces teach about race and identity. These challenges, bedrocks of social "culture wars," are platforms upon which students can campaign and champion, even when doing so gives colleges and universities an "out" from institutional leadership or responsibility–particularly in a state context with a significant level of political discourse.

In 2022, *Politico's* Fineout and Atterbury titled an op-ed declaring Florida as "ground zero for America's 'culture war.'" Such framing is not uncommon in states with extreme political turmoil and state officials legislating

college and university matters. For example, in Idaho, Boise State University leadership rescinded a 2020 land acknowledgment as a part of first-year convocation. The speech, set to be delivered three days before a special budgeting legislative session for higher education, was deemed "too long and too provocative to roll out in a politically precarious climate" (Golden & Berg, 2022, para 5). Similar infringements of academic freedom are not unfamiliar to Floridians; since 2020, Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law various (politically-motivated) pieces of legislation such as the Parental Rights in Education Senate Bill (S.B.) 1834, Stop WOKE Act House Bill 7, and SB 7044 regarding post-tenure reviews in postsecondary education. These recent legislative efforts–intended to remove freedoms–were made possible as the result of conservative stewardship within Florida's government; since 1999, Republicans have controlled the Governorship, House, and Senate.

Methods

In January 2022, the researchers established an approach for this study. We selected Florida as a state context that maintains a politically relevant experience regarding student government (e.g., Lozano & Hughes, 2017). Considering researcher capacity, we engaged in random sampling for seven institutions, in which institutions had an equal chance of being selected as a site (Given, 2008; Marshall, 1996). We organized Florida colleges and universities by "public," "private," and "at large." We then randomly selected five public schools, two private, and two at-large. The two additional at-large schools were selected through purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015) based on one being the largest in the state and one being a private school with a notable athletic conference. Our total sample of nine institutions included religious-affiliated, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and a Historically Black University. We recognize the differing experiences of students based on institution type (e.g., see Harper & Gasman, 2008; Hardaway et al., 2021; Miles, 2010), and yet still believe students more broadly are guided by seeking change on campus–which is reflected in our findings. There were 18 platforms across the nine institutions, with each platform attached to "tickets" of presidential and vice presidential candidates. Nine of these platforms represented "parties," which included a slate of students running together for executive branch positions. One school had an unopposed election.

We created four categories of possible data sources, including platform websites, campus newspapers, other election materials (e.g., transcribed candidate debates), and social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter). We then collected data as a group for one test site in order to demonstrate consistency in collecting publicly available data. Of the 18 platforms, we collected campus newspaper data for 18, social media content for 12, debate transcripts for 9, and website materials for 4. Data were collected from campaign platforms between January and April 2022, and researchers memoed throughout the data collection process, which included reflexivity and follow-up researcher debriefing. Memoing and researcher debriefing meetings strengthened the trustworthiness of our research (Jones et al., 2014).

We engaged with CDA, understanding that meaning is produced in texts and that interpretations are diverse (Fairclough, 2010). To code and analyze, we adopted elements from Ziskin's (2019) analysis approach in that we first read through the materials multiple times individually and coded excerpts (low-inference thematic coding, selection). Specifically, we found meaningful statements across multiple sections of our data to begin the process of further coding and eventual analysis (Ziskin, 2019). As we continued to (re)construct codes across our entire dataset, we memoed and annotated about discourses and styles of the selected excerpts and eventually identified the key themes (Ziskin, 2019) that are presented in a subsequent section. Doing CDA as critical scholars, interpretations can be difficult to convey, and "we need analytical methods that can take [on] multiple meanings and pragmatic structures" (Ziskin, 2019, p. 616). In addition to memoing, we conferred as a research collective at multiple points during coding and analyses, as well as through the interpreting and writing processes.

Positionality

As scholar-practitioners determined to critique current cultural power structures, we approached this research with a range of experience with and exposure to college student government elections. For example, Goodman is a former undergraduate and graduate student government president and has advised and researched student government in multiple capacities over many years. Simi Cohen is a former undergraduate and graduate president of

a queer and trans section of student government and continues to be involved in student government affairs today. Parks is a former undergraduate student government president who advises and researches student government, and Arndt is a former student government advisor who has remained engaged in student government research. None of the researchers have worked in or attended school in Florida, and thus, approached this investigation from an outsider perspective. At the same time, with such rich and diverse experiences with student governance, there becomes an outsider-insider point-of-view that enabled us to do this research with unique intentionality.

As scholar-practitioners, we care deeply about the role of student engagement, leadership, and activism on campus. We are also politically engaged, whole humans involved in our local communities across the United States. As progressive, "left-leaning" people, we acknowledge that we bring passionate views with us into this research. At the same time, we are not "neutral," per se, and rather, have been intentional to hold each other accountable for how we view(ed) data and write about our research. We understand the rapid changes in higher education that force students to take up issues in the absence of the campus (e.g., three of the four authors are doctoral students studying higher education and/or student affairs). Kauffman and Schuster (1994) suggested that student government contributes to student life and features "predictions of the likely impact of the changing student population and the streamlining of the academic enterprise as consumerism and accountability become the watchwords of the 90s" (p. 1). We have each seen this occur through scholarship and practice and wonder–and worry–about the road ahead. As such, we write with practitioners in mind, in that we aim to make our research and writing applicable to the efforts of those on the frontlines of student government and student leadership work in higher education.

Limitations

No study is without limitations, and we know that methods such as these and a location such as Florida do not ensure generalizability across institutions or states. Yet, to generalize is not the purpose of the study. In terms of data collection, we only engaged with publicly available data. For example, an institution may have had a debate; however, if it was unavailable online, we did not include it in our dataset. Further, there may be institutions where some information is kept behind a campus-specific portal, and as such, we did not use that information. As a result, we recognize that there is additional context that we may be missing, such as campus-specific election guidelines on platforms, budgets, and campaigning. In addition, we are unaware of the political leanings of student government advisors or the climate and culture of specific campuses, which almost certainly influence the development of platforms and the availability of materials online. Finally, we are aware that we did not have community college representation in our sample; future studies will include this campus type. Aside from these limitations, we found ourselves immersed in the rich available data, allowing us to interpret these discourse(s) thoroughly and critically.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Our findings identified elements of neoliberal agendas, policies, and thought present in almost every platform and at every institution. Specifically, findings revealed significant concern and attention to student finances in most platforms, but only a few focused on decreased state funding and increasing student fees. In a related way, nearly all campaigns proposed outsourcing and private-sector solutions. A particularly surprising finding was how the political climate in Florida in Spring 2022 went unacknowledged by tickets. We also noted trends in campaign communications, particularly around Instagram. Finally, our findings pointed to notable differences by institution type.

Concern for Student Finances

Of the 18 campaigns, eight explicitly acknowledged concern for student finances in some capacity. Specifically, five tickets campaigned on promises of freezing tuition, finding funding outside their institution for scholarships, and enabling ways to promote institutional scholarships more effectively. Other tickets considered student fees and the increasing utilization of institutional revenue; for example, one ticket promised a "breakdown of [institution's] student fees to give students a better understanding of how their fee dollars are spent," while another simply promised to lower the already existing student activity fee. Two tickets from two different institutions

campaigned on the promise to implement student textbook stipends to offset increasing financial costs. In these instances, student government candidates were tuned into the fiscal realities faced by their peers.

Although eight student government tickets explicitly recognized the financial burden placed on students, ten tickets advocated for increases in institutional services such as counseling, parking, transportation, and food options while also desiring an increase in hours at recreation centers, dining halls, and libraries. Though most of the ten campaign promises utilized general language such as "increase or reevaluate on-campus dining options" or "expand late-night shuttle service hours," some platform promises were explicit. For example, one ticket ran on the promise of introducing a graduate student-specific bus line onto campus, while another promised to implement a transportation service to allow students from multiple campuses to attend football games. Only one ticket promoted its own self-generated data supporting the campaign's initiative to redraw campus parking maps. Such platform points reveal a disconnect between the desire for additional or expanded services and individual student financing.

Most noticeably, only one student government ticket explicitly acknowledged or questioned decreased state funding (resulting in increasing tuition/fee costs) as a neoliberal consequence. Within its platform notice, this ticket announced it would "advocate to state legislatures to provide more funding to the university to increase the ratio of counselors to students and counseling services for students overall." So, although this single ticket's candidates were both aware of the strain placed on fellow students/themselves and could articulate solutions that would benefit the student body, the explicit connection to neoliberalism as a driving force of student financial burden was not visible in the materials reviewed.

Private Sector Solutions

A second major finding concerned the number of student government campaigns advocating for outsourcing student services. This showed up in several different ways. Four student government tickets expressed an openness to outsourcing campus services like dining and parking. Additionally, four tickets campaigned on developing specific and presumably popular third-party partnerships. For instance, at one large public institution, one ticket ran on a pilot program offering students free Spotify and Hulu services, following the logic that premium television services such as HBO and Showtime were already being offered to students. Three additional tickets proposed corporate partnerships with rideshare services such as Lyft, food delivery agreements with Grubhub, and promoting local businesses at Food Truck Fridays. Two tickets at two different institutions explicitly promised to promote Black-owned businesses, presumably to expose students to and support and uplift racially diverse business owners at events and farmers markets.

Again, although student government tickets articulated student needs and provided solutions to filling gaps, instead of advocating to state legislatures for additional funding, six student government campaigns suggested that the private sector remedy the shortcomings of their institution's services. Outsourcing student services to private businesses and establishing campus relationships with specific corporations serves the neoliberal agenda, where exogenous privatization is championed as the solution to market-driven insufficiencies (Ball, 2016). Although some campaign promises concerning outsourcing were surely to be popular with students (e.g., Spotify, Hulu), other advocacies for essential services (i.e., food delivery, transportation) may serve as institutional critiques of unmet student needs. Instead of campaigning for improved institutional support (and subsequent additional funding), one-third of the tickets advocated for a solution sourced from the private sector.

Acknowledged and Unacknowledged Political Climate

A third finding is the acknowledged and unacknowledged political realities in Florida and federal politics. As previously discussed, we intentionally selected Florida because of its unique political climate. Three political issues were indirectly observed in the eighteen campaigns' materials: diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) support (four tickets), various responses to COVID-19 vaccines (three tickets), and election-related initiatives (two tickets). As a part of their platform, four tickets advocated for increased DEI initiatives; however, each lacked explicit connections to any Florida or federal legislation. For example, one ticket promised to advocate for a mandatory diversity course for all first-year students concerning Seminole Tribe history. Another ticket prom-

ised to advocate for mandatory faculty anti-racism training. But neither connected these efforts to political or social movements. The few platforms that addressed COVID-19 ran the gamut from calls for "personal freedom" to others advocating for incentives for students to be vaccinated. Concerning election-related initiatives, two tickets (from the same institution) campaigned on the promise to advocate for election days to be institutional holidays, presumably to increase voter access. Despite these few platform promises, overwhelmingly (and concerningly), a general disconnect between state and federal laws and student government campaigns was observed (e.g., throughout the data collection period of this study, federal laws were publicly drafted, debated, reconsidered, and implemented). For instance, noticeably absent from any materials reviewed was the mention of explicit abortion access (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*). However, four tickets promised to increase access to menstrual hygiene products and reproductive health resources (e.g., "Sexual Health is Wealth - free STD testing, self-defense, and safe sex materials during Sexual Health Awareness Week").

Despite the fact that it was being debated at the same time as many student government campaigns (January-April 2022), no explicit mention of the Parental Rights in Education law (2022) nor the "Stop WOKE Act" (2022) was present in any of the eighteen tickets' materials reviewed. Many pundits in higher education have feared that such legislation (currently being challenged in a Florida court) will have a chilling effect on postsecondary education, as the law was designed to restrict speech, add limits on tenure for professors, and change public college and university accreditation within the state. The "Stop WOKE Act" was introduced following two 2021 laws: Florida House Bill 223 and Florida Senate Bill 1028, the "Fairness in Women's Sports Act." SB 1028 bans transgender women from participating in female sports at public institutions. This Florida-specific legislation was not acknowledged at all in the materials and platforms reviewed. Beyond higher education-specific legislation, this void is interesting when considering the state's recent history. For example, despite several tragedies within the state, no ticket promised to address or even acknowledge gun violence.

Communication Practices/Methods

A fourth emergent finding involves the communication platforms and strategies tickets utilized to share their messages. Across the 18 tickets, we found just four candidate or ticket websites. Instead, we discovered a number of outdated student government websites that did not include information on current elections or candidates. Campus student media coverage was more widespread, but the amount varied widely. At almost all of the institutions in our sample, we found "meet the candidates" features, general news articles on student government elections, and/or op-eds by candidates in advance of elections. Several campus media entities reported stories on historically low voter turnout, and in some cases, we only found news coverage on elections/results and not the campaigns specifically. Media coverage also included reporting on the few debates and forums between candidates, which we found present in discourse at five institutions. There are connections here between neoliberalism and communication in that student media organizations face many of the headwinds of other local media, including decreasing the audience for printed media, shifting to digital products to offset increasing costs, fewer resources and staff members, and a consolidation of media sources.

In place of extensive campus media coverage, websites, or debates, we discovered the vast majority of information and content for the 18 tickets on social media platforms. Specifically, we found Instagram to be the most commonly used platform by almost every ticket, with fewer tickets utilizing Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. The significant use of Instagram showed up in a number of different ways. First, Instagram is designed to be visually appealing. In order to stand out on the platform, tickets displayed images of candidates and campus, as well as brightly-colored word art. We found many tickets that presented their platform pillars through multiple Instagram images that could be shared on Twitter and Facebook. Instagram also encourages the use of memes, and we saw candidates displaying various levels of creativity. At one institution, we found tickets that advertised events with sponsorships by local businesses. Second, in a related way, Instagram encourages using short-form video that allows tickets to "speak" directly to students, bypassing campus media or sanctioned debates. Third, many tickets utilized Instagram stories, which only appear for 24 hours unless they are saved. As a result, we recognize that there is likely an amount of content we may not have seen during the data collection process. This raises questions about accountability and transparency in student government campaigns if content "disappears." Finally, in utilizing social media platforms in lieu of their own websites, students are sharing all of their data with

a few major corporations, which is a by-product of neoliberal consolidation. Conversely, some students are not even on social media platforms, which inherently limits the reach and engagement of campaigns that choose to use only these forms of communication.

Institutional Comparisons

A fifth and final finding concerns a comparison of tickets by institution type and demonstrates the diversity of student populations, as well as the variety and breadth of experiences for students in the state of Florida. For instance, one institution in our sample is one of the largest historically-Black universities (HBCU) in the United States. Both tickets from this institution notably highlighted the importance of mental health and financial aid. Notably, one of the few tickets advocating for increased state funding was found at an HBCU. However, the bulk of both platforms focused on enhancing and increasing services for students on campus by working with the institution. In addition, while the campus newspaper had limited coverage of the campaign, a student media entity exclusively on Instagram with over 40,000 followers provided extensive coverage, including re-posting stories from both tickets. Each ticket at this HBCU emphasized promotional giveaways to capture student interest, with one ticket offering brunch with Black-owned businesses and a "Barbershop Talk," and the other ticket offering "Taco Tuesday" and a "trap and paint" event.

Two institutions in our sample are classified as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), with over 25% of their student population identifying as Hispanic. Both institutions were founded in the 1960s and located in a major city. The lone ticket from one institution detailed a platform including "accountable governance," "financial transparency," and the novel ideas of hiring a lobbyist for student government and holding regular press conferences. The other institution, on the other hand, had four very different tickets. One ticket featured students from Campus Republicans and a focus on funding and budgetary issues. Another ticket featured the current student body vice president, who spearheaded a drive to pay students $150 for being vaccinated since Florida state law does not allow institutions to mandate vaccines. A final ticket featured–and described–a white man and a Hispanic woman, and offered striking appeals to financial benefits, such as allocating $48,000 to offer free Spotify for 1,000 students, offering students $100 textbook stipends, sharing unused meal swipes with other students, and a reimbursement program for graduate exams like the GRE and MCAT.

Four additional institutions in our sample are all on the cusp of HSI status. However, they are all still predominantly white institutions (PWI), though two are just below the technical definition of a PWI. We found competitive elections at the three public PWIs, including debates, websites, and robust social media among the tickets. At one of these institutions, standing parties compete from year to year. During the election cycle, both tickets focused on DEI efforts, while one proposed a financial audit of student government. However, at another, we found students focused on tangible and easily accessible ways to implement change, including support of international students and advocacy for Title IX training. Finally, we found both tickets at the third of these institutions to have platforms engaging financial issues at the institutional level, including bus, food, and library services.

The final type we reviewed included private institutions. At one institution, in addition to mental health and sexual assault resources, both tickets focused on updating campus dining options, with one ticket advocating for a partnership with Grubhub. One ticket even had one pillar connecting the school with local city major league sports teams. At the second private institution, the lone ticket focused on strengthening community and DEI initiatives. However, perhaps as a consequence of neoliberal norms, both tickets at the third private institution focused on neoliberal logics like "financial transparency" and "accountability." Instead of questioning neoliberal practices, one ticket embraced the idea of austerity and auditing to practice efficiency, an increasingly common practice forced upon state services by legislatures who are asked to do more with less.

DISCUSSION

The spectrum of neoliberalism influence was wide-reaching in these student government tickets. While some campaign platforms sought to engage third-party companies and vendors, others promised to advocate for in-

creased on-campus auxiliary services. Such campaign promises align, fit, and morph into neoliberal tendencies at a time when Florida public institutions continue to operate on close but still lower than pre-Great Recession (2008) per-student appropriation funding levels (SHEEO, 2020) and as COVID-19-related higher education labor shortages remain (Bauman, 2022). Though these campaign promises concerning the outsourcing of student services are intended to fill a perceived gap, they also feed privatized, neoliberal tenets. Much like higher education more broadly, student governments, in turn, are complicit in upholding neoliberalism and capitalism in higher education.

Neoliberalism remained prevalent throughout these findings. The desire for tickets to appear apolitical to increase the chances of winning an election seems to be a typical response at first glance. However, viewing the data through the neoliberal lens and under our methodological approach, we see that there is perhaps more purpose behind this palatability. One of the most shocking was student government campaigns' universal lack of acknowledgment of the political climate. Across the board, campaigns did not recognize the harsh political climate many of their constituents are living and fighting through daily, especially in Florida with bills such as the notorious *Don't Say Gay Bill* and the countless anti-transgender and anti-Critical Race Theory-esque policies being eschewed and enforced. The lack of attention to these Florida-specific policies demonstrates how neoliberalism demands people (students) to portray a picture-perfect campaign that seeks to uplift certain social justice efforts without acknowledging some of the deeper-rooted issues. This allows candidates room to then only address what seems, perhaps, palatable to appease and approach more constituents than they would if they addressed the overarching political climate in Florida. This may also relate to the assumption or adoption that student government is a non-partisan entity (e.g., see Goodman, 2022b), serving students–and administrators–at a broad level.

One of the central tenets of neoliberalism is to increase and support the free-market economy. The high focus of these campaigns to meet students' financial needs and address institutional financial barriers could also be attributed to a desire to remain palatable. Within the realm of student governments in higher education, support for a free-market economy can appear in many ways, including the promise to address some of the main financial concerns brought up by students and making promises, many being empty, on how they would bring forth financial security for their constituents. Museus and LePeau (2019) state, "exploitation is at the core of the neoliberalism regime" and that understanding consumerism as a core of neoliberalism helps us see how "consumer choice" is vital to that regime (p. 2). As the campaigns focused on promoting solutions that centered many of their financial concerns, it prompts a deeper question surrounding how we understand student governments' dialogue and their intention to promote these ideals. Related, CDA centers questions of power relations and dynamics, including who can say what. To be critical of these campaigns is not as much about the campaigns as the system in which these students operate as leaders and institutional agents. As many campaigns chose to prioritize financial burdens put on by the university, they attempt to demonstrate their power relationship to the university by promising to alleviate constituents' barriers, all while continuing to be an entity aligning its values within institutions' values. Therefore, student governments are not laden with connection to their institution, embracing the neoliberal goals to gain as much revenue as possible from their constituents.

Overall, it appears that many student government campaigns attempt to promise things that are appeasing to what students immediately need and desire. Many of these promises seem out of reach for what one student government might achieve within one year's work; however, the mere promise and mindset aligned with neoliberal thinking often negates the thought process of what it would take to achieve these lengthy promises. For example, the positioning of campaigns to offer free or subsidized services such as Hulu, Spotify, Lyft, and Grubhub with no recognition of *how* they were going to achieve such goals puts the idea that so long as we promise things we do not need to have a means to an end. These almost bring a performative aspect to the campaigns, where student governments utilize knowledge about their constituents to act and say what they seek.

Glass (2020) cited how neoliberalism is enmeshed within concepts of political performativity. Glass (2020) shared how those who are "proponents of neoliberalism" often use performative methods through "policies and practices that can convince stakeholders of the merits of free market capitalism and limited government regulation" (pp. 353-354). Glass's (2020) recognition of how elected officials shape policies through their interpersonal reactions aligns with how college student governments function, primarily through the needs and desires of

their constituents. Understanding neoliberalism through this performative lens can provide context into how some student government campaigns neglected to consider ways they might actualize the promises promoted through their campaigns.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research prompts several implications related to higher education and college student government. Further, many recommendations can be gleaned from this study's findings through the lens of both practice and research.

Practice

Several recommendations exist for improved and intentional practice by campus administrators, student government advisors, and individual students and campaigns. First, administrators and advisors should note what student government tickets are advocating for and against and consider the role(s) they play in those declarations. These individuals might engage students in a deeper political understanding of their role and the society and system they operate within. For example, local and state happenings that reverberate onto campus may show up in specific ways on campus and impact students/faculty/staff differently. Advisors and administrators can engage students in understanding the nuances between those decisions and constituent-based leadership like student government. Next, "election onboarding" activities coordinated by student government advisors could be a way to orient all candidates to student government leadership–this is particularly important for those students running for office who do not have the within-system experience or knowledge about power dynamics associated with decision-making and student government leadership (e.g., incumbent elections).

When students are elected, incoming/outgoing officers and advisors should work to map and connect institutional values with platform promises; aligning institutional and campaign values/vision may be a low-effort opportunity to at least educate unaware students of neoliberal resistance. At a bare minimum, administrators and advisors should consider the ways their values and vision align with that of student leaders on campus, including those who do not win their student government election–and then be open and up front about that. Administrators and advisors can play a role in campus elections by engaging with platform discourse as it relates specifically to systems of oppression (e.g., see Museus & LePeau, 2019) and perhaps include these types of data points in professional development spaces in student government (e.g., "advisor updates," through a student government internship or onboarding program).

Research

First, future critical discourse analyses on college student government campaigns can include how students communicate (or not) amid the ever-changing media landscape (e.g., via TikTok to Instagram; canvassing electronically or in-person; how money is spent on communications). Next, future research can be done to better and more deeply understand the application of student government promises throughout their elections, as well as if or how higher educational leaders' agendas are in line with student government election platforms. For example, future research could include focus groups or interviews with students/candidates, and students/candidates based on their legacy in student government (e.g., how long they have been part of the student government system of leadership). Further, researchers can engage with a particular student body regarding an understanding of who makes specific decisions on campus and how voting (or not) plays into students' belief in campus change (e.g., are they voting because they believe the students can bring Lyft or Black-owned businesses to campus?). Finally, future research should involve student government leaders' feelings of "representation" and who they represent. Do students see themselves as leaders for their peers, or do their responsibilities lie in institutional change that includes faculty, staff, and the local community of today and tomorrow? Further, what repercussions exist when students speak outside of those campus-specific goals that might be incongruent with student needs? Researchers can explore these questions in multiple ways through multiple qualitative methods.

CONCLUSION

As they take on myriad challenges through campaign platforms, student government leaders demonstrate the level of persistence and resilience needed to serve in their critical roles. In these 18 campaign platforms, students assumed the responsibility that would otherwise be on the institution itself, thus furthering the neoliberal ideals of upholding power dynamics through capitalism and less labor on those whom the responsibility should lay. Higher educational leaders' inherent lack of responsibility further complicates the necessity of student government and elections but proposes a new structure to the power these elections hold on achieving goals the student body desires. This leaves room for the student body to shift the blame when promises remain unfulfilled from the higher education leaders to those in the executive branch positions. In line with Museus and LePeau's (2019) recognition that neoliberalism stifles our ability to achieve various social justice efforts, we see student government elections being used as tools to imagine new directions for the institution without having accountability practices in place.

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