THE RHETORICAL DIVIDE: USING (AND PROBLEMATIZING) STASIS THEORY TO ANALYZE RHETORICAL FRACTION ACROSS PARTISAN LINES IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Partisan animosity, brought to a tangible apex after Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, still dominates the character of American political debate four years later, and the clash of political parties only continues to rise in the wake of the impeachment trials and the approaching 2020 elections. As contention between partisan lines escalates, political discussion increasingly devolves into maneuvers of attack, insult, and blame across partisan lines from political elites, media journalists, and citizens alike. Though it is difficult to claim whether our current animosity is exceptionally noteworthy compared to those of past U.S. conflicts (Shea and Fiorina 8), the landscape of our political discourse appears, nonetheless, rather grim. Scholars report an increase in antagonistic political discourse (Blumler 89; Strommer-Galley and Wichowski 172; Thompson 246), negative stereotyping across partisan lines (Iyengar and Westwood 691; Iyengar et al. 16), and tendencies to view or cast political opponents as illegitimate discursive partners (Iyengar et al. 24; Thompson 248). These issues appear to be both effects of and contributing factors to rising trends of affective polarization and moralization of politics, altogether painting a particularly hostile and combative discursive environment.

Political discourse carries significant ramifications for the health of a democracy because it not only *reflects* political reality, it also works to *construct* it (Fairclough; Hauser; Parker and Bozeman). Because these exchanges provide a window into the constitutive forces that shape political environments, they also

offer important insight into the “pattern[s] of sentiment[s]” driving public engagement (Hauser 96).Through analyzing political discourse and its rhetorical exchanges, one can better understand the nature of a public’s political behavior.

Currently, discussion partners more often ignore or directly attack opposing views rather than engage them (Strommer-Galley and Wichowski;), effectively foreclosing opportunities for resolution and exacerbating what is, to me, the most concerning element of our political discourse: the lack of genuine engagement across opposing arguments. My goal is to contribute greater understanding toward the public sentiments driving our current discursive climate, particularly our difficulty negotiating opposing views meaningfully (if not productively) across partisan lines. Toward this goal, the present study analyzes a pervasive example of our current difficulties discussed above: the political insult, “snowflake.”

In a particularly intriguing evolution, “snowflake,” which one might distantly remember hearing as an encouragement or endearment toward young children, is now a prevalent political insult launched by both parties to characterize opposing members as sensitive and unreasonably offended by criticism or opposing ideas. In 2018, the *Oxford English Dictionary* included a draft addition for “snowflake” that captures its leap to political insult well: “Originally: a person, esp. a child, regarded as having a unique personality and potential. Later: a person mockingly characterized as overly sensitive or easily offended, esp. one said to consider himself or herself entitled to special treatment or consideration.” The roots of the more incendiary meanings of “snowflake” are most often

credited to a salient quote from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*: "You are not special, you are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone, and we are all part of the same compost pile" (Goldstein; Hess). This subtle shift from acknowledging uniqueness to deriding the *presumption* of uniqueness may speak to the accusation of entitlement in its later usage.

However, the larger metaphorical shift, wherein the allusion to the "unique" structure of a "snowflake" gives way to its "fragility," is best witnessed through its emergence as a generational insult against millennials, where "snowflake" first gained momentum in mainstream media. According to Claire Fox, the moniker gained traction in the wake of a 2015 viral YouTube video of a confrontation between Yale faculty head, Nicholas Christakis, and an "almost hysterical mob of students" (*'I Find that Offensive!'* 57). The students, angered by an email Christakis' wife sent in response to a memo the Yale Intercultural Affairs Committee students wrote urging fellow students to avoid disrespectful or culturally appropriated Halloween costumes, are shown gathered around Chirstakis screaming, demanding his apology and resignation for failing to adequately address their concerns of safety on campus (PEN America 46). Winning the *Collins English Dictionary's* top ten words of 2016, "Snowflake Generation" refers to younger generations, particularly millennials and college students, as "too convinced of their own status as special and unique people to be able (or bothered) to handle the normal trials and travails of regular adult life" ("No, 'Snowflake' as a Slang").

While “Snowflake Generation” broadly describes younger generations at large as fragile, intolerant, and overly sensitive, the insult most often circles American and British university campus conflict regarding multiculturalism and diversity and inclusion policies like trigger warnings, safe spaces, and no-platforming. In this context, “Snowflake Generation” is intimately implicated in tensions over free speech, censorship, and political correctness. Prompted to write her book *’I Find that Offensive!’* in response to her concern that “the young, in particular, have developed this insidious deference to the offence,” Fox asserts the primary source of this issue “is undoubtedly the decline of a liberal commitment to free speech” (Prologue xx) and later claims “there is nowhere more potently symbolic of this toxicity than on campus” (47). In the context the term’s evolution, however, I believe the early association of “snowflake” with emerging attempts to accommodate issues of inequality and social movements commonly associated with the liberal party sheds light on its transformation from a generational insult to a political slur.

By 2016, “snowflake” encompassed not only liberal leaning youths but all liberals. As journalist Amanda Hess describes it, “during the 2016 election, youth became confused with liberalism, and an entire political posture was infantilized.” In this new context, remnants of the insult’s semantic history as “Generation Snowflake” are evident in the connotation of “liberal snowflakes,” if not magnified: “self-imposed victimhood, an inflated sense of self-importance, an inability to handle criticism, and a totalitarian demand for respect are the criteria that define the snowflake” (Brammer). “Liberal snowflakes” implies liberals are unreasonably

offended, enraged, or hysterical in the face of opposing ideas, traditional values, or everyday reality, framing liberal criticisms as irrational, emotional, and childish. While conservatives employ the insult in a number of controversial debates, "liberal snowflake" often surfaces in the same types of discussion as "Generation Snowflake," primarily debates regarding social justice movements and the accommodation of gender, racial, or sexual minorities in society.

In response, liberals appropriated the term in two different ways. Some reclaimed the label, much the same as other groups reclaim hateful words to diminish their power (like "gay" or "bitch"). This is interesting because it highlights that the values invoked by its use are understood differently (either by definition or quality) across partisan lines. However, I am most interested in investigating "snowflake" in the context of combative political discourse, so I focus here on liberal's use of "snowflake" to insult conservatives, whom liberals claim only demonstrate their own deference to offense and emotional outburst by calling liberals "snowflakes" in the first place: "The truth is that people who use snowflake as an insult tend to seem pretty aggrieved themselves—hypersensitive to dissent or complication and nursing a healthy appetite for feeling oppressed" (Hess). The most iconic demonstration of this particular shift is the variant "Snowflake-in-Chief," whereby liberals assert President Trump is the perfect example of a "snowflake," evidenced by tweets such as, "Just had a very open and successful president election. Now professional protesters, incited by the media, are protesting. Very unfair!" (Pyke).

"Snowflake" may have initially only ridiculed the behavior of a younger generation as unreasonably upset, offended, or outraged and intolerant of criticism or opposing views (Brammar; Goldstein), but it soon grew to represent a thematic characteristic of the opposing party for democrats and republicans alike; as Mark Peters puts it, "snowflakery" appears to be "in the eye of the beholder." Reflecting on the "vocabulary of vilification" that sprung up in the aftermath of Trump and Brexit, slang lexicographer Jonathan Green remarks the popular use of "snowflake," among similar insults, "just reflects the fact that there are huge and very strongly felt divisions" in our societies (qtd. in Goldstein).

I find "snowflake" to be a particularly promising focus for research because its use encapsulates many characteristics scholars find troubling about contemporary political discourse, providing a narrow scope to analyze these characteristics in tandem and allowing greater understanding toward how our discursive difficulties function as a whole. I also predict the arguments beneath the term itself and the conflict in which it arises in debate likely signal important conflicting values, beliefs, and/or arguments that constrain the possibility for productive rhetorical exchange—or at least arrest movement. Take for example Milo Yiannopoulos's response to a protester at his 2016 talk in Houston to warn listeners of the serious threat the left's politically correct agenda poses to the alt-right.

A protester interrupted Yiannopoulos with a shouted comment after he finished illustrating his argument that liberal repression of offensive comical expression resembles authoritarian intolerance by providing a list of topics he

finds funny and “inherently entertaining” (including AIDS, Islam, and “trannies”) but that “we’re told we can’t laugh about… because we’re offending someone” (35:50-36:17). In response to the woman’s comment (which is inaudible through the video recording) Yiannopoulos retorted, “Madam, I am grateful to you for coming, but to be quite honest with you, fuck your feelings.” He proceeded to shoo her out, declaring his event was “not the silver-haired snowflake show” (37:05).

Yiannoploulos avoids responding to and engaging the protester’s argument by dismissing it as merely “triggered” feelings (37:23)—which, in a culture heavily influenced by liberal conventions of logical reasoning, carries a strong insinuation of “illogical.” Such moves to “question the arguer’s credibility, or ability to enter into reasoned argument” most often work to establish the claim, “no serious attention can be paid to his argument” (Walton, *Ad Hominem Arguments* 171). “Snowflake” inherently attacks the validity of another’s claim by implying the speaker is not a legitimate discursive partner: a “snowflake” is “irrational,” “over-reacting,” “overly-sensitive,” and thus his/her/their claims are not worth considering further.

One can observe in the example above how “snowflake” invokes values regarding what issues should be considered important or harmful, how it carries implications about the value of emotions—particularly emotion in argument, and how it marks important boundaries for how discursive partners are expected to respond to opposing ideas and what constitutes legitimate arguments or political actors. Yet, these divisions appear blurry and lacking in critical purchase when

arguments made toward and about each other are exactly and unwaveringly the same. That both sides believe equally the other represent the *true* “snowflakes” (to the point that “snowflake” has come in many ways to represent a negative symbol for each party as a whole) and employ the same accusation through its use illustrates that the claims or arguments underlying “snowflake” are ones we collectively feel strongly about but understand differently. I predict each party has a different understanding about what such an argument actually *embodies* and that conflict between such understandings is exactly what must be addressed if we hope for our political discourse to engage argument meaningfully across partisan lines.

The aim of the present study is precisely to explore the critical purchase analysis of such conflict offers toward understanding the nature of our political discursive climate, an approach largely inspired by Alan Finlayson’s model of rhetorical political analysis (RPA) and his reflections on stasis theory. Finlayson claims democracies are based on the premise that people “disagree not only about *means* but about *ends* and even about the *meaning* and *value* of means and ends” (550; emphasis added). In other words, people disagree not only about what to do in response to particular issues (policy); they also disagree about what type of issue it may represent (definition); how the issue should be evaluated or justified (quality); or if there is even an issue to address at all (fact).

In classical rhetoric, these types of conflict are called stasis points. *Stasis* represents the conflict that both generates and arrests argument (Dieter 227); it marks a “temporary standing between contradictories” (221), or an issue for

which “equally potent conflicting impulses” immobilize argument (230), with each party “insisting on what [was] previously maintained” (240). In the face of such a standstill, one may identify the “true bone of contention” (Finlayson 554), or the initial matter from which and around which the conflict evolves, by assessing which *type* of stasis it represents: one of fact (e.g., Did X even happen?), definition (e.g., How should we characterize/classify X? What qualities constitute that characterization/classification?), quality (e.g., how do we evaluate X? What are the extenuating circumstances? How serious is X?), or policy (e.g. what is the appropriate action in response to X?). In stasis theory, arguments are evaluated by these criteria, in that order, until parties involved “discover the true stasis, the issue around which their dispute resolves” (Finlayson 99). Its premises hold that without such identification or agreement regarding the issue *under disagreement,* the dispute “cannot… determine its course and pursue it effectively” (Dieter 230): the arguments that comprise it become incongruent and unable to exert rhetorical force on one another.

Finlayson argues the distinct nature of politics resides in the “presence of beliefs in contradiction with each other” (552), and thus analysis should always be directed at the “rationalities on which politics is based” (560), or the different traditions, values and beliefs guiding agents in contrary directions and the nature of their clash as citizens negotiate such values through public debate. I believe, in accordance with Finlayson, that the arguments that make up such discursive behavior and their points of conflict offer the most critical purchase to understand the nature of our public sphere, and stasis theory offers an explanatory

framework for how I will conceptualize these conflicts. To better understand what conditions of our public life and discourse inhibit the meaningful exchange of perspectives across partisan lines, the following study analyzes the stasis points of “snowflake” in two senses: 1) disagreements involving the meaning of the term itself and who it “rightfully” applies to and 2) the points of conflict which signal its use, or the stases in the surrounding contextual argument. Specifically, I am concerned with the following questions in this study:

Research Questions:

1. What tensions or stasis points do arguments underlying and surrounding “snowflake” reveal?
2. How might the stasis points encountered in the arguments surrounding “snowflake” help us better understand the nature of our current discursive climate? What new insights might they provide about our current problems?
3. How is the use of “snowflake” indicative of existing tensions or stasis points across partisan lines? In what ways have people previously conceived these stasis points, and how might “snowflake” offer new perspectives?
4. What additional or root stasis points in our political discourse may be revealed through analyzing the arguments surrounding “snowflake”?
5. Are the stasis points reflected in “snowflake” indicative of incompatible rhetorics across partisan lines? If so, how can stasis theory help us better understand how to address political discourse going forward?

In asking these questions, I seek to investigate what contradictory rationalities drive and represent the use of the term “snowflake” in hopes these points of conflict will shed light on the conditions that shape, enable, and constitute our current discursive environment. Particularly, I hope to address the mechanisms deflecting meaningful engagement of opposing arguments across partisan lines.

That said, as opposed to some branches of political theory or science, for example, I do not consider “meaningful” political discourse to be characterized by an achievement of consensus or adherence to a standard of particular reason: my interest in pursuing points of conflict in these discussions is not to identify a means for resolution nor evaluate competing arguments according to their relative superior standard of “success,” truth, reason, or execution. My primary concern is, as a public, we appear more apt to argue at or about each other than *with* each other; my goal, like Alan Finlayson’s, is to “ensure not less argumentation but more and better” (559). For such a task, I turn to rhetoric, RPA, and stasis theory.

A rhetorical framework conceptualizes the goals and value of public discourse differently than other disciplines interested in similar pursuits and, accordingly, conceptualizes different goals in its analysis of political discourse and evaluation of its “success.” Before I set to establish the current climate of our political discourse as reported by scholars in other fields, I find it useful to establish the principles of a rhetorical framework and differentiate its perspective from other disciplines that commonly conceptualize and evaluate political

discourse so as to avoid confusion about the purposes of this study and to establish the context by which I evaluate such conditions.

The following literature review is accordingly comprised of two main sections. In the first section, I characterize a rhetorical understanding of political discourse, then explore the differences this perspective brings to the evaluation and analysis of discourse as compared to other common theoretical frameworks, and finally demonstrate the benefits a rhetorical framework brings to this body of research. In the second section, I outline some of the major conversations regarding our current issues in political discourse and their causal factors, situating these issues in a rhetorical framework as I move forward. Building from these two sections, I finally demonstrate how “snowflake” represents these issues from a rhetorical perspective in order to provide a more precise representation of the problem this study aims to address and clarify the premises by which I chose my primary analytical framework: stasis theory.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Discourse: A Rhetorical Perspective

In the late 20th century, an epistemological shift centralizing language's role in the construction of knowledge and subjective experience produced a vibrant body of theoretical discussion aiming for a way to conceptualize language's role in shaping our political engagements, a prominent example being deliberative democracy. As these theories became more refined, many political theorists and others influenced by the linguistic turn grew critical of universal constructs of reason and goals of consensus in political discourse for their exclusionary qualities and inaccurate depiction of both human rationality and discursive behavior (Dahlberg; Fenton; Fraser 115; Garnham 369; Mouffe 104), launching new debates as scholars searched for a framework that best captures the goals and realistic functions of political discourse in a democracy. Influenced by similar theoretical shifts, rhetoricians like Gerard Hauser and Sharon Crowley voiced similar criticisms toward deliberative models and other political theories, though rhetoric's rich history of theorizing the relationship between language, publics, and politics offers a distinct perception of discursive engagement that distinguishes it from this broader argument in a number of ways.

First, a contemporary rhetorical framework accommodates multiple modes of reasoning rather than privileging rationality as the primary and ideal substance of political discourse (Crowley; Finlayson; Hauser). Alongside other critics (Fenton; Fraser 115; Garnham 369; Mouffe 104), rhetoricians challenge universal

constructs of reason for excluding other modes of reasoning, denying the subjective plurality of a diverse community and the wide variety of communicative norms that accompany it, and representing, frankly, an unrealistic depiction of the means by which individuals negotiate conflicting values and beliefs. For example, to Crowley, universal constructs of reason are unrealistic not only because citizens are unlikely to always behave rationally but also because citizens are unlikely to be persuaded on rational appeals alone, especially those whose beliefs are centered on moral or emotional convictions (44).

What sets rhetoric apart in these discussions is the rich tradition of classical invention. Works such as Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* investigate how people are moved and persuaded by beliefs and desires and explores the value in understanding an audience's emotional orientation toward a given issue and the ways these orientations impact the reception of a rhetor's message. A rhetorical framework appreciates the variety of means by which people come to hold, defend, or evaluate a belief, including "historically-shaped values and habits of thought as well as emotionally and instrumentally generated criteria" (Finlayson 546). Sensitive to the "multiple forms of rationality" (546) at play in a given exchange, a rhetorical political analysis is less inclined to evaluate political discourse by a standard of rationality than it is to analyze the rationalities *by which* participants make appeals and the historical and cultural attachments which accompany them.

Similarly, a rhetorical framework does not assume consensus is the end goal of political discourse. Joined by a large body of critics in political theory and

social sciences, Crowley, Hauser, and Finlayson all express doubt that a diverse population with different value attachments and varied perspectives is capable of reaching consensus without modes of exclusion. For Hauser, this means the goal of political discourse should rather be one of understanding: “when multiple perspectives are the norm,” he reasons, “the realistic test of a position’s strength is less that it achieves agreement and more that it can be understood across perspectives” (55), requiring some form of contextualized language for participants to locate their shared sense of the world (78).

In his argument to reconceptualize Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere as a *rhetorical* public sphere, Hauser identifies contextualized language as one of the five “rhetorical norms,” or criteria by which a public sphere ought to be evaluated.[1] The other norms include permeable boundaries, or the measure of “conditions for making a discursive appearance” (77); activity, or the presence of multiple perspectives; believable appearance, or the degree to which individuals or groups are perceived to be legitimate participants; and tolerance, which, in an attempt to break away from “presupposing conformity of values and ends,” Hauser describes as the ability of a public sphere to give their opinions “weight in arenas of official action” (78-90).

These rhetorical norms are not posed as a standard against which one might evaluate the validity, strength, or success of political discourse, however, as a rhetorical framework recognizes “to dismiss these transactions as flawed is

[1] As opposed to Habermas’s original definition of the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (“The Public Sphere” 49), Hauser defines the public sphere as any group of citizens engaged in discussion of shared issues (76).

to dismiss the means by which society posits the order of its own representations" (Hauser 273). Rhetorical norms are not established outside a discursive interaction but *through* it; accordingly, they can only be "derived from actual discursive practices" (61). To assess these norms is less a process of evaluation as it is interpretation, a means to better understand the rhetorical character of a public sphere, as its character bears direct consequence on the ways people both understand their collective issues and engage with them.

This emphasis on interpretation over evaluation in some ways makes a rhetorical framework similar to cultural sociology's approach, as that field emerged as a form of interpretation of social behavior through culture and discourse. However, rhetoric's emphasis on the dynamic process by which language shapes collective meaning sets it apart from these approaches. While language is now regarded by a number of fields to construct citizens' perception and understanding of their world and the problems they face (Blumler; Crowley; Hauser; Postmes et al.; Strommer-Galley and Wichowski); shape citizens' interpretation and negotiation of public values (Hauser; Parker and Bozeman); work to compose, mediate, and expose identities and relationships (Fairclough; Hauser; Postmes et al.); and inform the available means and boundaries of current and future discursive participation (Hauser; Mouffe), theorists struggle to devise a framework that fully captures the various elements at play, often because they envision any one of the components above, such as beliefs or values expressed by the public in such exchanges, as stable existing entities.

A contemporary rhetorical framework, however, is most concerned by the *recursive processes* by which these interactions occur. From this perspective, a public sphere and the people and material shaping its interactions could never be static; they are always shifting, comprised of dynamic exchanges and opposed forces shaped by historical and cultural antecedents and institutional constraints even as they work to inform future symbolic acts and representations (Hauser 14, 33). It is this activity, Hauser and Finlayson argue, that best offers critical purchase to investigate public sentiments. Directing our attention toward these processes within the political arena designates *argument* as the true object of study in rhetorical political discourse analysis: "It then follows that the ideational and interpretive analyses have tended to examine the wrong object, which ought to be not ideas but arguments: their formation, effects and fate in the activity known as persuading" (Finlayson 552). Politics exist because a public represents conflicting interests, goals, beliefs, and values. Political realities, then, are best represented in the collision and negotiation of these conflicts—the arguments by which they interact. Thus, Finlayson argues political analysis must look to the rhetorical tradition to capture the varied elements of an argument's formation and effects (552).

A rhetorical approach shifts the focus of analysis toward the rhetorical situation of the exchange (including the exigence, or event which inspires its action; the contextual events or issues which shape the public's awareness of the matter at hand; the ongoing conversations surrounding the issue; and the context in which participants exchange views, including its accompanying constraints or

norms of engagement and the relationships it establishes between participants), the point or points of conflict generating dispute, the means and strategies by which participants frame issues and make appeals; and the values upon which their arguments operate (Finlayson 553). The art of a rhetorical framework is considering each of these elements as a part of an interrelated process that shapes and informs meaning.

Though, just because a rhetorical framework prioritizes the rhetorical processes by which publics engage and form opinions over criticizing such practices does not mean elements that concern political scientists about our political discourse bear no consequence to a rhetorical analysis. Quite the contrary, these characteristics shape the rhetorical situation and boundaries of communicative action in which individual discursive exchanges emerge. In the following section I outline the conversations in political science that characterize the discursive arena in which this study takes place.

The Current Discursive Climate

According to a 2019 poll by the Pew Research Center, "Overwhelming majorities of the public say that the tone and nature of political debate in the country has become more negative (85%), less respectful (85%) and less fact-based (76%)" ("Public Highly Critical" 2). CEO of *New York Times*, Mark Thompson, describes the tone of our political discourse as "poisonous, infantile, dehumanized, and dehumanizing" and argues this is not exceptional behavior but rather the new standard of online debate for which all parties are equally guilty: "this is an assembly of rage that all are welcome to join—Left and Right, rich and

poor, pro-lifers and pro-choicers… [T]he only qualification necessary for admission is unreasonable fury" (247). Strommer-Galley and Wichowski also concur "flaming-verbal attacks or insults in online discourse… meant to disrupt or disparage conversation" is a "common phenomena" (172). Not only does such hateful language potentially deter other modes of contribution (Strommer-Galley and Wichowski), Thompson also believes it "sets a new dark standard for the expression of strong opinion" (Thompson 107), encouraging the escalation of verbal attacks in lieu of attending to the issue at hand or responding to contributions of discursive partners. Strommer-Galley and Wichowski explain these verbal attacks replace a "willingness to hear the other side" (168), which Thompson identifies as a "critical indicator" of the "public language crisis we currently face" (248).

At least as measured by our public life, it seems as a nation we are currently more preoccupied by attacking those with whom we disagree than working to resolve or address those disagreements. Thompson notes that while this issue is widespread, it is particularly evident in the U.S.: "the number of policy areas on which the mainstream parties are willing or capable of reaching accommodation has shrunk, in the case of the US close to zero" (8). In searching for the cause to such a discursive climate, many scholars have indicated increasing polarization, moralization, and delegitimization as key factors.

Polarization

Polarization is a sharply increasing issue in the U.S. (Abramowitz and Webster; Benhabib et al.; Garret and Bankart; Pew Research Center,

“Partisanship and Political Animosity”; Pew Research Center, “The Partisan Divide”; Rogowski and Sutherland). According to Pew Research surveys, the rift between political values on policy preferences across partisan lines has more than doubled since 1994, and the partisan divide now far exceeds other demographic differences such as race, gender, religion, age, and education—though these too have seen wider gaps as such demographic identifiers become increasingly partisan as well (Pew Research Center “The Partisan Divide”). Abramowitz and Webster report U.S. elections have experienced the “highest levels of party loyalty and straight-ticket voting” since 1952, and, consequently, “sharp party divisions now characterize all of the nation’s major political institutions” (12). Though, a large body of scholarship, Abramowitz and Webster included, holds such polarization in the U.S. is not based on ideological attachments (i.e. liberal or conservative), but rather affective attachments (Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment 164*; Garret and Bankart; Iyengar and Westwood; Iyengar et al.; Rogowski and Sutherland).

In “Affect, Not Ideology,” Iyengar et al. assert that because “party identification represents a meaningful group affiliation,” a better measurement of polarization is the “extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group” (2)—or their affective polarization. Such identification mirrors out-group and in-group behavior and tends to follow what Postmes et al. refer to as depersonalization: a tendency to view oneself and others “not as individuals with a range of idiosyncratic characteristics and ways of behaving, but as representatives of social group or wider social categories that are made salient

during interaction" (698). Thus, members of political discussion act and view other actors as representatives of political parties rather than individuals, imbuing them with all the ideological assumptions and affectual responses associated with those parties.

Affectual group dynamics constitute a means of establishing boundaries to differentiate in-groups from out-groups through "group norms and social stereotypes [that] define the limits of social behavior" (Postmes et al. 690), potentially explaining why a number of studies reflect a rise in negative stereotyping across partisan lines (Garret and Bankart; Iyengar and Westood; Iyengar et al.; Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity"). Iyengar et al., for example, found democrats and republicans both show signs of increasing dislike and negative evaluation of the opposing party to the extent that negative stereotyping across partisan lines is "nearly 50% more likely" than the 1960s (16), and "the level of inter-party ill will is sufficient to inject partisanship into decisions that are entirely personal" (14). Garret and Bankart also report "bias, aversion, and hostility toward partisan opponents have escalated substantially among average citizens" (2), and Abramowitz and Webster reveal, regardless of party affiliation, 21st century voters are more motivated by their dislike of the opposing party than affiliation with their own (21). Indeed, the Pew Research Center reports negative sentiment toward opposing parties is greater than "any point in nearly a quarter of a century": 87% of each party holds feelings of frustration, fear, or anger toward the opposing party ("Partisanship and Animosity"). Finding limited "ideological underpinnings" to partisan identity,

Iyenger et al. argue evidence for ideological polarization based on policy preferences more likely demonstrates “the mere act of identifying with a political party is sufficient to trigger negative evaluations of the opposition” (3).

As our society aggressively divides itself deeper into partisan camps—ideologically, affectively, institutionally, even geographically (Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* 100; Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment* 109)—along with the issues that concern us, the possibility for cooperation, or even the consideration of opponents’ views, seems impossibly bleak. But what is driving such animosity? Some believe ideological polarization drives greater affective polarization (Rogowski and Sutherland), while others have posited exposure to negative political advertisements and campaigns as a contributing factor, likely along with tendencies to seek like-minded media online (Iyengar et al.). Garret and Bankart, however, believe affective polarization is due to a moral division in the public and the affiliation of moral values with partisan identity, or the moralization of politics (3).

Moralization

When individuals form alliances toward political parties founded on “core moral beliefs,” Garret and Bankart explain, they develop “partisan moral convictions, or the perceptions that their [political] attitudes… are connected to their fundamental sense of right and wrong” (7). Such an approach to political issues is not by any means rare: the Pew Research Center reports just under half of Americans view politics as “a struggle between right and wrong” (“The Public” 8). In Garret and Bankart’s study, “The Moral Roots of Partisan Division,”

they discovered, regardless of partisan or ideological strength, those who moralize politics exhibit affective polarization at “considerably higher levels,” suggesting moral conviction contributes to divisiveness in the U.S., a factor they find especially concerning considering the extent to which media and political elites frequently frame political issues as moral concerns (3). Significantly, while they found moralization does not encourage anger as strongly as partisan strength, they found “it has the same or greater effect in motivating antagonistic behavior and uncivil speech… driving more hostile responses toward members of the opposing party” (24). Just as moral values influence social identities, moral political convictions also likely work to construct partisan identity, which Garret and Bankart explain “may in turn increase partisan convictions and hostility” (27).

In *Why Things Matter to People,* Andrew Sayer’s discussion of values sheds light on how moralization could embolden affective polarization and encourage hostile language. He explains values inform how we evaluate ourselves and others, to the point where they “become a part of our character, so that we are likely to feel upset if they are criticized; indeed, radical challenges to them may feel like a violation” (27). Moral affiliation with party values works to increase the affiliation toward one’s own party and inform perceptions of the opposing party, all while strengthening heated emotional response to opposition and framing such opposition as threatening to one’s personal values. From this, it is evident why 68% of republicans and 62% of democrats believe the opposing party’s policies are threatening to the wellbeing of the nation, while 64% and 68% of republicans and democrats respectively believe their own party’s policies are

"beneficial for the country" (Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity"). Inevitably, both affective polarization and moral association toward political values influences one's perception of opposing party members' character, which carries serious consequences for the nature of political discourse: most prominently, it fuels the belief that members of opposing parties are illegitimate discursive partners.

Delegitimization

As Jean-François Lyotard informs us in *The Postmodern Condition,* the competence or legitimacy of an individual to participate in a discursive exchange is "never an accomplished fact"; rather, "it depends on whether or not the statement proposed is considered by one's peers to be worth discussion." Legitimacy, therefore, can only be granted by those participating in a discussion at a given time, as the "truth of the statement and the competence of its sender are… subject to the collective approval of a group" (24). For this reason, Lyotard emphasizes it is imperative for equals to be created in discursive exchanges (24). However, affective polarization and the exacerbating effects of moralization indicate current discursive partners in the U.S. are unlikely to view opponents on equal grounds, and thus unlikely to respect opponents' contributions as valid.

Thompson similarly draws such a connection when he reflects on the process by which participants resist listening to or acknowledging opponents' views:

> The thought process is clear: there comes a point when someone's values are so contrary to mine that further discussion is futile, and I should

> treat him not as an interlocutor worthy of hearing out, or even as an intellectual adversary to be overcome through argument, but as a moral outcast who, if possible, should be prevented from speaking at all (Thompson 248).

In other words, when individuals come to a point in discussion where they believe their moral values are too vastly distanced from those with whom they engage, they are likely to assess their opponents and their contributions as unworthy of consideration. Rhetorically speaking, such behavior is problematic for any discussion, as an "ethical rhetor can never foreclose the possibility that an opposing argument will open new lines of rhetorical force" (Crowley 56); to do so would not only limit the progression of an argument and its ability to expand and negotiate knowledge, but it would inevitably favor a singular ideology and exclude any participants who think differently from participating equally in the discussion.

Moreover, viewing opponents as illegitimate is also problematic for the health of democracy as a whole, as general respect for opposing views and a willingness to listen to them is key to supporting one of the most fundamental values of any democracy: the presence and "encouragement of vibrant opposition in a free civil society" (Benhabib et al. 5). To truly achieve this goal, political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues it is "the aim of democratic politics" to construct the "them" of political out-groups not as enemies or illegitimate opponents, but as "someone whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (101-102). Only when we accept those

with whom we disagree have valid contributions to offer in discussion and equal rights to voice these contributions can we begin to exchange views meaningfully and productively, so political discourse may serve the critical function it is meant to serve in a democracy. Though, one only has to look to an example such as "snowflake" to see such goals, laudable and true as they are, become quite complicated in practice.

Situating "Snowflake" in the Current Discursive Climate

As stated in my introduction, one reason I find "snowflake" to be a promising site of inquiry is that it appears to reflect the ailments of our discursive climate as discussed above. Certainly, "snowflake" reflects negative associations across partisan lines, but, moreover, the manner in which it is used provides a prime example of how such affective behavior manifests itself in public discourse—while typically said to one person, it commonly implicates his/her party at large in the accusation (for example, "liberal snowflakes"), becoming, in a sense, a negative symbol for one's opposing party. As a negative stereotype, "snowflake" often *is* and/or accompanies hateful, hostile, and degrading language; for example, on his podcast show, Bret Ellis referred to "little snowflake justice warriors" as "sniveling little weak-ass narcissists": "little snowflakes, when did you all become grandmothers and society matrons, clutching your pearls in horror at someone who has an opinion… a way of expressing themselves that's not the mirror image of yours, you sniveling little weak-ass narcissists?" (qtd. in Nicholson). General lack of respect for "snowflakes" is also evident in this example, indicating Ellis does not view

“snowflakes” or their claims as legitimate and even works to further delegitimize them through his mockery. Arguably, as a sort of *ad hominem*, the very use of “snowflake” is likely intended to assert the illegitimacy of his opponents here and in most uses of “snowflake.”

While perhaps less obvious, I also contend moralization, or basing partisan identity on one’s fundamental sense of right and wrong, likely plays a large role in the use of “snowflake” in political discourse. As in Ellis’ example, “snowflake” is often used to challenge or ridicule an opposing party member’s expression of outrage, offense, or fear. Such emotions express a form of wrongdoing and establish relationships of perpetrators and victims; in other words, they are moral emotions, reflecting a cognitive structure based on moral principles (Jasper 17). As Lukianoff and Haidt explain in “The Coddling of the American Mind,” “a claim that someone’s words are ‘offensive’ is… a public charge that the speaker has done something objectively wrong.” Just as to claim something is offensive is a moral evaluation, so too is to claim someone *should not* be offended, making “snowflake” in these instances as much a moral evaluation as the actions of those it describes. Given that stereotypes and insults depict a representation of identity, “snowflake” represents in many ways an evaluation of the opposing party’s identity, and, as “snowflake” generally circles around cultural issues or involves moral judgements, the content of dispute and subsequent evaluation of partisan identity is likely closely associated with aspects of individuals’ moral values.

These connections suggest a focused analysis of discourse surrounding "snowflake" may prove a valuable contribution to scholarship of these issues; by encapsulating so many important concerns of our discursive environment, "snowflake" and the points of conflict underlying its use provide a narrow scope through which one may analyze these tensions in tandem and potentially allow greater understanding for how they function as a whole. More importantly, though, I find "snowflake" to encapsulate the threat I understand these issues to pose *rhetorically* to our public sphere—that our disputes may be immobilized for lack of genuine engagement and rhetorical purchase across opposing arguments. By delving deeper into the rhetorical conflict of ideas, beliefs, morals, and values which create such discursive behavior, I hope to shed light on what drives our inability to negotiate perspectives meaningfully across partisan lines and offer insight as to how we may begin to mend such relations.

III. METHODOLOGY

The problem this study aims to address is the current state of political discourse, particularly our apparent inability to engage opposing views meaningfully and productively across partisan lines in the U.S. In order to expand our knowledge of what factors contribute to this problem, I analyze samples of political discourse through stasis theory, which is designed to pinpoint the precise point of conflict in order to assess if an argument is *in stasis,* or if opposing arguments concern/engage the same issue and are therefore capable of exerting rhetorical force on one another. Through this analysis, I locate and identify precise points at which arguments diverge or conflict in order to observe what rhetorical behaviors and conflicting values, beliefs, or morals drive such separation.

I have narrowed my focus toward a particular example of our current political discourse that represents this problem well: the political insult, “snowflake.” In this study, I use six opinion pieces disputing the state of free speech on college campuses due to student or liberal “snowflakes” as a site of analysis. “Snowflake,” as I demonstrate above, is widely used across partisan lines, appears to reflect several tendencies presumed to contribute to our current troubled discursive climate (e.g., hostile, hateful verbal attacks, affective polarization, moralization, and delegitimization of opponents), and brings promising potential to expose important conflicting values across partisan lines that create and likely surround stasis in political debate. My belief is by investigating through stasis theory how these values oppose one another (both in

the invocation of "snowflake" itself and the surrounding disputes in which it surfaces), I will be able to contribute valuable knowledge toward our understanding of the forces that drive our current discursive climate and the nature of our partisan relations in the public sphere.

Though the results of these methods later call for a critical re-examination of Finlayson's principles in *praxis,* the methods outlined in this section are largely inspired by Alan Finlayson's call for a rhetorical political analysis (RPA). However, Finlayson's account of RPA is less a structured methodological framework and more a general overview of "the sorts of things [RPA] must be concerned with" (553): Finlayson provides a broad (though not exhaustive) list of what elements a rhetorical analyst of political discourse ought to consider, but not necessarily the structure such an analysis should take. To compensate for this lack of structure and to better focus analysis toward the purpose of this study (to assess the mechanisms and conflicting values that disrupt rhetorical engagement in contemporary political discourse), I centralize stasis theory as my primary analytical framework and incorporate several of Finlayson's broader concerns in a preliminary rhetorical analysis.

My adaptations to Finlayson's model and resulting analytical methods are organized below in three sections. First, I establish my analytical framework, where I explore the theoretical premises of stasis theory and its value to this study. Then, I frame the scope of this project and describe the selection process and criteria for the primary samples of political discourse I analyze. Finally, I outline the three stages of analysis I pursued to answer my research questions,

which I reiterate in the following analytical framework, as stasis theory's premises largely inspired their precision.

Analytical Framework: Stasis Theory

Stasis theory is but one among several rhetorical tools Finlayson suggests for political discourse analysis, but I found its theoretical foundations speak best to the heart of what drew me to investigate "snowflake" in the first place: a peculiar sense of standstill driven by a *lack* of contact, a collection of arguments immobilized by the gaping distance in perceptions of the argument at hand. Though, with "snowflake," something seems to be both shared and contradictory. We invoke similar arguments by its use (i.e., someone is unreasonably upset or offended), but it is apparent there are conflicted understandings of the values and arguments it otherwise embodies within the contexts in which it arises.

If we begin with the rhetorical understanding of the political sphere as the contestation of ideas, as Finlayson argues (552), the most valuable place to begin investigating its characteristics is to locate and define the precise points of conflict and their relations to the arguments involved. Only from here may we begin conceptualizing these issues as they actually manifest in the public sphere. My aim in this study is to identify these points of difference and discover what insights they may provide toward our current discursive environment. Stasis theory provides a promising conceptual vocabulary and procedural framework to do so.

Writing on ways publics find themselves in disagreement, Finlayson reflects that political issues represent "problems without solutions inasmuch as

they are dilemmas or uncertainties for which there is no agreed external evaluative standard" (550). These issues are not easily reduced to a mutual decision because people conceive political issues differently or may not even see them at all. They possess alternative understandings of the meaning of terms such as "freedom" or "racism" and inform decisions based on variant standards of evaluation.

Stasis theory, as David Goodwin explains, assumes "people find themselves opposed… [and] require the means, or the method, to clarify this opposition even as they seek to move beyond it" (92). Originally developed by Hermagoras in Classical Greece to resolve judicial disputes regarding an accusation and defense, stasis theory's operating premise is that in order to effectively deliberate about the problem at hand, we must first come to agreement as to *what* our particular disagreement *is*. The true conflict depicts a stasis, or a "temporary standing between contradictories" (Dieter 221). Stasis theory presumes without establishing a collective understanding of the type of conflict (stasis) under dispute arguments are not *in stasis*, wherein two lines of argument become incongruent and can no longer exert rhetorical force on one another.

Stasis theory provides a framework to conceptualize these points of divergence in order to identify and clarify a collective understanding of the "true bone of contention" at play in a dispute (Finlayson 554). It aims to locate the precise point of opposition by identifying under which of four categories the stasis point(s) fall (Carter 99):

1. Fact—dispute over the fact at hand (e.g., Did X even happen?)
2. Definition—what do we characterize X as? (e.g., Is X considered murder or terrorism?)
3. Quality—how do we evaluate this issue? What are the extenuating circumstances, or what else should we consider? (e.g., How serious is X? What are the consequences? Was X malicious or well-intended?)
4. Policy—what is appropriate action to take in response? (e.g., Should we amend the law? Sentence to time served?)

Some authors reference the fourth criteria as Place (Finlayson; Dieter), wherein participants disagree about whether the conflict fits the boundaries of the current context and claim it is inappropriate to settle X here/now/like this for Y reason. For example, one might argue the current discussion does not capture the issue at hand and is in fact representative of an entirely different problem or that it is inappropriate to have this particular discussion in the present setting/context: it marks a participant's move to disengage from the current conversation and, if not end, redirect the argument in a new direction. I find both policy and place to be useful markers of conflict, and so rather than exclude one for the other, I include place as a fifth criteria in this study.

The types of conflict above are designed to build a foundation by each level, reasoning an incident cannot be defined until it is recognized, or evaluated until it is defined, etc. Through stasis theory, contending arguments are intended to be assessed by these criteria in their particular order, acquiring agreement at each step until the "true stasis" is discovered (Carter 99) and argument may

begin again. For example, if an accuser and defendant disagree about the severity of the crime, the conflict would not truly represent a stasis of quality if they were in fact arguing all along over the severity of two different *types* of crime: i.e., if they are not in agreement of *definition*, which would represent the true stasis as it is the lower-level conflict type (presuming participants are indeed arguing over the same facts).

In other words, stasis theory assumes participants must agree to the facts of the issue before they can debate the categorization *of* that issue, and that they must agree on the type of issue they debate before they can begin evaluating said issue, and so on. The example above, left as it stands with two parties arguing over an issue of quality with an unaddressed conflict of definition, would not be considered *in stasis*: the issue cannot be resolved by present means because participants are not, in fact, arguing about the same thing. Until debate is redirected to its most basic conflict, opposing arguments lack the necessary rhetorical purchase to effectively engage one another.

It is the inquirer's job to investigate each participant's argument and perspective of the problem in order to distinguish about what, exactly, participants disagree, be it fact, definition, quality, or policy/place. Through this inquiry, disputes regarding separate, related matters can also arise, and this new dispute may need to be settled before participants are able to resume debate over the original conflict. In other words, it is possible for there to be multiple, smaller stases of a different dispute at play within one larger debate; in order to confirm a given conflict truly represents the point of stasis in its respective

dispute, one must confirm agreement of its lower-level stasis types—some potentially from stases of separate disputes.

Stasis theory offers more than a means to identify the point of contention, however: it also works to “extend the range of possible solutions” (Finlayson 556). Despite the connotation that stasis represents a standstill, it is precisely in these points of conflict where new possibilities emerge through the negotiation of contending worldviews. By identifying the true point of conflict, rhetorical acts can finally begin to affect one another through earnest engagement, and so stasis points are also “generative, creating an impetus for rhetorical action” (Carter 99) and a means by which those in conflict may approach resolution—or at the very least continue discussion. This implicates the conflicting values and beliefs identified through stasis theory not only valuable as a critical tool to better understand the public sentiments shaping our public sphere but also as a tool of rhetorical invention for everyday citizens as they encounter and engage in such conflicts (Crowley 45).

For these reasons, stasis theory presents a particularly promising analytical framework to allow focused analysis of the contradictions “snowflake” represents and to yield important insights toward the character and nature of conflicts we experience in our current political discourse. Its premises shape not only the following design and methods of this study, but also my research questions themselves.

Research Questions

1) What tensions or stasis points do arguments underlying and surrounding "snowflake" reveal?
2) How might the stasis points encountered in the arguments surrounding "snowflake" help us better understand the nature of our current discursive climate? What new insights might they provide about our current problems?
3) How is the use of "snowflake" indicative of existing tensions or stasis points across partisan lines? In what ways have people previously conceived these stasis points, and how might "snowflake" offer new perspectives?
4) What additional or root stasis points in our political discourse may be revealed through analyzing the arguments surrounding "snowflake"?
5) Are the stasis points reflected in "snowflake" indicative of incompatible rhetorics across partisan lines? If so, how can stasis theory help us better understand how to address political discourse issues going forward?

In the following sections, I detail further how I adapted Finlayson's RPA and stasis theory to pursue answers to these questions.

Selection of Primary Samples

The primary discourse samples this study analyzes consists of six opinion pieces—three pairs of right- and left-leaning publications reflecting a broad range of partisan bias collectively but similar degrees of partisan bias across individual pairs—that debate whether student "snowflakes" threaten free speech on college campuses. The following sections outline the principals, procedures and criteria

that informed my selection of these sources. I begin with an introduction to the contextual dispute that distinguishes the scope of this project and a discussion of the principles that guided this choice, followed by a discussion of the principles that informed my choice to select opinion pieces as the medium of these samples. Next, I introduce the tool I used to measure partisan bias, Vanessa Otero’s 2018 media bias chart, and the assessment criteria that make up this tool. Finally, I conclude this section with a report of the selection criteria regarding argumentative content and partisan bias I adhere to in my search that establish the conditions necessary for sources to receive consideration as final contenders and report the six final selections of political discourse samples I chose to analyze in this study.

Scope: The Contextual Dispute

The first step Finlayson suggests for RPA is to identify a corpus of argument to analyze, be it either a single speech or a number of exchanges over a particular issue (554). One piece is not viable for an analysis of stasis across partisan lines, so I narrow my focus toward a particular debate in which “snowflake” surfaces frequently: decrying or defending student protesters as threatening free speech on college campuses. The student activism and protests that swept through universities across the country from 2014 to 2019 sparked a fierce debate over whether students’ behavior, temperament, ideals, or arguments threaten free speech. “Snowflake” emerges as a significant player in this debate among those who argue student protests (against controversial speakers, racist historic figures, faculty, and curriculum), as well as emerging

diversity and inclusion policies and terminology such as trigger warnings, safe spaces, and microaggressions display fear, weakness, and oversensitivity (a.k.a., "snowflakery" (Peters)) that poses serious threats to liberal ideals of free inquiry, freedom of speech, and public discourse. Others counter students do not threaten free speech but are rather *using* or *fighting for* free speech, that the threats posed to free speech are miniscule in comparison to the just cause for which students fight, or even that accusations of students threatening free speech are nothing more than red herrings to distract from serious concerns of inequality (PEN America 32-38).

I chose this particular debate for a number of reasons. First, I am influenced by Hauser's assertion that to conceptualize the public sphere rhetorically, one must equally focus on what symbols mean and how they come to assume these meanings (61): he argues any evaluation of a public's current state must assess the rhetorical environment "as well as the rhetorical acts out of which they evolved, for these are the conditions that constitute their individual character" (81). Beginning in 2015, the insult "Snowflake" emerged in mainstream discourse and media first and most forcefully in the debate over free speech on college campuses and remained entangled in this particular debate long after it took space in the political arena. Not only is there a larger, more consistent body of arguments available to compare linearly, as is best suited for stasis theory, but analyzing the stasis points of this particular dispute allows me to understand and account for the historicity of "snowflake" and the context from which it emerged. Additionally, the nature of this dispute allows me to readily

access the basic analytical framework of stasis theory, which traditionally begins with an accusation and defense (Carter; Dieter; Hoppmann; Kennedy).

Finally, I also believe a dispute revolving around language struggles brings added value to a study such as this. Struggles over language, especially the freedom of language, tend to expose especially important issues, as they reveal which ideas people are most invested in or threatened by. Narrowing my scope in this way allows me to survey values implicated in this dispute that go beyond those of free speech and collect a broader range of stasis points that mark important tensions deeply felt across partisan lines.

Moreover, free speech debates necessarily involve a negotiation over the values, boundaries, and goals of public discourse. The liberties and limitations of free speech ultimately draw the boundaries of rhetorical possibilities for political and public engagement, and negotiation over their specifics tells a story of what role and value citizens understand speech to serve in a community through the practices and speech forms they fight for or against. As this study aims to better understand the conflicts that drive our current discursive environment, an examination of a conflict that involves direct confrontation over the goals and value of public discourse will likely prove particularly illuminating.

Ideally, Finlayson advises to select long-term exchanges over a number of years expressed in a range of forms (554). While the U.S. has a long history of controversial debates regarding student activism, free speech, and inequality on college campuses, “snowflake” has only appeared in these conversations in recent years. As I am primarily interested in the term’s interaction in our political

debate over this specific topical dispute, I focus my analysis on recent manifestations of this argument rather than collecting and comparing a historical overview of these disputes. Though, to better account for the historicity of these conflicts and inform analysis of data likely saturated with contextual references to these historical conflicts, I implement additional stages of secondary research in my preliminary rhetorical analysis, the details of which are outlined in a later section of these methods, Stages of Analysis.

The Medium: Opinion Pieces

I selected six opinion pieces to analyze in this study: three argue college students are "snowflakes" for campus protests, and three argue students are not "snowflakes" for campus protests. I analyze opinion pieces over the many other types of genres and forms in which "snowflake" surfaces in public discourse (including memes, social media posts and comment threads, YouTube videos, cable news networks, podcasts, and more) because I feel they offered the best balance toward the purpose, methods, and constraints of this study. As I aim to apply stasis theory to a textual analysis of political discourse to identify conflicting rationalities beneath the use of "snowflake" itself and within the larger debates surrounding its use, I found opinion pieces preferable over other mediums of political discourse for their level of contextual and argumentative development and focus.

A textual analysis of stasis, especially one that seeks to identify the relationship of stases in branching disputes, requires the arguments under analysis be substantially developed enough to provide adequate data to

investigate the various forms and relations of contradiction to locate true points of conflict. Compared to other mediums through which “snowflake” surfaces in this debate like combative comment threads or quick jabs on cable news networks, opinion pieces as a genre offer a more dependable source of data to make such connections as authors are generally expected to present a substantial development of their claims and relevant context to deliver an argument that stands on its own.

Additionally, opinion pieces offer a more dependable topical focus and more promising chance of drawing explicit connections to any deviations of the initial focus, as conversations on social media may bounce from one topic to the next without much connective tissue, making it difficult to track the potential stases among scattered and weakly connected argumentative detours. As each new topical dispute introduces its own separate potential set of stases, the greater topical focus provided by opinion pieces limits the instances for which I would need to bridge connections based on my own presumptions as opposed the direct claims by the authors and provides a more grounded argument corpus to compare linearly.

While the mediating presence of the publications’ editors’ bias is undeniable in opinion pieces, opinion pieces still present a more removed stance from the editorials’ specific agendas than if they were written by the team themselves and are thus more likely to reflect arguments of the general public. Though, this influence of bias also allows for a measure of control over partisan bias in my samples. As bias may likely exacerbate the particular elements I aim

to analyze in these conflicts, especially those examples of current discursive trends discussed in the literature review above, I used this presence of publication bias to gather pairs of samples that share similar bias rankings across partisan lines but collectively reflect a broad range of bias. In the sections below, I first introduce the tool I used to measure partisan bias in my selected samples and then specify the selection criteria I used to evaluate potential sources and identify my six primary samples of analysis.

Measuring Partisan Bias in Selected Samples

To measure and control for partisan bias in this study, I used the February 2018 media bias chart developed by Ad Fontes Media's founder, Vanessa Otero, to guide my selection process. In her chart, Otero rates media sources along two axes: 1) a vertical quality scale, and 2) a horizontal bias scale.[2] She places these sources by coding the content of a sample of publications by each media outlet sentence-by-sentence by three metrics for each scale. Along the vertical quality scale, Otero measures for veracity of fact and expression, using the following categories to classify the information quality of sources from highest to lowest quality:

[2] Last year, Ad Fontes Media has expanded to include multiple analysts in their evaluation to minimize bias in their findings. The chart I reference is from the company's early stages when Otero conducted the analysis on her own. While the company used her original methods to design their larger project, the methods I sketch here are from the original blog she shared for the chart 3.1 version of the 2018 chart I reference.

- original fact reporting
- fact reporting
- complex analysis
- analysis
- opinion
- selective or incomplete story
- propaganda (misleading facts)
- inaccurate/fabricated information

Along the horizontal bias scale, Otero considers bias of the topic itself (partisan policy positions), bias in promotion or linguistic expression, and elements excluded from the story to rank both left- and right-leaning sources according to the following categories: most extreme, hyper-partisan, skews, or neutral.

It should be noted the criteria Otero uses to assess fairness or lexical expression for partisan bias, such as attacks or partisan insults, reflect much of the same criteria I use to evaluate examples of current discursive trends in political discourse discussed in the Literature Review. In fact, Otero lists "snowflake" as an example of the types of political insults she measures for partisan bias ("Part 2 of 4"). This indicates findings of discrepancies in examples of these trends located strictly along the axis of partisan bias may represent the influence of this measuring tool rather than a natural phenomenon of my selected samples. However, it also re-emphasizes the need for the selected samples to reflect a broad range of neutral to extreme partisan bias so as to capture a more accurate depiction of the range by which these rhetorical behaviors emerge in public discourse.

Selection Process and Criteria

In my selection process, starting with right-leaning sources Otero ranks in her chart and working from neutral to most extreme bias, I searched each source's collection of present and archived opinion pieces from years 2015-2018 (when the debate was most lively in public discourse) for pieces that matched the following criteria:

1. the article uses the term "snowflake" at least once, either in accusation or defense
2. the main argument of the piece focuses on free speech issues on college campuses surrounding student protests
3. a majority of the work comprises of the author's own words and paraphrases, as opposed to extended quotations.

This third criteria became necessary when I identified several sources that fit the previous criteria comprised of only a brief statement in response to otherwise bulleted quotations. As much of the content presented in these pieces reflected arguments from other publications with different rankings of bias and quality, I did not find these sources suitable to pair. Furthermore, as I intended to investigate the points of conflict specific to each author's particular perspective and interpretation of the issue, I found arguments centered on the author's own argument or paraphrase rather than a majority of quoted arguments better suited for this study.

Once I identified a right-leaning opinion piece matching the above criteria, I began my search for its pair by identifying sources on the left partisan axis at

the same distance from zero on the bias scale, working through sources point-by-point above and below the first article's score until I located the nearest source that published an opinion piece similarly satisfying the content requirements between 2015 and 2018.

Selected Samples

Ideally, I hoped to find pairs within a 5-pt range of difference from each other within the same category for both quality and bias that collectively reflect a broad range of bias. After searching the archives of every conservative source Otero ranks, I came just shy of this goal. The following six opinion pieces represent the publications closest in range of bias that published opinion pieces fitting the above criteria, organized according to partisan groups.

Table 1 Selected Discourse Samples

Bias Group	Publication Information	Left	Right
1	Title and Author:	"What Snowflakes Get Right about Free Speech," by Baer Ulrich	"These 'Snowflakes' Have Chilling Effects Beyond the Campus," by Heather Mac Donald
	Date:	24 April 2017	22 April 2017
	Publication:	*The New York Times*	*The Wall Street Journal*
	Category:	Opinion (The Stone)	Opinion (Commentary)
	Bias:	Vertical- 52 (Fact Reporting) Horizontal- -5 (Neutral) Fair Interpretation	Vertical- 53 (Fact Reporting) Horizontal- 11 (Skews Right) Fair Interpretation
	Author:	Baer Ulrich	Heather Mac Donald
2	Title and Author:	"A Nation of Snowflakes: The Greatest Threats to Free Speech in America Come from the State, not from Activists on College Campuses," by Adam Serwer	"Special Snowflakes? Or Fascists?" by Mona Charen
	Date	26 September 2017	22 April 2017

Table 1 Continued

Bias Group	Publication Information	Left	Right
2	Publication:	*The Atlantic*	*National Review*
	Category:	Politics	Culture
	Bias:	Vertical- 46 (Fact Reporting) Horizontal -15 (Skews Left) Fair Interpretation	Vertical- 51 (Fact Reporting) Horizontal- 20 (Hyper-Partisan Right Fair Interpretation
3	Title and Author:	"Guess What? Despite the Right's Propaganda, College Students Strongly Support the First Amendment," by Sophia McClennen	"Poll Reveals How Many Students Believe Violence is Warranted to Suppress Speech," by Tom Knighton
	Date:	7 October 2017	19 September 2017
	Publication:	*Alternet*	*PJ Media*
	Category:	Opinion	Opinion
	Bias:	Vertical- 18 (Selective/ Incomplete) Horizontal—23 (Hyper-Partisan Liberal)	Vertical- 17 (Selective/ Incomplete Story) Horizontal- 26 (Hyper-Partisan Right)

While the publications of the first two groups reflect different bias categories than their pair, *The New York Times* is only one point away from matching the category of its paired publication, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Atlantic* is only two points from qualifying as Hyper-Partisan to match *National Review*. Likely, this distance is due to the fact that publications scoring higher in quality and bias are less likely to publish articles about "snowflakes" directly, especially as this type of language is specifically scored in Otero's ranking. Nonetheless, I feel confident I identified the most suitable sources available in Otero's list of ranked publications to reflect a broad range of partisan bias pairs.

It should be disclosed that, in later stages of analysis, I discovered the author of "Poll Reveals," Tom Knighton (R3), plagiarized several passages of his piece by inserting another author's overview of the study Knighton references. As I searched for paraphrase rather than quotes in my initial criteria evaluation, I did not suspect these passages may predominantly represent another author's voice. However, the plagiarized material primarily represents a straightforward report of data Knighton (R3) uses to launch a separate argument, and as the purpose of the third selection criteria was to centralize data toward the authors' interpretation of sources they reference, I felt his remaining passages suited this goal satisfactorily enough to allow its continued presence in this study. To make sure all future analysis centered on Knighton's (R3) arguments specifically, I coded the plagiarized passages as factual evidence and gathered all further codes of claims and supporting connections from Knighton's (R3) surrounding passages.

Stages of Analysis

Though I am most prominently focused on identifying and analyzing the stasis points within these samples, I believe along with Finlayson that a broad rhetorical approach toward analyzing political discourse enriches the value of one's perspective and findings. Thus, analysis in this study is comprised of three stages:

1. A preliminary rhetorical analysis adapted from Finlayson's suggested rhetorical approaches to ground and supplement future analysis.

2. A stasis analysis, wherein I locate the stasis points within the use of “snowflake” itself and the surrounding dispute.
3. A cross analysis of stages 1 and 2 to identify and inform underlying connections.

Throughout all stages, I used MAXQDA coding software to organize themes and compare data most efficiently in the final stages of analysis. The sections below detail my methods for each stage.

Preliminary Rhetorical Analysis

The primary goal of this preliminary stage of analysis was to gain a firm understanding of the arguments and rhetorical context of the selected samples to provide a strong foundation for later analysis and inform resulting conclusions. Finlayson’s suggested points of focus are typical concerns of many rhetorical analyses—such as the rhetorical situation, genre of speech, and rhetorical constraints; appeals to *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*; the means of framing, narrating, and supporting appeals; and appeals to ‘universal’ values and means by which one situates particular claims within universal frameworks (555-557). While all of these concerns are valuable, some more directly serve the purpose of this preliminary stage of analysis than others. For example, I agree with Edward Schiappa that there is “no significant difference between ‘defining’ or ‘framing’ a situation” (151), and so I analyze the framing of appeals or contexts in my stasis analysis of definition. After considering Finlayson’s concerns, I identified two core priorities on which I structured my approach to direct my energy efficiently and to gather materials that would best supplement future data and ground later

analysis: 1) locating the argument's structure of appeals and 2) exploring the rhetorical situation.

Locating the Arguments' Structure of Appeals

Because several of these elements felt relevant primarily within the context of their particular arguments or through emerging patterns, and because Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) "insists on perceiving these phenomena within argumentative contexts" (559), my first step in this analysis was to map the individual case structures of each article. I first identified what I understood to be the author's main argument and sorted surrounding claims under the following categories: introduction of the problem, supporting claims, proof, additional/historical context, asides (wherein the authors took a moment to detour from their focused argument to make a side comment of their thoughts), and rebuttals. I also mapped the individual stages of rebuttal in this case structure, including refutations, representation of opposing claims and proofs, and counter claims as available because I felt moves of rebuttal would provide valuable purchase in my investigation of stasis theory by inferring if not clarifying what authors take to be the main oppositional claim(s) they respond to and by marking explicit points of divergence.

I focused on gathering a firm understanding of each author's unique argumentative structure because I recognized potential stases would invariably depend on each opposing positions' precise relationship to their respective roles in the authors' arguments. In this process, I cut up printed copies of my selected samples into strips of their individual claims and rearranged their order to use as

a visual tool to explore connections authors establish through their claims and proof. Initially, this exercise was intended to serve as a strategy to identify stated or unstated warrants, as the underlying principle enabling proof to substantiate a claim can often be left unaddressed and undefended or appear under the guise of a claim or proof of a claim. My goal was to use this activity to create a visual tool to better differentiate between claims and potential warrants.

Unfortunately, this process did not decisively illuminate a clear distinction between potential warrants or claims, perhaps due to the informal structure of the authors' arguments, and so rather than potentially mislabel a claim or proof as a warrant or backing for a warrant, I decided to only hypothesize potential unstated warrants tying together the authors' presented claims and proof. Thus, I coded only for proof and claims (making note of particular claims and correlating proof I felt to be potential warrants) and used this practice instead to visualize connections between proof and claims and between sub-claims and main claims.

I annotated both these visual exercises and full copies of the selected samples to further muse over potential warrants and make note of the rhetorical moves, strategies, and styles taken (e.g., appeals to *logos, ethos, pathos* and/or modes of discourse such as narrative, definition, cause and effect, or compare-and-contrast); interesting appeals (i.e., claims that particularly stuck out to me, such as claims that contradict previous arguments or claims that starkly contrast arguments made by authors of the same partisan-leaning), strategies used to emphasize or de-emphasize elements of the contextual problem (e.g., what elements of the contextual dispute do authors highlight or avoid? What is the

purpose of the author’s focused attention or lack thereof? What tactics do they engage to direct this focus?), and any particular patterns observed of the elements above across left- and right-leaning arguments or rhetorical behavior frequently accompanying particular rhetorical elements.

Exploring the Rhetorical Situation

I also prioritized a comprehensive representation of the rhetorical situation, or the “context of relations in which [the arguments] take place” (Finlayson 554). Finlayson argues the relationships established between authors and readers, or the “acceptance of certain roles” a rhetorical act calls for, is one of the most important aspects of a rhetorical situation (554). Though in this claim he specifically references the dynamics established through the medium and place of a rhetorical act, such as the dynamics that constitute the relationship between the speaker and audience of a State of Union Address, much of these relations are determined through the medium of my primary sources as the readership of each publication represents the audience of the text—a relationship that increasingly defies definition through the mass dissemination and automated circulation of online media.

I re-directed inquiry of the rhetorical situation in this stage toward the ways authors establish relationships with the reader directly or with other groups addressed in their arguments, paying special attention to the ways authors establish in-group and out-group boundaries and relate to particular groups, such as democrats, republicans, academia, students, millennials, etc. In other words, I searched for strategies authors use to distance or more closely associate

themselves with other groups and their ideas and the affective tone of address authors establish when considering other groups' identify, values, and ideas.

I also consider the ongoing conversations authors interact with in their arguments an important element of these text's rhetorical situation, as these conversations inform the authors' representations of the problem at hand and demonstrate how authors situate their argument within other relevant conversations and cultural context. For this reason, I paid special attention to sources, cultural events, and context referenced in each argument. I visited the sources referenced by authors in order to understand how authors relate to and incorporate sources' claims in their own arguments and gauge how accurately or fairly authors represent these references. I also conducted secondary research into the events and cultural context referenced most often, including academic debates surrounding political correctness, free speech, and authoritarianism (which emerged as a key theme in right-leaning sources). My hope was by delving deeply into the rhetorical situation and ongoing conversations involved in this debate, I could mitigate some of the ahistorical limitations of this study and establish the relevant context necessary to inform later analysis of emergent themes.

Given my goal to situate "snowflake" within its broader context of our current discursive climate, I also regarded examples of current discursive trends outlined in the literature review above to be important elements of these texts' rhetorical situation. I recorded apparent strong negative feelings expressed toward opposing political parties (through tone or direct address), distinctive

moves to indicate the opposing party as a disliked outgroup, hateful and attacking language, and uses of negative stereotypes toward opposing party members to identify the rhetorical moves of affective polarization; appeals to one's sense of right and wrong to identify instances of moralization in political expression; and moves to delegitimize or assert the illegitimacy of opposing arguments or the opposition's character to capture delegitimization. Typically, delegitimization involves an attack on the character of one's opponent accompanied by the insinuation or claim that said flaw invalidates the opponent's participation or contribution in the present debate. In this way, it mimics the rhetorical structure of *ad hominem*s (Walton, *Ad Hominem Arguments* 170), and so I follow Douglas Walton's categorization for types of attacks on one's character to categorize delegitimization.

The findings from this portion of analysis serve primarily to help answer my second research question: How might the stasis points encountered in the arguments surrounding "snowflake" help us better understand the nature of our current discursive climate? What new insights might they provide about our current problems? The purpose of identifying these examples in this primary stage of analysis was to organize a corpus of data to compare against stasis findings in the final cross-analysis stage. In my findings, I report only examples that became relevant in my cross-analysis toward answering this question.

Stasis Analysis

The stasis analysis in this study is comprised of two parts: first, I am interested in the stases underlying and embodied by the use of "snowflake" itself

to clarify its specific points of contradiction in use across partisan lines and second, I am interested in the stases present in the surrounding conversations in which “snowflake” is used—which in the scope of this study are those that arise from recent conflicts over free speech on college campuses—as I believe these points of conflict signal important conditions of the use of the term “snowflake.”

Stasis theory, as explained in the analytical framework, was originally intended for use in judicial disputes and began with a contradiction between an accusation and defense. The goal of inquiry was to decipher the precise point of conflict by assessing agreement or contradiction for each type of stasis *in order*, as agreement for each type provides the necessary foundation to indicate the contradiction discovered in the next is the “true” bone of contention. Designed to settle debate in a courtroom setting, stasis theory assumes the ability to pursue or direct additional lines of reasoning from the accuser and defendant to investigate and verify the types of stasis reflected in their dispute or to address stases of additional relevant disputes to appropriately address the primary issue. Such access is particularly valuable, as the conflicting nature of each type of issue is deeply influenced by its precise relation to and correct diagnosis of lower-level and branching stasis conflicts. In analyzing the stasis points across six separate opinion pieces, however, I knew I would be limited to the data presented in each authors’ independent case, so to speak, and unable to investigate the level of conflict in lower-level stases if not clearly addressed by the authors.

This necessarily brought important implications to the way I approached the collection of my data, as I was unable to depend on settled facts informing settled definitions that then lead to one ultimate conflict of quality, for example. I recognized I would need to organize my data in such a way that I could keep track of how unsettled points of stasis affect those that come after, which would likely require the building of each author's representations of facts, definitions, quality, policy, and place particular to each area of dispute he/she shares. This would in turn involve a degree of inference in cases for which the parallel stasis is not directly addressed in the opposing arguments (e.g., if a definitional dispute is present in left-leaning sources but not addressed in right-leaning sources) and a means of gathering potential clues in opposing arguments that might inform the missing pieces. Furthermore, as the authors are not directly engaged in argument *with* each other, I knew authors were likely to stray in directions not directly taken by their opponents, and that conflicts among those detours could potentially affect other data.

As authors in this study present their argument of free speech on college campuses, they often move between different related problems or events, creating new areas of dispute from which separate stases can also arise. As I aimed to locate stases in the surrounding contextual dispute of my primary samples, I hoped to identify stasis points in the dispute over free speech as well as those in disputes that branch from this debate. Though, the ways authors relate to these issues, and, accordingly, the ways potential stases of these conflicts relate to and interact with stases of the larger dispute from which they

stem, do not always reflect evenly across opposing arguments. The precise nature of the arguments' contradictions and the degree to which each type of conflict may be inferred to influence the previous or later stases are contingent on how the contradictions build from and relate to each author's contextual argument.

Anticipating several types of stasis for a number of yet unidentified and potentially divergently related "problems at hand," I felt it best to begin by identifying and organizing the various contingent disputes available for analysis across these texts. Thus, my first step in this stage was to identify the points of contradiction in the authors' main arguments—those over free speech on college campuses—in order to locate branching disputes introduced by authors of both sides and identify how authors situate these disputes in the larger debate they all share. For this task, I returned to the case structures I built in the first stage of analysis to examine more closely how authors' main arguments conflict or diverge from one another.

After assessing what problems, beliefs, or realities authors present as given; issues or positions authors feel necessary to defend or condemn; the web of relations authors build to narrate their understanding of the problem at hand; and the related issues implicated in these narratives in answers to questions such as who, what, when, where, why, how, and to what effect, I was able to categorize most points of conflict represented by sufficient data on both sides of the argument, not yet including conflicts regarding the use of "snowflake," under

two primary areas of dispute: 1) conflict over free speech and the threat(s) it faces and 2) conflict over issues of discrimination.

After I identified these thematic disputes, I used MAXQDA software to gather the arguments involved in each major theme, including those also coded under other disputes. I then further categorized data according to their particular role in the conceptual problem before identifying and categorizing particular stasis points in each dispute. My assumption was it would be most productive to approach classifying stasis points by evaluating their contradictions as grounded within the context of the problems from which they evolved. I also believed this approach would allow me to most efficiently evaluate points of contradiction linearly across all six articles, gather additional points of contradiction that may have previously or otherwise gone unnoticed, and track/account for discrepancies in previous stases by providing an organized representation of authors' arguments as related to each author's conception of the problem for reference during later analysis.

Beginning with arguments over free speech, I categorized data from each dispute according to the type of information it provides about the problem under dispute, beginning first with general categories such as who, what, when, where, why, how, and to what effect and broadening to additional components as relevant or necessary to the structure of the problem at hand. Through this process, my categorization schema remained flexible in order to best reflect the structure and nature of each dispute and available data. In my attempt to collect all relevant data that could reveal stasis points within these disputes, I coded

these segments for both semantic and syntactic indicators of the involved components. That is, I coded at the sentence and paragraph level for claims, warrants, and examples as well as the grammatical level of sentences, such as the specific adjectives and verbs used to describe students or their actions.

The purpose of the above process was to accumulate and organize components that depict a clear representation of the author's *understanding of* and *relation to* the problem at hand in each dispute so in the next stage of analysis I could lay them side-by-side to assess precisely *where* and *how* these perceptions and arguments contradict one another while remaining fully grounded in the function each argument serves in the individual articles. Below, I first describe my pre-stasis categorization schema for each thematic dispute as well as the conflicts that arise through uses of "snowflake." Each of these approaches differs slightly as I allowed the rhetorical nature of each dispute and available data to shape my coding process. In the following section, I detail my final step in this stage of analysis: assessing these compiled data to identify and classify the types of stasis reflected in each conflict, which in this study includes five rather than the typical four types of stasis: 1) fact, 2) definition, 3) quality, 4) policy, and/or 5) place.

Pre-Stasis Coding Schema for Main Thematic Disputes

Dispute #1: Free Speech, and its Threats

As this dispute represents the main argument around which all six sources are focused and structured, the categorization of this problem is the most advanced of the three to both accommodate and take advantage of the larger

sample of data. As I explained in my selection of this contextual dispute, one of the benefits this topic brings is its arguments across partisan lines take shape through an accusation and defense, which is the context for which stasis theory was originally intended. To take full advantage of this, I categorized the representation of this problem, or the threat to free speech, by organizing the argumentative moves and claims first according to their role of accusation (e.g., "X person/group poses a threat to free speech") or defense (e.g., "X person/group does not pose a threat to free speech"). Though these texts are focused on the topic of free speech on college campuses, altogether, authors accuse many groups of posing a threat to free speech. To keep track of potential discrepancies between types of action and different perceptions toward different scenarios, I further organized these accusations and defenses depending on which group is accused of posing a threat to free speech (e.g., students, liberals, conservatives, the government, or President Trump).

In my sub-codes for accusation and defense, I break down the argumentative structure into the key variables that comprise the author's representation *of* and orientation *to* the threat to free speech (building and branching from a general schema of who, what, when, where, and why). In table 2, I sketch the sub-codes I use for accusation and defense for each group and explain the types of criteria they include. For sub-codes that stray from the general schema, I also include further explanation as to why I felt this was relevant or necessary data to isolate.

Table 2 Accusation and Defense Sub-Codes for Free Speech Dispute

Code	Criteria	Notes
Charge	Primary accusation of threat/problem	
Who Threatens?	Who is the agent/group considered responsible?	Includes multiple references to the same group by different names/characterizations
What Threatens?	What offense / acts are considered threatening by this group?	Sub-category: why (is it threatening)?
Why?	Proposed or self-declared motive for threatening actions	Includes both reasons authors provide of that group's reasoning and their own theories of that group's reasoning
Effects?	What are the consequences of such actions/threats to free speech?	

In this dispute, authors at times turn to arguments of definition, wherein they argue for the reinterpretation of free speech itself. To best capture this data, I separate authors' references to free speech in general from the accusation/defense scheme so as not to confuse the context in which they are expressed, though I was careful to reference and analyze them in tandem. Table 3 depicts the sub-codes I use for free speech definitions.

Table 3 Sub-Codes for Free Speech Definitions

Code	Criteria	Notes
Definition	Pro-offered definitions of free speech	
What threatens?	Commentary of what threatens free speech	Both removed from the context of a specific responsible agent and regarding specific threats to gather holistic understanding of what that author perceives as threatening to free speech
Policy	Policy positions on how we uphold / protect / promote free speech	

Table 3 Continued

Code	Criteria	Notes
Parameters	Explicit limitations and boundaries referenced of free speech	

Dispute #2: The Issue of Discrimination

Discrimination enters the debate as the purported enemy students or liberals fight against in their protests—the condition that inspired the action under debate in the larger dispute over free speech. For this dispute, I organize my data to track their role in the larger debate of free speech, as authors' perceptions and depictions of discrimination, as well as the ways they situate discrimination in their larger argument, vary greatly.

In gathering data for this dispute, I included references to or arguments about discrimination as it relates to student actions on college campuses as well as references to these struggles as they manifest in society at large. This includes references to or commentary of discrimination or inequality based on race, gender, or sexual orientation; inclusion and diversity policies, agendas, or terms such as diversity, intersectionality, Affirmative Action, microaggressions, safe-spaces, or trigger warnings; references to larger social movements or protests such as Black Lives Matter and the national anthem protests in the NFL; or racist groups such as Nazis or Ku Klux Klan. In table 4 below, I outline the coding schema I used to organize these data.

Table 4 Sub-Codes for Discrimination Dispute

Code	Criteria	Notes
Statement of the Problem	Statements regarding authors' perspective of the problem of discrimination	Includes counter claims or challenges to discrimination
Claims of discrimination	Direct charges / claims of discriminatory actions	
Discriminated Against	What groups experience discrimination?	
Discriminatory Group	What groups discriminate?	
Discriminatory Act	What acts authors identify as discrimination	
Evaluation of Effects/Harm	What are the professed effects/ harm of discrimination?	Includes reasoning for why

Dispute #3: The Real "Snowflakes"

To isolate themes of dispute underlying the use of "snowflake," I first located each of its uses, including those in article titles. For examples located in the text, I surveyed the surrounding argument to deduce how far the referent for "snowflake" extends into the conversation. For example, many authors reference "snowflakes" to continue referring to the same group as "students" or "liberals" in the following sentence(s)/paragraph(s), and so I consider these later referents as data to be included as the author's use and representation of "snowflake"—though I did not continue beyond the resolution of the claim in which "snowflake" initially surfaced so as not to over-extend analysis.

After identifying the portions of argument involving "snowflakes," I organized them according to whether they depict an accusation one is a "snowflake" or a defense of such characterizations in order to access the original structure by which stasis theory was intended to operate. Next, I organized the

data according to what argument it presents *about* “snowflake” itself, including direct or indirect depictions of who the term refers to or should refer to; how this person or group is characterized; what actions, attributes, or examples characterize them as “snowflakes” or *not “snowflakes”*; what reasons the author believes them to be acting upon; and what effects the author sees of their actions to cause.

Classifying Stasis

To identify potential stases, or points at which lines of argument were no longer compatible or depicted contrary representations of the problem across partisan lines, I first compared the data to identify points of contradiction in opposing arguments, beginning with a comparison across left- and right-leaning sources as a whole and then comparing across assigned partisan bias pairs. Next, I classified these contradictions according to their type of stasis, either one of fact, definition, quality, policy, or place. For this task, I used the following questions to aid my analysis:

1. On what opposing values, beliefs, and premises are these assertions based?
2. What conflicting/incompatible assumptions about our world do they reflect?
3. In what ways are these values, beliefs, and premises contradictory or incompatible with one another?
4. What role do these conflicting elements play in the larger dispute?

5. In what ways are they unable to interact meaningfully with the opposing argument(s)?

In this process, I kept close record of the stases that developed throughout each dispute—and from which articles—so I could remain alert to the ways these conflicts might inform or alter later or previous types of stases as well as to counter factors specific to each article, such as the main argument, author, partisan bias, rhetorical style, etc. Below, I clarify the criteria I used to determine and categorize each type of stasis: fact, definition, quality, policy, and place.

Fact

Issues of fact concern dispute over the occurrence, existence, or facts regarding the event or circumstance under dispute. Questions like “Did X happen?” or “Does X exist?” depict the most forthright issues of fact. To discern issues of fact, I did not delve into the subtleties of how these issues are depicted (as I consider these differences to be rather instances of framing, which I include in definition below), but rather assessed to see if the general essence of the fact at hand remains stable. For example, in the debate over free speech, the “facts” under dispute are student protests, and so long as these conflicts are roughly anchored to the acceptance of the same actors and events (i.e., authors express agreement students protested on college campuses) I do not consider any contradictions to be ones of fact.

Definition

Stasis of definition involves disputes over how the issue ought to be characterized—of what, exactly, authors consider the problem to *be*. I consider issues of definition to be potentially operative in two senses: first in the particular classification assigned to an issue or object at hand (e.g. do the authors classify students' actions as protest or censorship? Authoritarian or egalitarian?); and second in the operating definition (e.g. do the authors agree on what "racism" means?). In other words, I classify stases as issues of definition both when authors assign contradictory classifications to issues/objects or assign contradictory meaning to the same or nearly identical classification.

At times, authors directly define certain terms in their argument, and I coded these under definition immediately as I encountered them and sorted them according to their relevant disputes. Otherwise, I searched for issues of definition through the language used to classify objects in their arguments as well as arguments which reflect the author's interpretation of such classifications. Though, I do not consider classifications to be only examples of formal, direct defining of actions, such as "protest" or "censorship." Rather, I follow Schiappa's lead to consider framing language and syntax as also performing rhetorically to define a situation or event (156). This means I paid special attention not only to the names authors give to issues or events but also the adjectives, verbs, and adverbs authors use to describe them and the language they use to frame an issue and encourage readers to interpret its events.

Quality

Issues of quality reflect contradiction regarding the judgement or evaluation of an issue. They concern not only the author's evaluation of the issue as, for example, serious, egregious, or justified but also the extenuating circumstances they use to inform these evaluations, including the actor's intent, credibility, or personal circumstance; the effects of their actions, proposed or otherwise; past events which led to this incident, etc. In many ways, definition and quality are closely linked, as to define or frame an issue a particular way is also to evaluate it in a particular way. For that reason, I also consider the names, adjectives, and framing language authors use to define events in my evaluation of quality. Though, my perspective here shifts to focus on the affective connotations recalled by these descriptors, gauging their levels of contrast across binary spectrums of evaluation such as good or bad, dangerous or harmless, ridiculous or serious. In speculating over these contrasts, I was careful to maintain a firm connection to the specific issue or object under evaluation, as well as the rhetorical focus of that evaluation. Tone was also considered in these evaluations, as authors often shift between facetious and serious evaluation.

Policy

Issues of policy are more easily identified, as they pertain to contrary opinions over appropriate courses of action in response to an issue. Thus, any differing actions or policies authors propose, support, or condemn in these texts qualify as a stasis of policy.

Place

Finally, issues of place reflect claims that assert this is not the appropriate place/time/manner to deliberate the particular issue at hand. Any point an author moves to foreclose the specific issue at hand in order to end discussion or re-direct conversation to a more "relevant" or "appropriate" topic, then, is classified as an issue of place in this study.

Cross-Analysis

In my final stage of analysis, I pursued an open-ended cross-analysis of my findings from the previous two stages. Using my research questions to guide analysis, I explored connections between the stases across disputes and "snowflake" itself; considered connections between "snowflake," stasis points, and the examples of current discursive trends compiled in my preliminary analysis; and reviewed the secondary research that engaged most directly with my findings. Observations from this stage of analysis were primarily intended to reflect on my research questions and inform discussion, and so this stage is not represented in the findings section below, but rather reflected upon in the following discussion.

IV. FINDINGS

This study aimed to identify and classify the points of stasis within the use of “snowflake” itself and those present in the surrounding disputes. The findings report the most consequential contradictions and points of stasis, organized first according to the thematic disputes housing each set of stases or contradictory arguments (beginning with threats to free speech, then issues of discrimination, and finally conflict within the use of “snowflake” itself) and then by the type of stasis the findings represent (fact, definition, quality, policy, or place). The final section in this chapter briefly outlines the most salient examples of affective polarization, delegitimization, and moralization across these articles, as these markers of our current discursive climate emerge as dominant rhetorical behaviors at play in the points of stasis outlined below and feature prominently in the following discussion. I find it useful to remind readers at this point that I do not examine these types of conflict to discern who is right or wrong or even to evaluate arguments as strong or weak: my goal is to evaluate the rhetorical *character* of our discursive exchanges to better understand the mechanisms fragmenting rhetorical purchase across partisan lines.

To that end, I present the lowest-level type stasis points as well as sequential higher-level types in a given dispute to build a conceptual map of the conflict’s contradictions as it progresses—though only conflict in the lowest-level type can reflect the true stasis of that dispute. Due to the structure of the arguments analyzed in this study and the available data, some reported findings reflect contradictions that are not stases in truth because the arguments

compared do not consist of an accusation and defense, but rather two separate accusations. Because I found contradictions in these instances particularly intriguing and potentially useful toward the goals of this study, I also include them in this report. Though not truly points of stasis, I conceptualize these conflicts through stasis theory and outline their contradictions according to the types of stasis they categorically represent. In these instances, I clearly indicate the findings presented do *not* represent points of stasis but rather contradictions conceptualized *through* stasis theory.

Below I briefly summarize the main arguments of each article to provide readers the necessary context to follow the intricacies of their collective contradictions and to provide an overview of how each thematic dispute relates to one another across arguments. Then, I outline the contradictions and stases identified in each thematic dispute, beginning first with free speech, then discrimination, and lastly those reflected in authors' use of "snowflake." Finally, I provide examples of current discursive trends discovered in these texts that prove most influential in the answers to this study's research questions in the following discussion: affective polarization, delegitimization, and moralization.

For additional clarity, from this point forward, each reference to the articles above will be accompanied by a parenthetical note of that article's bias leaning (either "R" to indicate right-leaning bias or "L" to indicate left-leaning bias) and the degree of bias from a scale of 1 (most neutral) to 3 (most extreme). For example, references to Baer's argument, published by the most neutral left-leaning publication, *The New York Times*, will always be referenced in company with

“(L1)”, and Knighton’s article, published by the right-leaning publication with the highest degree of partisan bias, *PJ Media,* will always be referenced with “(R3).”

Brief Overview of Selected Samples

L1: “What ‘Snowflakes’ Get Right About Free Speech,” by Ulrich Baer (*The New York Times*)

In “What ‘Snowflakes’ Get Right,” Ulrich Baer (L1) argues that “we should resist the temptation to rehash” debates regarding free speech on college campuses because it disregards the philosophical work carried out in the 1980s and 90s to “legitimate” experience. According to Baer, such work reconceived the boundaries of free speech, prioritizing *equal access* to speech and designating arguments that devalue human worth to “restrict speech as a public good.” Through this framework, Baer asserts student protests are not censorship but efforts to protect free speech for a “greater group of people.” What is actually threatened, he argues, through American political leadership sanctioning insults and threats meant to delegitimize groups as unworthy of participating in public debate and bolstered by notions of an absolute free speech “that never existed,” are “the legal and cultural” rights of minorities to participate in public debate.

L2: “A Nation of ‘Snowflakes’: The Greatest Threats to Free Speech in American Come from the State, not from Activists on College Campuses,” by Adam Serwer (*The Atlantic*)

Adam Serwer (L2) argues in “A Nation of ‘Snowflakes’” that most debates about “snowflakes” and student protests do not truly concern free speech because they do not involve censorship of speech through state power, which Serwer marks as the boundaries of the First Amendment protections. Instead, he

argues these struggles only reflect natural conflict over the value of ideas in a morally polarized society and that it is rather conservatives who pose the "greatest contemporary threat to free speech," evidenced by scores of contemporary and historical examples of conservative efforts to restrict speech through state power in their own "acute sensitivity to liberal or left-wing criticism." Serwer contends that conservatives threaten not only free speech but freedom itself because conservative efforts to defend free speech disguise efforts to legalize the discrimination of minorities.

L3: "Guess What? Despite the Right's Propaganda, College Students Strongly Support the First Amendment," by Sophia McClennen (*Alternet*)

In "Guess What?" McClennen (L3) sets out to debunk the "hysteria" regarding free speech on college campuses. She argues campus unrest is orchestrated by alt-right provocation, manipulated by media bias, and exaggerated through misleading "so-called data" of student intolerance. McClennen rejects depictions of college students as weak, coddled, and entitled "snowflakes," arguing that such characterizations ignore "the reality of the millennial generation" because (more reliable) research suggests millennials are responsible and show habits of good character, and that they are more tolerant and supportive of the first amendment compared to older, uneducated conservatives, whose attitudes toward free speech (along with a general lack of education of the first amendment) pose the much larger threat to free speech.

R1: “Those ‘Snowflakes’ Have Chilling Effects Even Beyond the Campus,” by Heather Mac Donald (*Wall Street Journal*)

In “Those ‘Snowflakes’ Have Chilling Effects,” Heather Mac Donald (R1) seeks to correct what she calls a common “misdiagno[sis]” of “snowflakes” and student intolerance as a psychological disorder caused by over-protective parenting. She argues the problem is not psychological but “ideological,” based on a “worldview that sees Western culture as endemically racist and sexist.” According to Mac Donald, academia’s “overriding goal” is to convince students they are “existentially oppressed,” who then graduate to disseminate this worldview throughout society’s institutions. While Mac Donald agrees the threat students pose to free speech is a significant issue, she argues it is only a “symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality,” that will ravage “American society and civil harmony” even if we manage to restore free speech on college campuses.

R2: “Special Snowflakes? Or Fascists?” by Mona Charen (*National Review*)

According to Mona Charen (R2) in “Special Snowflakes? Or Fascists?” student protests reflect authoritarian and fascist behavior: despite the fact that students’ arguments are “couched in the language of safety,” Charen asserts “what these little snowflakes really want is repression.” However, Charen claims students have always been “natural radicals” who bolster totalitarian movements and that it is the responsibility of university administrators, “in a free society that hopes to remain so,” to impart respect for free speech and tame students’ natural

authoritarian instincts. Our real problem, she argues, is that those in charge of this duty now are the radical “shock troops” from the 1960s.

R3: “Poll Reveals How Many Students Believe Violence is Warranted to Suppress Speech,” by Tom Knighton (*PJ Media*)

In his article, “Poll Reveals,” Knighton (R3) reviews a survey published by The Brookings Institution to reveal a “large number” of students “support violating others’ right” to free speech. According to Knighton, students are driven to censorship because their ideas are not substantial enough to influence others through the contestation of ideas: he speculates, “what’s lacking from the “snowflake” Brigade’s arsenal” is “better ideas,” as their thinking is based on a repeatedly failed philosophy of “warn, Marxist rhetoric.” He concludes his argument with a warning that if students continue to censor others, they will only succeed in pushing their philosophy “toward the dustbin of history.”

Stases and Contradiction in Thematic Dispute #1: Free Speech, and its Threats

The structure of authors’ arguments in the dispute over free speech necessitated I report these stases out of order to appropriately account for how each type of conflict influences contradiction in the surrounding types. Though authors in this dispute reflect an agreement of fact (i.e., they agree student protests occurred), a majority of authors make arguments of place that mimic the rhetorical fracture of a disagreement of fact, thus influencing the character of contradiction for types of stasis that precede place (the fifth and last type).

Consequently, I first provide an overview of the agreed facts and next survey the rhetorical fracture that stems from authors' arguments of place.

Fact

The lowest level of conflict an argument may experience is one over the facts that constitute the matter under dispute, and it is the first type of stasis that must be settled in order to assess higher-level stases of definition, quality, or policy. In the dispute over free speech on college campuses, authors appear to primarily reflect an agreement of fact—that is, authors agree student protests occurred and are the current matter under dispute, and they do not challenge the reported facts of these incidents. From this finding, it should follow the next level of conflict that can disrupt the current dispute is one of definition. However, numerous arguments of place in this dispute render the foundational structure this agreement of fact ought to ensure in the evaluation of higher-level stases somewhat tenuous.

Place

Four out of six authors, including all three left-leaning authors, structure their main arguments over free speech around issues of place. Though place is the fifth and highest stasis type in this study and intended to be evaluated last, I report findings of place next because the high percentage of authors who present arguments of place in their main arguments over free speech significantly influence the data available and types of stases that precede place in this dispute.

Two rhetorical moves mark an argument of place: to disengage from the initial issue by dismissing and/or discrediting the current debate (in this instance the debate over whether or not students threaten free speech) and to redirect the conversation toward a more pertinent and/or pressing matter. These two rhetorical moves, especially as presented in the primary dispute by all three arguments of defense (left-leaning articles), significantly influence the nature of disagreement and types of stases that emerge from both this primary dispute and branching disputes by narrowing the focus of the main, initial debate and by disrupting agreement of fact through their introduction of a new dispute.

The specific influence these stases of place bring to the surrounding dispute are best observed through the individual arguments put forward by each author, as each argument uniquely situates its surrounding data in relation to the primary dispute and opposing arguments. Table 5 below illustrates the particular arguments authors present for each rhetorical move of place from left to right bias.

Table 5 Arguments of Place in the Dispute of Free Speech

Author	Withdrawal from Initial Issue:	Redirected Issue:
McClennen (L3)	“The other side to the story, however, is how the overblown coverage of free speech issues on campuses ignores the reality of the millennial generation”	“While the ‘alt-right’ wants everyone to look at colleges as hostile to free speech, it is actually the right itself that currently poses the biggest threat to free speech” “The only increasing threat to the First Amendment is a lack of higher education”

Table 5 Continued

Author	Withdrawal from Initial Issue:	Redirected Issue:
Serwer (L2)	"Most of the debates about free speech, however, are not actually concerned with the first amendment's protections… what is actually occurring on most college campuses is a conflict between groups over the value of particular ideas"	"But the greatest contemporary threat to free speech comes not from antifa radicals or campus leftists, but from a president prepared to use the power and authority of government to chill or suppress controversial speech, and the political movement that put him in office"
Baer (L1)	"…we should resist the temptation to rehash these debates. Doing so would overlook the fact that a thorough generational shift has occurred."	"What is under severe attack, in the name of an absolute notion of free speech, are the rights, both legal and cultural, of minorities to participate in public discourse"
Mac Donald (R1)	"Campus intolerance is at root not a psychological phenomenon but an ideological one." "The silencing of speech is a massive problem, but it is a symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality."	"But even if dissenting thought were welcome on college campuses, the ideology of victimhood would still wreak havoc on American society and civil harmony."

By justifying the dismissal of the initial debate, authors establish the premises on which they diverge from common understandings of the conflict and, consequently, the boundaries by which their claims regarding this initial dispute may be said to agree with opposing arguments that do *not* challenge the same common understandings by those same terms. For example, McClennen (L3) argues typical characterizations of students as overly-sensitive and hostile to free speech "ignores the reality of the millennial generation" (by which she appears to mean the general character, outlook, and patterns of behavior of younger Americans) and is rather the confused result of a "manufactured hysteria."

McClennen's (L3) withdrawal indicates any opposing arguments relying on the characterization of students as overly emotional, sensitive, or intolerant

across any dispute automatically conflicts with McClennen's argument, though the type of stasis it may or may not create further depends on how this characterization is situated in the opposing argument. For instance, McClennen's claim centers a majority of available data in this particular dispute on the younger generation's good character, and, as such, it does not often find direct purchase across opposing arguments in the dispute over free speech because, except for McClennen's (L3) partisan bias pair, Knighton (R3), students' character of insensitivity and intolerance—though certainly mentioned—does not often play a *direct* role in right-leaning arguments of students' threat to free speech, and the qualities of character she believes reflect the "true" reality do not openly conflict with right-leaning arguments.

Baer (L1) similarly dismisses the debates over college students and free speech for ignoring a component of "reality" he believes better captures the nature of the issue of free speech on college campuses, but though Baer (L1) and McClennen (L3) use similar strategies to withdraw from the initial dispute, their distinct arguments affect their relationship to data of opposing arguments in different ways. For Baer (L1), debates over free speech and student protests ignore the reality of a generational and theoretical shift that reconceived the boundaries of "what counts as public speech" and the communal obligations accompanying free speech protections.

In Baer's (L1) case, this theoretical shift is intended to render current debates over free speech moot because these conflicts have presumably already been settled: "we should resist the temptation to rehash these debates" (Baer).

Essentially, Baer (L1) asserts that through this generational shift, as a community, we have already agreed free speech means *equal access* to free speech and student protests, as associated with the cultural aims of this generational shift, reflect a defense of this goal: thus, further debate is unnecessary. In this sense, Baer's (L1) argument of withdrawal hinges on his operating definition of free speech, and so it influences the nature of conflict across opposing arguments more similarly to Serwer's (L2) withdrawal, which declares conflicts on college campuses do not involve free speech because "they are not actually concerned with the first amendment's protections."

Baer (L1) and Serwer's (L2) withdrawals identify the point of conflict between their arguments and those who argue students threaten free speech to be one of definition—that is, how do we define free speech and, consequently, what is considered a threat to free speech? In a sense, Baer (L1) and Serwer (L2) argue participants should withdraw from the dispute because it is not in stasis; though, to accept this as a true stasis point is to assume right-leaning authors disagree with this definition and that this disagreement affects their following definition of students' actions as violating or threatening free speech by those particular standards. Right-leaning authors, however, seldomly call on their definitions of free speech, and any indicator as to their potential nature of conflict is left to contextual clues. Direct conflict across opposing arguments is further blurred through these withdrawals as left-leaning authors directly challenge and respond to a particular definition of free speech they believe their political

opposition (conservatives or republicans) to hold, further restricting the criteria for opposing arguments to be considered in direct conflict.

Though, this first rhetorical move only represents half of these authors' arguments of place. The second rhetorical move, redirecting conversation to a more pressing/appropriate matter, influences the nature of conflict across opposing arguments in an entirely different way. Though authors are in agreement of fact, by necessity of directing a significant portion of their argument toward a different concern, authors implicate the variables of new facts in their arguments, engaging the second portion of their argument through an entirely new area of dispute and without the tether of established agreed upon facts or the opportunity for the accusation to respond to or engage these new issues.

Significantly, all three left-leaning sources redirect conversation to the larger or "real" threat students' accusers pose to free speech, launching responsibility back to conservatives, President Trump, or the media in a thorough role-reversal from the original issue. Building from a separate base of facts (e.g., Trump's response to NFL protestors or conservative legislation aiming to restrict protest (Serwer) (L2)), these arguments represent additional disputes that cannot be adequately compared across the dispute of free speech on college campuses through stasis theory. The structure of these arguments do, however, allow me to compare not only accusation against defense across partisan lines, but accusation against accusation, measuring the similarities and differences in how we perceive, define, and evaluate threats to free speech. Though I continue to use stasis theory's conceptual vocabulary to articulate these contradictions

across mirroring accusations of threats to free speech (predominantly in issues of quality), one should be mindful they do not reflect true stases because the arguments involved regard different disputes.

Themes evident in left-leaning authors' arguments of place above also emerge in Mac Donald's (R1) argument, the one right-leaning author to make an argument of place in the dispute over free speech. Like Baer (L1) and McClennen's (L3) withdrawals, Mac Donald (R1) poses opponents as removed from reality, and just like all three re-directed issues from left-leaning articles, Mac Donald (R1) departs from the initial debate in order to direct conversation to a new, larger, and more pressing threat posed by her opponents; though, in Mac Donald's case, all of these qualities are magnified. According to Mac Donald, the threat students pose to free speech is miniscule in comparison to the threat posed by the distorted ideology that inspires such censorship: "even if dissenting thought were welcome on college campuses, the ideology of victimhood would still wreak havoc on American society and civil harmony." The threat to free speech, she argues, is but a mere "symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality," brought about by academia's "overriding goal" to convince students to see "Western culture as endemically racist and sexist" and "view themselves as existentially oppressed." In Mac Donald's case, students are dismissed not merely for disregarding an aspect of reality but for experiencing an entire "distortion" of reality, and Mac Donald does not, like left-leaning authors, diminish the initial threat in order to pose a new one—rather, she maintains the initial

threat is still a “massive problem” of its own but emphasizes it is only the symptom of a far greater threat to our society.

Mac Donald’s (R1) argument of place is built through establishing a great number of definitions of students and their actions, beliefs, and claims (e.g. “ideology of victimhood,” “soft totalitarianism,” “graduates of the academic victimology complex,” “distortion of reality,” “ruthlessly competitive hierarchy of victimhood”). These definitions are logically interdependent in Mac Donald’s argument as it is extends across these disputes and thus crucial components of a great majority of her claims, meaning opposing arguments that stray from these definitions or the conditions that make them conceivable are automatically, on a number of given planes, in conflict with Mac Donald’s argument. The following sections detail the types of stasis that spring from these points of conflict Mac Donald (R1), Baer (L1), Serwer (L2), and McClennen (L3) establish in arguments of place.

Definition

Following an agreement of fact, the next official area of concern is how this fact ought to be defined. Traditionally, this would involve the definition of the agreed upon fact(s)—the issue of student protests on college campuses. However, the arguments of place implicate definitions of free speech as a potential area of conflict, including the liberties and parameters it entails and what constitutes a threat to free speech. Definitions of free speech play large roles in the authors’ definitions of student protests on college campuses (as

either violating or not violating free speech), so I report these findings before detailing contrary definitions of student protests.

Operating Definitions of Free Speech: Liberties and Parameters

Few right-leaning sources reference or call upon their definition of free speech in their arguments; only one right-leaning source, Knighton's (R3) "Poll Reveals," directly references specific liberties of free speech under threat by students as "the right to speak or listen to speakers who disagree."[3] Several left-leaning sources, however, draw upon not only their own definitions of free speech but also work to challenge what they take to be their opponents' operative definition of free speech in the issue on college campuses and beyond. Tables 6 and 7 record instances of direct references to liberties and parameters constituting free speech respectively, including liberal representations of conservative definitions.

Table 6 Entitlements of Free Speech

Author	McClennen	Serwer (L2)	Baer (L1)	Knighton
Primary Definition	"participate in a march, engage in local activism, donate to a cause, petition government and take leadership on issues that matter to them."	"people are allowed to express themselves… without fear of state punishment"	"equal access to public speech" "participate in discourse as fully recognized members of that community"	"right to speak or listen to speakers who disagree"

[3] Though, closely related, Charen (R2) does claim students have "succeeded in undermining the ethic of free inquiry."

Table 6 Continued

Author	McClennen	Serwer (L2)	Baer (L1)	Knighton
Proposed Opposing Definition	n/a	"'free speech' should be understood to protect businesses that wish to discriminate"	n/a	n/a

Table 7 Parameters of Free Speech

Author	Serwer (L2)	Baer (L1)
Primary Definition	n/a	"Some topics, such as claims that some human beings are by definition inferior to others, or illegal or unworthy of legal standing, are not open to debate because such people cannot debate them on the same turns" "Free speech protections… should not mean that someone's humanity, or their right to participate in political speech as political agents can be freely attacked, demeaned, or questioned."
Proposed Opposing Definition	"free speech absolutism" "The boundaries of free speech that elements of the conservative movement mean to set delineate a world in which the state protects the right to discriminate… and those who choose to protect such treatment can be easily marginalized with public opprobrium or state violence if necessary"	"a blanket permission to say anything anybody thinks."

McClennen (L3) and Knighton (R3) reference these liberties only briefly in passing as entitlements students take advantage of or threaten respectively, and so it is unclear whether or not liberties like the freedom to "participate in a march, engage in local activism, donate to a cause, petition the government" (McClennen) (L3) and "speak or listen to speakers who disagree" (Knighton) encompass the entirety of their understanding of free speech rights. For Serwer

(L2) and Baer (L1), however, these definitions are the grounds by which they dismiss the issue of student protests on college campuses, and so their representations offer a more complete picture.

Serwer (L2) understands free speech to protect expression from *government* control, which is ultimately upheld or not through the "commitment of American political leadership." Using the Trump Administration's brief in the 2018 Supreme Court case regarding a Christian baker who refused service to a gay couple on the basis of religious views as proof (which argues "the government may not compel an unwilling expressive group or event to admit speakers at odds with its message" (qtd. in Serwer)), Serwer in turn argues *conservatives* define free speech, demonstrated by their own treatment of free speech and discrimination in the "public square," as the protection to *discriminate*: "'free speech should be understood to protect businesses that wish to discriminate." Though Serwer offers no further explicit parameters for his own definition of free speech, he does further delineate the parameters he believes constitutes the right's definition of free speech, establishing it under an explicit binary whereby discrimination is protected but protests of such discrimination are *not* protected: "the boundaries of free speech that elements of the conservative movement mean to set delineate a world in which the state protects the right to discriminate… and those who choose to protest such treatment can be easily marginalized with public opprobrium or state violence" (Serwer) (L2).

Serwer's (L2) definition of free speech would not likely consider Knighton's (R3) appeal to the "right to speak or listen to those who disagree" to be involved

in free speech protections as Knighton (R3) implores it, nor would he likely admit other right-leaning authors' claim that students pose a threat to free speech by consequence of students autonomy from the state. Without knowing how right-leaning authors may respond to this definition (for example, many consider public universities to be an extension of the state, and thus subject to the same obligations as government bodies to protect free speech), these definitions, though likely contrary, are not presented in enough detail in these samples to definitively claim this distinction is the true essence of conflict—though it is Serwer's (L2) own professed point of conflict.

Baer's (L1) deemphasis of free speech as any one person's liberty to speak freely, on the other hand, may appear to be in more direct conflict with opposing arguments. For Baer (L1), free speech is less about protecting any one person's *liberty* to speak freely, with or without government interference, and more about ensuring equal access to speech as a "common, public good," which requires the "vigilant and continuing examination of its parameters" to ensure the necessary conditions for all members of a community to be considered legitimate contributors in the public exchange of ideas. Thus, he views arguments delegitimizing or dehumanizing groups to be excluded from free speech protections because they "restrict speech as a public good," and he insists the value of any particular idea must always be weighed against the "community's obligation" to ensure all members can participate as "fully recognized members of that community." This indicates student protests, by nature of the issues students fight against (i.e. discrimination, which Baer believes restricts speech as

a public good, and which all authors in this study at least agree is what students *claim* to fight against), are actually efforts to *uphold* free speech. This argument inherently conflicts with right-leaning arguments that insist student protests repress free speech in their defense of discrimination (to be explored further in subsequent definitional conflicts regarding threats to free speech and student protests).

Interestingly, both Serwer (L2) and Baer (L1) infer conservative arguments about student protesters rely on a (faulty) notion of "absolute" free speech: Serwer (L2) tries to diminish the opposing argument by stating, "free speech absolutism has rarely been a popular position in practice," while Baer (L1) understands the true attack on free speech to be "in the name of an absolute notion of free speech." Though no right-leaning source explicitly clarifies this position one way or another, some arguments, such as Charen's (R2) musing that a student shouting obscenities at a faculty member "ought to be enough to ensure her dismissal from the college—or some punishment," suggests conservatives may not necessarily understand free speech to be entirely absolute in these arguments as Baer (L1) and Serwer (L2) assume, or at least that they may not consistently or forthrightly do so.

Operating Definitions of Free Speech: Threats to Free Speech

What authors consider threatening to free speech offers insight about their general definition of the protections free speech is meant to embody. In the direct definitions of free speech provided, it is clear Serwer (L2) understands free speech to be violated by censorship through state power while Baer (L1)

understands arguments that “invalidate the humanity” of people to threaten free speech. Though other authors do not provide such detailed definitions, throughout all six articles, authors provide several examples of “perpetrators” violating free speech that provide insight into what they understand constitutes a “threat” to free speech. Surprisingly, many examples imply an agreement of definition, despite the fact both sides see the other as the ‘true” perpetrator. For example, both right- and left-leaning sources reference the use of violence, harassment, or threats toward controversial speakers as well as efforts or policies that limit/attack the freedom of the media and the press as threats to free speech.

The most blatant and interesting contradiction in these definitions of threat appears as the only potential concrete stasis of definition between Baer (L1) and Mac Donald’s (R1) arguments. In her argument, the several examples Mac Donald (R1) provides—and openly mocks—of students justifying what she classifies as “the forceful silencing of contrarian speech” closely resemble Baer’s (L1) argument for what constitutes the necessary *conditions* for free speech: “’shutting down rhetoric that undermines the existence and rights of others’” (Mac Donald) (R1). While Baer (L1) would likely argue such endeavors are necessary to ensure equal access to free speech and in fact work to *protect* free speech, Mac Donald (R1) openly categorizes these arguments as the ideology driving students to threaten free speech, indicating these arguments may operate on contrary definitions of free speech—indeed, perhaps even intrinsically opposite definitions.

Defining Student Protests

From all of the varying definitions of free speech, all six authors come to define the conflicts on college campuses rather differently. Even among partisan groups, though all three right-leaning sources characterize student protests as threatening to free speech and all three left-leaning sources challenge this definition, each author's definition of the conflict is rather distinct. In tables 8 and 9 below, I outline first the right-leaning definitions of this conflict as threatening to free speech and then detail counter left-leaning definitions.

Table 8 Defining Student Protests: Right-Leaning Authors

	Mac Donald (R1)	**Charen (R2)**	**Knighton**
Definition	"Campus intolerance is at root not a psychological phenomenon but an ideological one. At its center is a worldview that sees Western culture as endemically racist and sexist"	"Events at the University of Missouri were a perfect American storm: the confluence of fascistic and faculty behavior, viral rumors of white racism, and the almighty dollar"	"In other words, a large number of college students support violating others' right to speak or listen to speakers who disagree with their special "snowflake" sensibilities."

Throughout her argument, Mac Donald (R1) glides past references of student protests as "the forceful silencing of contrarian speech" and "soft totalitarianism" in order to emphasize her broader definition of the problem of "campus intolerance" as a whole as, "at root," a product of ideological aggression. As the one right-leaning author to make an explicit argument of place, Mac Donald's (R1) characterization of the student conflicts is offered as a counter to a common (often conservative) argument that students' behavior on campus is a result of a psychological disorder, most commonly referenced by Greg Lukianoff's and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

Challenging Lukianoff's and Haidt's blame for students' psychological distress on risk-averse child-rearing on the grounds that white heterosexual males, who do not demand safe spaces, had the "same kinds of parents," Mac Donald (R1) argues the suppression of free speech is rather an effect of a "worldview" perpetuated by academia "that sees Western culture as endemically racist and sexist." To Mac Donald (R1), "the forceful silencing of contrarian speech" is, though a significant problem of its own, only a "symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality," or, as she characterizes it, "the ideology of victimhood." Drawing on similar tyrannical tones, Charen (R2) defines student behavior as "fascist" and "authoritarian" in their "demands" to administrators and the public.

Finally, Knighton (R3) defines student protests as the repression of ideas that contradict students' "special snowflake sensibilities," representing the most typical criticism launched toward student protesters and the most similar in spirit to the conservative definitions left-leaning authors challenge in their own definitions (see table 9).

Table 9 Defining Student Protests: Left-Leaning Authors

Left	**Baer (L1)**	**Serwer (L2)**	**McClennen**
Definition	"The recent student demonstrations… should be understood as an attempt to ensure the conditions of free speech for a greater group of people, rather than censorship"	"What is actually occurring on most college campuses is a conflict between groups over the value of particular ideas"	"manufactured hysteria over the erosion of free speech protections on college campuses"

Left-leaning definitions of student protests represent an opposite reality to their right-leaning counterparts, though each author challenges the argument that students' actions ought to be characterized as threatening to free speech by different tactics. Baer's (L1) definition offers the most complete reversal and direct conflict to right-leaning characterizations, arguing students are not threatening free speech but rather defending free speech, particularly the free speech of minority groups. Serwer (L2), building from his argument that student protests do not involve first amendment protections because they do not exemplify abuse of state power, argues this contention is instead a natural and "expected" conflict over which ideas ought to be accepted or marginalized in a free society consisting of polity groups with "profound differences of opinion over moral values." Lastly, McClennen (L3) claims the concern that free speech is under attack on college campuses is not founded in truth, but rather an exacerbated and "manufactured hysteria" that fails to accurately account for the character and disposition of younger generations.

Interestingly, though McClennen (L3) definitively asserts, "free speech is in no way threatened on college campuses," she does not counter that students' actions are not threatening, as Baer (L1) and Serwer (L2) do, but rather emphasizes the characteristics of students that are contrary to popular belief and the lesser degree to which they support policies that threaten free speech as opposed to older conservatives or President Trump and his followers. To this extent, though she presents her claim as an assertive definition of "not threatening," the argument presented more closely represents a stasis of quality,

in that the conclusion she proves is really that students are “less” threatening than conservatives.

Quality

In evaluating the severity or seriousness of either “threat” to free speech, authors appeal to what they believe to have caused the threat, the motives and character of the individual or group responsible, and the effects and degree of harm it elicits. For those who make arguments of place, there is also significant effort dedicated to emphasizing the severity of one threat over the other. Below, I compare both the contrary evaluations of the causes, motives, and effects of student protests across partisan lines as well as compare the ways each side evaluates the other as a serious threat (i.e., compare accusation against accusation).

To be clear, none of the data that follows reflect stasis points *precisely*. The conflicting evaluations of the threat posed by students between left and right authors depict a conceptual progression of stasis from the contrary definitions of free speech and student protests explored above. That is, they do not represent “true” stases but rather portray how the unsettled stases of definition develop and branch into often more starkly contrasted evaluations of student protests. To compare right-leaning evaluations of students’ threat to free speech across left-leaning evaluations of the *conservative* threat to free speech, however, reflects a comparison of two (similar) accusations from two separate disputes, and thus they do not reflect stasis *at all* because their arguments do not concern the same issues, though they demonstrate intriguing contradictions, nonetheless.

Cause

Speculation as to what caused a defendant to act out his or her crime (assuming participants agree what type of crime characterizes those acts) are typically posed to emphasize the degree to which the defendant may be held responsible or "charged as guilty" for their actions, therefore arguing over the severity of the charge against them (quality). For example, left-leaning sources often claim the cause of student protests are the natural circumstances of their environment and thus not something to be feared or condemned, like Serwer's (L2) definition of student conflict as a natural contestation of the public's moral values, or Baer's (L1) insistence students are only responding to the "new reality" of a more diverse and inclusive society that aims to secure free speech for *all* citizens. Essentially, the arguments of quality put forward are that the conflicts are nothing to fear because they are a natural effect of our "profound differences of opinion over moral values" (Serwer) (L2), or students actions are not condemnable because they confront the reality of the situation and fight for laudable values (Baer) (L1).

McClennen (L3), however, shifts blame back to conservatives in her causal argument: she argues "'alt-right' personalities… entice students to push back on their scheduled appearances" and college campuses are used by the right as "staging grounds to foster violence and provoke conflict." From McClennen's (L3) perspective, conservatives are responsible not only for provoking students into conflicts and propagating a false narrative, or "manufactured hysteria" misrepresenting youths and their threat to free speech,

but also for what she refers to as “the upside-down world we live in today” by spinning a false, hypocritical narrative in response to the beginnings of the politically correct movement: “At the start of the PC wars, the right found a way to invert the story. Now they argued that they were the ones being censored, even though historically they have been the ones seeking to censor” (McClennen). Ultimately, McClennen (L3) believes conservatives, not students, hold the majority of blame in these conflicts, and thus students’ crime of threatening free speech ought to be considered minor in comparison to those who foster this conflict for political gain.

Often, arguments that point to a larger agent responsible/more responsible for the defendant’s actions or the injury caused, which simultaneously diminishes the accountability of the defendant accused, are posed to persuade others the issue or problem is less serious, or at least the defendant’s culpability or guilt in the issue is less serious (as in McClennen’s (L3) argument in defense of students above). Interestingly, most right-leaning causal arguments of quality also work to weaken students’ responsibility in their actions against free speech, though right-leaning sources do this primarily by minimizing students’ agency. Like many who criticize student protests, Mac Donald (R1) and Charen (R2) both view academia as responsible: Mac Donald (R1) argues it is higher education’s “overriding goal” to indoctrinate students into the “ideology of victimhood” by teaching them “within the ever-growing list of official victim classifications to view themselves as existentially oppressed” while Charen (R2) asserts students are “natural radicals” “stimulated by the scent of blood in the

water" and left unchecked by the once radical students of the 60s—now their professors—who are failing their "job" to "instill respect" for free speech: "our problem is that many of the students who were burning professors' research notes in the 1960s are now on the faculty" (Charen) (R2). For both Charen (R2) and Mac Donald (R1), responsibility ultimately lies with administrators and professors for student behavior, while students are simply deluded, in Mac Donald's (R1) view, or, in Charen's (R2) case, entirely incapable of reason and civil temperament on their own due to their radical, bloodthirsty nature. This theoretically works to de-emphasizes students' own agency and responsibility for their actions and beliefs.

Charen (R2) and Mac Donald (R1), however, do not appear to present these arguments in defense of students or to lessen the severity of their threat but rather to *emphasize* the severity of threat posed, even if not entirely posed by students. Depictions of students overcome and controlled by emotionally charged false perceptions of discrimination (Mac Donald) (R1) or by animalistic passions by nature (Charen) (R2) (especially given both Charen's (R2) and Mac Donald's (R1) appeals to restore Enlightenment ideals in later claims, which stresses the value of reason over emotion) portray an uncontrolled, unpredictable, frenzied adversary unsusceptible to logical reason and therefore unable to be reasoned with by civil means. For this type of adversary, the lack of accountability only serves to exacerbate the problem, as if to say, "They can't be reasoned with. It's hopeless."

Moreover, their depiction of the true agent responsible for the crimes (i.e., academia) also serve to exacerbate the severity of the crime. Charen (R2), for instance, poses administrators and faculty—seemingly society's only guardians against the animalistic radicalism of students—as sympathetic accomplices in students' crimes, responsible for leaving the freedom of society unprotected and allowing/encouraging student totalitarian movements to run rampant. Meanwhile, Mac Donald (R1) rouses fear of mass indoctrination in her depiction of academia's responsibility for student censorship, claiming they are consumed by the "overriding goal" to indoctrinate students to the "ideology of victimhood," who then go on to "remake to world in their own image." Though Baer (L1) agrees with Mac Donald (R1) that academic philosophy influences students' worldview and engagement in these protests, it is clear in this portrayal Mac Donald (R1) and Baer's (L1) unsettled stasis of definition regarding what characterizes a threat to free speech (as well as different understandings of the discrimination to which students respond, to be discussed in the next dispute) leads to vastly different evaluations of this influence.

Compared to his right-leaning counterparts, Knighton (R3) might at first appear to offer *more* accountability to students in that he does not point to an alternative/additional guilty party as the cause of the injury. Nevertheless, students are portrayed equally inept. For Knighton (R3), students are driven to censorship by their own sheer intellectual deficiency—they simply do not have any ideas or arguments strong enough to stand on their own, leaving censorship students' only option to beat contrary ideas: "But to beat those ideas with better

ideas, you first need some better ideas, and that's what's lacking from the Snowflake Brigade's arsenal" (Knighton). Knighton (R3) asserts students' threat to free speech is a result of their inept philosophy, which he seems to view as empty of all substance or merit and incapable surviving in the free competition of ideas: "Their ideas are based on a philosophy that has failed literally everywhere it's been tried, but they keep pushing it." Like Charen (R2) and Mac Donald (R1), Knighton (R3) minimizes students' accountability by questioning their capability of reason; though, unlike Charen (R2) and Mac Donald (R1), the effect of Knighton's (R3) attack on students' reason largely works to diminish the threat they pose to the degree that students' own ineptitude will lead to their inevitable destruction, or, in his words, "[they]'ll continue to push [their] own philosophy toward the dustbin of history."

Motive

Similar to the cause of a crime, imploring the motives of the defendant are also used to dispute issues of quality by arguing the defendant ought to be viewed as more or less culpable and thus more or less severe—for example, "he did not mean to run over the mailbox" (i.e., it was not an intentional act of vandalism), "so he should be viewed less harshly." In the dispute over whether or not students threaten free speech, motive is predominantly the branching point from which the second thematic dispute, discrimination, stems; though, discrimination continues to be a strong theme in the proposed motives of conservatives in separate disputes as well, and the contradictions at play depict

primarily a conflict over the moral evaluation of discrimination as it relates to a given side's motivation.

All three left-leaning authors imply issues of discrimination motivated students to engage in protests. For instance, Baer (L1) credits students for "grasp[ing]" the tenuous nature of "racial and sexual equality" in America, while Serwer (L2) aligns students with "those who choose to protest" discrimination "against religious, ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities." McClennen (L3) establishes this claim much more directly, challenging the argument that students are hostile toward free speech by countering they are truly motivated against "hate speech, racism, sexism, bigotry and Nazis." While McClennen's (L3) claim is put forward most directly as a conflict of quality regarding motive, all three of these depictions still function to imply students are motivated by a morally sound objection, and accordingly their actions are not (or, more aptly, less) condemnable. I suspect Mac Donald (R1) would agree to this motive, at least as perceived by students, though she would argue these perceptions of racism and sexism are examples of the distorted "ideology of victimhood" (brought about by the sinister motives of academia to perpetuate this ideology), and thus their claim to moral wrong is unsound.

Left-leaning authors further highlight students' diminished culpability on the grounds of morally affiliated motives by contrasting this innocence against conservative motives in their own threat to free speech—which also involve contradictory moral evaluations of discrimination because left-leaning authors often accuse conservatives as being motivated *by* discrimination in some

fashion. In the most extreme case, Serwer (L2) argues racism, sexism, and bigotry are what conservatives are actually fighting *for* in their *defense* of free speech. Referring to the Trump administration's brief in the Supreme Court Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission case, Serwer (L2) writes, "Ultimately the purpose of the argument before the Supreme Court is to create an exception to anti-discrimination protections large enough to encompass any form of economic activity." Claims that conservatives hold discriminatory motives establish conservative and student/liberal motives (regarding two separate disputes) as diametrically (and morally) opposed, but though right-leaning authors frequently asses student claims of discrimination with incredulity (to be explored in greater depth in the discrimination dispute), there is no evidence in the samples of this study to suggest they view discrimination as their own motive.

Though, in her examples of radical student shock troops, Charen (R2) includes an example of "Nazi students (egged on by professors) 'cleans[ing]'" Jews from universities in Germany, suggesting she may disagree with this assumption and equally views Nazis, at least, to represent a morally negative symbol. However, she also openly mocks or admonishes those who apologize for committing these moral offences after students accused them of injustice ("Good riddance" "we're all disappointed in you, buddy"), implying she does not understand student charges of discrimination to represent morally reprehensible behavior. Moreover, Charen (R2) challenges whether students are sincerely motivated by the need to protect themselves or others against discrimination.

She argues, “When fascism comes to America it will be wrapped in ‘diversity’ and demanding ‘safe spaces,’” and “though it is couched in a language of safety, what these little snowflakes want is repression” (Charen). Not to mention the contradictions potentially implicated in the ambiguous, possibly racist accusation fascism might invoke in this statement, from this perspective, discrimination is understood as the guise students use to repress others, the mirror opposite of Serwer (L2) and Baer’s (L1) argument that free speech is the guise their opponents use to discriminate. Indeed, the indication that students are truly advancing repression is also directly opposed to Baer’s (L1) argument that students are actually motivated to expand the boundaries of free speech—to liberate rather than repress. Overall, motives across partisan lines in the initial dispute and across separate accusations are inherently paradoxical.

Severity of Opposition’s Threat

In each side’s separate accusations of threats to free speech, barring a few interesting discrepancies, both view the opposition as exceptionally threatening in remarkably similar ways. The *pervasiveness* of a perceived threat to free speech is most widely used across both partisan lines to indicate degree of severity. For instance, Mac Donald (R1) uses several particular verbs, adjectives, and qualifiers (see table 10) to insinuate both the ubiquitous threat “graduates of the academic victimology complex” pose to society, of which the suppression of free speech is just one example, and the presumably delusional degree to which students believe themselves to be victimized by Western society (emphasis added).

Table 10 Pervasiveness of Threats Perceived and Posed by Students in Mac Donald's Argument

Threat Posed by Students:	**Threat Perceived by Students:**
"**any remotely** conservative speaker" "Such maudlin pleas for self-preservation are **typical**" "**plagues every** nonacademic institution today" "enter the **mainstream** at an **ever-quickening pace**"	"**endemically** racist and sexist" "within the **ever-growing** list" "**circumambient** bigotry" "**ruthlessly competitive** hierarchy of victimhood" "**inevitable** discrimination"

Herein ultimately lies Mac Donald's (R1) argument of place: "The silencing of speech is a massive problem, but it is a symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality." In these moves, Mac Donald (R1) emphasizes the severity of the threat posed by students by alluding to the pervasive spread of their ideology as if akin to an epidemic ("plagues every nonacademic institution"), while simultaneously working to diminish the pervasiveness of the threat perceived *by students* through facetious all-encompassing language that emphasizes the dubious scale to which students perceive discrimination: "the overriding goal of the educational establishment is to teach young people within the ever-growing list of official victim classifications to view themselves as existentially oppressed." Serwer (L2) accomplishes a similar effect by piling example after example of current and historical conservative efforts to censor criticism and discriminate against minorities through the power of the state.

For Knighton (R3) and McClennen (L3), this evaluation has more to do with sheer numbers. Knighton (R3) emphasizes the large percentage—"Over half… *Over half*"—of students willing to censor speech through violence or the

heckler's veto, while McClennen (L3) directly challenges the legitimacy of the study Knighton (R3) references in this claim, countering that, in comparison to older, right leaning adults, students are more hopeful about First Amendment freedoms (73%-54%), more confident in its security (40%-22%), and more tolerant of opposing views (78%-66%) (McClennen) (L3). Nearly echoing Knighton's (R3) own comment, she continues to say, "It's worth asking why more people are aware of campus protests of controversial speakers than of *the fact that almost half of all Republicans favor censoring the news*" (McClennen; emphasis added) (L3). Though the statistical nature of these evaluations give the appearance of an issue of fact, the issue under dispute in this schemata of stasis—proceeding the shared definition of a threat to free speech as a wiliness to censor speech—is really the *degree* to which their opposition as well as their own group can be understood to pose a threat to free speech.

McClennen (L3) and Serwer (L2) also urge readers to consider the extent conservatives ought to be perceived as threatening to free speech by taking into consideration the prevalence of commonly sanctioned and previously existing threats to free speech in our society as a whole:

- "The unpleasant truth is also that free speech absolutism has rarely been a popular position in practice" (Serwer) (L2).
- "While a disturbing number of U.S. citizens—whether students or not—would limit the First Amendment today, the truth is that lack of support for the five freedoms is not new" (McClennen) (L2).

Here, rather than emphasizing the prevalence of a threat to increase the sense of severity, Serwer (L2) and McClennen (L3) use it to devalue its severity, de-escalating its status from a unique, categorical threat to a common, if undesirable, infraction.

One final interesting theme in the comparison of evaluations of threat severity across both accusations is both sides stress and appear to fear the degree of power held by their opposition. For right-leaning sources, this takes shape through characterizing student protests or ideology as some of the most culturally condemned political ideologies, like “fascism,” “authoritarianism” (Charen) (R2), and “totalitarianism” (Mac Donald) (R1). In referencing, by definition, some of the most restrictive and repressive forms of government, Charen (R2) and Mac Donald (R1) also characterize the extent of the threat students pose in their degree of power as among the bleakest potential for tolerance of free speech, dissenting expression, and potentially even democracy and freedom themselves.

Further describing students’ demanding nature “that marks the essential authoritarianism at work,” Charen (R2) identifies the powers that carry student control as “fascistic student and faculty behavior, viral rumors of white racism, and the almighty dollar”—particularly the economic clout of Missouri black football players in their successful to unseating of university president Tim Wolfe: “That’s where the real power resides. When the black football players threatened to boycott this weekend’s game against Brigham Young, the university president

had to go." In evaluations such as this, it is the degree of influence students wield that appears to present such a threatening case.

Left-leaning articles, though not using this exact vocabulary, also imbue a similar air to their opponents' control as a repressive regime by emphasizing conservative's, especially Trump's, use and influence of "the power and authority of the state" (Serwer) (L2) in their threats to free speech. Serwer (L2) especially draws from tones of a violent, repressive state power. His argument of place, as discussed above, indicates this power as the only technical threat to free speech; but he also often leverages this power as an argument that elevates the severity of the threat posed by conservatives as compared to others. After admitting political violence of Antifa radicals *does* in fact pose a threat to free speech because it could potentially "be used as a justification for violent state repression of dissent," he continues to clarify, "that does not… make that movement a more pressing threat to free speech than those who hold the reins of the state and use that power to stifle dissent."

It is not only the *use* of this power that is threatening, but also the endorsing power it lends to the words themselves. Serwer (L2) also argues Antifa is "decidedly limited and non-lethal compared to the right-wing extremists who have inherited centuries-old traditions of terrorism and murder, and who have received the tacit approval of the president as 'very fine people.'" Baer (L1) similarly emphasizes the threatening power that stems from the influence of conservative political authority. He argues while the insults and threats "to which students are so sensitive might be benign when they occur within the ivory

tower," when they come instead "sanctioned by the most powerful office in the land," they pose a significantly larger threat of delegitimizing "whole groups as less worthy of participation in the public exchange of ideas."

All in all, authors evaluate threats purportedly posed by their own groups as miniscule, laughable, or even representative of a false reality while, on majority, they view threats posed by their opposition as urgent, pressing, and severe—and ultimately threatening to more than just free speech. For example, authors posit a variety of societal values, including "the Enlightenment legacy of reason and civil debate," "American society and civil harmony" (Mac Donald) (R1), "the soul of our republic" (Baer) (L1), "the greatest works of Western civilization" (Charen) (R2), and "free society" itself (Charen; Serwer) (R2; L2) to be at stake in the face of these dire threats. While these contrary evaluations do not reflect true stases as they do not involve the same dispute, it is evident there are indeed powerful contradictions at play in these mirroring and highly threatening accusations, and the fact that both sides depict the other to such a menacing degree is certainly of no small importance to the rhetorical character of our public sphere.

Stases and Contradiction in Thematic Dispute #2: Discrimination

In the dispute over discrimination, the type of conflict across opposing arguments remained ambiguous, and I was unable to determine this conflict as either one of fact, definition, or quality. In the following passages, I survey the ambiguities between fact, definition, and quality and then explore contradictory

definitions of cases or issues of discrimination to provide greater clarity as to the nature of contradiction across these articles.

Fact, Definition, or Quality?

As seen above, discrimination is deeply embroiled in the conflict over free speech on college campuses and beyond. It enters the conversation as the purported enemy college students, the left in general, or the authors themselves fight against in their protests, though the authors' perceptions and depictions of discrimination as well as the ways they situate this issue in their larger arguments vary greatly. While those on the left treat discrimination not only as a well-known and established fact of daily life but also the very threat conservatives pose (Baer; Serwer) (L1; L2), the fraudulence or miniscule effect of discrimination are largely the premises on which right-leaning claims rest, as in those depicted in table 11 below. The primary type of stasis in this branching dispute is difficult to pinpoint precisely, however, as data is less frequently clarified by authors and more often presented to serve divergent rhetorical purposes. With the available data, these contradictions could more or less equally reflect an issue of fact (i.e., conflict over whether or not discrimination is real or if it exists), an issue of definition (i.e., conflict over what constitutes or *ought* to constitute discrimination), or an issue of quality (i.e., conflicting evaluations of the magnitude, severity, or harmful effects of discrimination on college campuses and in American society at large).

Table 11 Discrimination Claims of Right-Leaning Authors

Author	**Claim**
Mac Donald (R1)	"But even if dissenting thought were welcome on college campuses, the **ideology of victimhood** would still wreak havoc on American society and civil harmony. The silencing of speech is a massive problem, but it is a symptom of an even more **profound distortion of reality**" (emphasis added).
Charen (R2)	"When fascism comes to America it will **be wrapped in 'diversity'** and demanding 'safe spaces'… **though it's couched in a language of safety**, what these little snowflakes want is repression" (emphasis added).
Knighton (R3)	"[students/snowflakes] don't have any [better ideas]. They've got tired, worn Marxist rhetoric peppered in with an **unhealthy dose of intersectionality—but they don't have anything particularly new**" (emphasis added).

Clearly, Mac Donald (R1) and Charen (R2) profess significant doubt toward the legitimacy of discrimination (at least discrimination claimed by students, liberals, or academia in these conflicts) when they argue it is a "distortion of reality" (Mac Donald) (R1) or the guise that "wrap[s]" and "couches" repressive efforts (Charen) (R2), but they do not specify the nature of this doubt. For example, Mac Donald's (R1) characterization of discrimination as a "distortion of reality" that "sees Western culture as endemically racist and sexist" could imply discrimination is not *real,* not accurately applied in the context of student protests, and/or not prevalent to the degree students claim it to be.

Mac Donald's (R1) and Charen's (R2) further emphasis of this doubt only appears to encourage a liberal interpretation toward the extent to which they leverage their doubt. Beyond these main arguments, Mac Donald (R1) and Charen (R2) work to discredit either discrimination's existence, legitimacy, or prevalence by way of dismissive tone, vocabulary, and style. From facetious quotation marks around terms like "diversity," "safe spaces," "marginalized students," and "intersectionality" (Charen) (R2) to descriptors like "so-called,"

"rumors" (Charen) (R2), "assumption," and "effete," (Mac Donald) (R1), Mac Donald and Charen cast explicit doubt toward (but largely leave up to readers' imagination to decide *between*) either the reality, definition, or legitimate threat of discrimination on college campuses and in the public sphere. Though right-leaning authors effuse blatant incredulity toward any mention of discrimination, I am hesitant to say this reflects an issue of fact. Rather, I suspect the true culprit, if given the opportunity to investigate further, would most likely be one of definition (i.e., they do not consider the issues students protest to *be* examples of discrimination) or one of quality (i.e., they do not consider discrimination to be as prevalent as an issue or as harmful of an injury as students claim it to be), though these authors do not appear concerned if readers assume they mean it does not exist at all.

Telling Definitions

Though the precise point of conflict in this dispute is difficult to discern, right- and left-leaning authors define and frame larger cultural conflicts or concepts related to discrimination in contrary ways that help further reveal the nature of conflict in this dispute. For example, Mac Donald (R1) defines intersectionality as "the campus-spawned notion that individuals who can check off multiple victim boxes experience exponentially higher and more complex levels of life-threatening oppression than lower-status single-category victims." Presented as such, the issue Mac Donald (R1) appears to take with intersectionality is that it prioritizes a degree of suffering based on a schemata she finds deeply problematic, perhaps even a degree of bitterness toward the

fact that those of the majority status are excluded from higher rankings of such victim statuses.

This definition, along with her additional objection to Affirmative Action (or, as she refers to it, “the assumption of inevitable discrimination against women and minorities”) on the grounds that it results in the “hiring and promotion based on sex and race at the expense of merit” and Charen’s (R2) distinction of “white racism,” follow similar lines of objection as those responses toward the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) like “All Lives Matter” or “Blue Lives Matter.” Though it is unclear from these samples as to how or if the definitions of such concepts are conflicted across partisan lines because left-leaning authors do not include their own interpretation of these terms, it is likely these arguments do at the very least reflect a conflict in quality, as these common responses to claims of discrimination are often rhetorically used to redirect attention to the idea that other groups are also, if not equally or more severely, victimized, challenging in some sense the prevalence of or the harm caused by the particular incident(s) is severe enough to allow it to rise above others.

Contrary evaluation of discrimination across partisan lines is evident in the contrast between Serwer (L2) and Charen’s (R2) framing and definition of police brutality and protests associated with Black Lives Matter as well, as shown in table 12 below.

Table 12 Framing Black Lives Matter Movement

Author	Definition / Evaluation	Author	Definition / Evaluation
Serwer (L2)	""Black Lives Matter activists protesting the lack of accountability **in lethal shootings of black men by police**" (emphasis added)	Charen (R2)	"Among his alleged sins was apparently not doing enough to shield so-called 'marginalized students' from feeling upset after a **black criminal**, Michael Brown, was **killed by the police officer he had assaulted**" (emphasis added)

Serwer's (L2) definition highlights the harm/threat police officers pose to black citizens ("lethal shootings") and their "lack of accountability," giving primary focus to the wrong to which activists react and expressing a general agreement that this issue regards racial discrimination. Charen (R2), on the other hand, in discussing the event that inspired the Black Lives Matter movement—the shooting of Michael Brown by Ferguson police—uses similar framing tools and passive language to emphasize *his* guilt, as well as the absurdity of University of Missouri students' demands that Tim Wolfe, their university president, apologize and resign for not appropriately acknowledging the threat Brown's death might "upset" them. By depicting Brown as a "black criminal," who "was killed" after "assault[ing]" a police officer, Charen (R2) draws attention to wrongs Brown committed and the ways he could be held responsible for his death, encouraging readers to presume, to some degree, justification in Brown's death and the police officer's actions. Charen (R2) also does not appear to consider racial discrimination a factor in this incident, as she presents Brown's death as a natural consequence of his actions, presumably to be equally experienced by any race, thereby negating the grounds on which activists could be considered

justified in their protests against “the lack of accountability in lethal shootings of black men by police” (Serwer) (L2).

Charen’s (R2) depiction of the very conflict said to have launched “snowflake” as an insult into mainstream media between students and Yale faculty head, Nicholas Christakis (Fox), also insinuates the issues students understand to be racially offensive or discriminatory (according to left-leaning sources and students’ own account) are either not true or harmful enough to be considered at all. Regarding this fight and its inciting conflict—which involved a public dialogue between Christakis wife, Erika Christakis, and the Yale Intercultural Affairs committee via emails to the student body about cultural appropriation and racially offensive Halloween costumes, the events of which were, according to PEN America, the climax of years-long racial tension on campus (46-47), Charen (R2) provides the following summary:

> An ideological fellow traveler at Yale screamed obscenities at a faculty member. That alone ought to be enough to ensure her dismissal from the college—or some punishment. But no. Background: The instructor’s wife had written an e-mail suggesting that students should be able to use their own judgment about Halloween costumes.

Charen (R2) makes no reference at all to racial tensions in this depiction, even in her definition of what students demand in response to the issues they perceive: “(comfort, that is, being defined by the insulation from challenging ideas).” Through defining and evaluating the encounter in this way, Charen omits, either intentionally or through honest representation, the issue of racism

and discrimination from the conflict entirely, while simultaneously implying the threat perceived by students (i.e., discrimination) is utterly ridiculous with quips like, “on such mighty issues do our finest minds now cogitate” (Charen). Compared to left-leaning authors who express no doubt toward discrimination’s existence in society at large or in instances to which students respond in their protests and who stress the significance of discrimination’s moral and legal (restriction of freedom) harm to American society, there are severe contradictions at play regarding discrimination’s presence, legitimacy, prevalence, *or* harmful effects on student and American populations. Despite the fact that the dismissal of these elements of discrimination establish the premises on which most right-leaning arguments rest, however, right-leaning authors do not specify or clarify these claims of dismissal but only allude to them, infusing doubt toward different aspects of discrimination as relevant in their conversation to demonstrate its total (if vague) falsity.

Stases and Contradiction in Thematic Dispute #3: “Snowflake,” Defining Our Political Opponents

When authors in this study use “snowflake” in a claim, they typically direct focus toward a specific definition or evaluation of the individual or group it describes. Accordingly, these claims often put forward arguments of definition or quality about the agents involved in the disputes above: including students, conservatives, liberals, academia, and President Trump. Most commonly, “snowflake” is brought forward as a term attributed to college students or liberals in these conflicts, to which authors either accept, amend, reject, or reassign that

descriptor based on the definition or qualities they understand “snowflake” and that group to imbue.

Authors in this study primarily appear to agree on the definition of “snowflake,” understanding it to refer to a hypersensitive, weak, coddled, and entitled person, especially someone who censors or represses free speech through sensitivity to criticism or intolerance of opposing views. Indeed, authors often treat “snowflake” as synonymous with someone who threatens free speech. Surprisingly, however, while right-leaning authors appear to agree with this definition and also believe students threaten free speech, left-leaning sources are not the only ones to challenge the argument that “snowflake” accurately describes students: on majority, right- and left-leaning sources *also* largely agree that “snowflake” does not, understood in this way, adequately define students in these conflicts.

Five out six authors, by varying degrees, do not consider the characterizations of “snowflake” as described in the definition above to appropriately capture students’ character or actions in campus protests. As noted in the methods above, many claims about “snowflakes” reflect directly back to or *are* the authors’ main arguments, and several of these claims are already explored in the disputes above. Focusing on the arguments directly related to defining or evaluating a group *as* “snowflakes,” however, allow elements isolated in findings of separate disputes above to come together now in intriguing ways. While there are several contradictions across these claims individually that reflect a lively dispute over the characterization of students’ character, actions, effects,

and motives across both disputes of free speech and discrimination, when each author's claims about "snowflakes" are taken holistically, especially compared across partisan bias pairs, the arguments tell an even more compelling story.

When observing the larger argument authors' put forward through their use of "snowflake," they each tell a story of what roles the author understands each group to play in debates over free speech and discrimination. Essentially, these epideictic arguments come to reflect a dispute over how groups invested in these public conversations ought to be represented as political agents and participants in the public sphere, and on what grounds these representations legitimize or delegitimize that group's claims. Interestingly, these arguments contradict each other most directly across partisan bias pairs. Across these pairs, authors' arguments involve the same players; use nearly identical narrative structures of perpetrators and victims; and apply strikingly similar definitions, evaluations, and accusations—but the assignment of these roles and definitions are completely reversed.

The most extreme bias pair, Group 3, offers the simplest structure, likely because it includes the only author who fully accepts "snowflake" as an appropriate definition for student protesters: Knighton (R3). Knighton's agreement centers the point of contradiction between his argument and McClennen's (L3) as one that either a) accepts "snowflake" as an acceptable definition for students or b) does not accept this definition. As such, it provides a useful foundation from which to observe how other authors build and diverge from this basic argument, and so I detail the contradictory arguments presented

in Group 3 first, working backwards in bias levels to end with the most moderate bias pair, Group 1. Below, I outline each author's argument of "snowflake"; discuss relevant contradictory arguments of definition, quality, policy, and place; and explore the ways these arguments both mirror and conflict across partisan bias pairs.

Group 3: Tom Knighton (R3) and Sophie McClennen (L3)

As the only author to accept without reservation that students are "snowflake" with all that entails, Knighton (R3) offers the least information regarding his own definition of the term, stating simply, "a large number of college students support violating others' right to speak or listen to speakers who disagree with their special "snowflake" sensibilities." Knighton (R3) introduces his article by confessing his "just plain silly" hope there were more "moderate and sane students" on college campuses (inferring "snowflakes" are comparatively *extreme* and *insane*) and later claims "snowflakes" are fearful and hateful toward the views they silence, but he does not directly reflect on the characteristics "snowflake" embodies, relying on the term's definition to instead carry itself through these similar allusions.

Though he declares "we have seriously failed America's youth" in response to his verdict that students support violating free speech, Knighton's (R3) evaluation of the threat "snowflakes" ultimately pose to free speech is by far the least threatening of all right-leaning (and some left-leaning) authors. He paints a picture of futile efforts and assured self-destruction through sheer lack of intellectual substance:

> But to beat those ideas with better ideas, you first need some better ideas, and that's what's lacking from the Snowflake Brigade's arsenal. They don't have any. They've got tired, worn Marxist rhetoric peppered with an unhealthy dose of intersectionality—but they don't have anything particularly new. Their ideas are based on a philosophy that has failed literally everywhere it's been tried, but they keep pushing it.

This "tired" and "worn Marxist rhetoric" leave "snowflakes" and their ideas so ill-equipped to stand on their own in the free competition of ideas, Knighton (R3) argues, they "simply want to block people from hearing anything but their own rhetoric." Yet, he continues to explain, regardless of students' efforts, people will still be exposed to these other ideas, at which point they will learn how much students fear those ideas and "just how hateful [their] ideology is." This, apparently, is enough to so thoroughly devalue their ideas to the public that Knighton (R3) ends his piece by warning "the Snowflake Brigade" if they continue to "keep this up," they will "push [their] own philosophy toward the dustbin of history." Ultimately, Knighton's (R3) evaluation of "snowflakes" is entirely dismissive, inferring a lack of both substance and impact despite their troubling tendencies of censorship.

McClennen (L3), on the other hand, firmly denies students are "snowflakes," arguing "the myths about millennials and college students simply don't match the facts," and these qualities more aptly suit conservatives who characterize students' as "snowflakes." Rejecting a long list of attributes assigned to millennial "snowflakes," including whiny, entitled, overreacting, hysterical,

intolerant, and unable to grasp reality, McClennen counters that students are mature, engaged, committed, and hardworking and more tolerant, informed, and open-minded than older conservatives. These facts, according to McClennen, better reflect the truth of our younger generations as compared to the biased and manipulated "so-called data" supporting these myths, including the specific study Knighton (R3) references to prove his own claim that students support violating free speech.

Knighton (R3) and McClennen's (L3) definitions of students are entirely opposite, and they ultimately find themselves in a standstill of conflicting data. While these conflicting data present more an issue of quality in the dispute over free speech on college campuses, in the dispute regarding "snowflake," these conflicts could be seen to reflect a stasis of fact because student character is directly the topic under dispute. They are similar, however, in that each author defines his/her opponents as "snowflakes" and utterly dismiss his/her opponents' logic and foundational knowledge as unsound and untrustworthy. Along with McCennen's tactic to reject the definition of "snowflake" toward students by proposing conflicting realities to assert opponents' claims to injury as false and exacerbate the perceived injury caused *by* opponents, these findings represent major themes in the "snowflake" dispute across all partisan bias pairs.

Group 2: Adam Serwer (L2) and Mona Charen (R2)

In defining students, Charen (R2) departs from the traditional understanding of "snowflake" in her rejection of students' hypersensitivity, expressing doubt that this description aptly captures the true motive of

“snowflakes” in their protests—repression: “There has been some tut-tutting, even among liberals, about modern university students’ hypersensitivity. But let’s not kid ourselves—though it is couched in the language of safety, what these little snowflakes want is repression” (Charen). In the quote above, Charen depicts sensitivity as a façade students create by rhetorical invention to disguise or excuse their exercise of fascistic, repressive authority. The notion that students’ claims to injury or offense are only tools to usher repressive agendas is further emphasized in her revision of Sinclair Lewis’ quote to read, “When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in ‘diversity’ and demanding ‘safe spaces.’” To complete the implication of this fraudulence, Charen expresses firm doubt and incredulity toward the existence or legitimacy of the issues of discrimination to which students claim injury by consistently enclosing related terms like “diversity,” “marginalized,” or “privilege” in quotation marks; by openly mocking students and others who acknowledge legitimate injury from these issues; and by making frequent dismissive quips about the issues they respond to, like, “on such mighty issues do our finest minds now cogitate.”

To explain students’ behavior, then, Charen (R2) makes an argument of place, claiming students have always been “natural radicals” who, “brimming with self-righteousness, unaware of how easily violence can spread, and stimulated by the scent of blood in the water, have provided the shock troops for most totalitarian movements.” Examples of such shock troops include American campus riots in the 1960s, Nazi students cleansing Jews in Germany, Russian students “taking their ideas to the streets” after being “incubat[ed]” by

universities, and students cannibalizing their own teachers during the Cultural Revolution in China. In this way, Charen dismantles the image of a weak, sensitive “snowflake” to replace it with a wild, uncontrollable, animalistic radical who must be tamed by academia through “instill[ing] respect for freedom of thought and expression” if our society “hopes to remain” free. Though, Charen implies this hope is rather slim, as the professors in charge of this duty are the very examples of radical “shock troops” she provides above.

The narrative put forward by Charen (R2) is one of a group who seizes absolute repressive control (as implied by the use of fascism and authoritarianism) by way of a false narrative of injury meant to disguise and empower repressive efforts. This narrative is shared across Serwer’s (L2) argument as well, but as opposed to claiming students falsely claim *sensitivity* toward *discrimination* in order to secure fascistic control of *free speech*—to the detriment of all freedom—as Charen (R2) does, Serwer (L2) argues conservatives use false and overly-sensitive claims of *free speech* violations to *discriminate*, which he similarly concludes is a “vision of an unfree society.” Though these stories share the basic steps, concepts, and people, they reverse the roles of perpetrators and victims between conservatives and students or those who protest discrimination, as well as the tools used to suppress and the objects of suppression (between free speech and discrimination). The price paid for each is not just free speech but freedom entirely.

As Serwer (L2) argues, it is not students who fit the description of “snowflake” but rather conservatives, especially President Trump and those who

support him. He claims that although conservatives argue liberals are "weak snowflakes, conservative complaints about political correctness often reflect acute sensitivity to liberal or left-wing criticism—criticism that when they can, they try to silence through opprobrium." He continues to explain that Trump's "views on free speech," as proven by his repressive threats in response to Berkeley and NFL protests to cut off funding and have players fired, "perfectly exemplify the strain of conservatism that insists those on the left are sensitive snowflakes who cannot sustain a dissenting view, and that simultaneously angrily demands that the state and society sanction the left for the expression of political views it finds distasteful." In his article, Serwer often emphasizes the hypocrisy he sees in conservative arguments in order to discredit their claims that their rights to free speech are violated by "snowflakes," and he argues these claims have "obscured the extent" to which "snowflake" tendencies describe their own movement. Yet, despite the fact that conservatives are the ones who truly represent the threat to free speech (on grounds that they use state power in order to do so), Serwer argues they fiercely defend the principal in the name of discrimination. What they are truly after, he says, in their cries in defense of free speech, is the right to legally discriminate in "any form of economic activity."

Here again, we have a villainous group who poses a severe threat to free speech and uses a 'fabricated' claim to injury in order to exert their power and will over other groups. And though Serwer does not use terms such as 'fascism' or 'authoritarianism,' the picture he depicts of conservative power as 1) one that does not shy from using "violent state repression of dissent," 2) is energized by

the identification of a fabricated threat, and 3) contains elements of racist or otherwise exclusionary goals matches the criteria widely used to describe fascism (Kedar). In lieu of emphatic labels to convey the severity of this threat, as Charen (R2) uses, Serwer (L2) rather emphasizes the urgency of this threat by stacking example after example of historical and contemporary conservative suppression of free speech and placing significant stress on their willingness to suppress dissent explicitly through power of the state.

Thus, we have two authors who each define and evaluate their present threat in nearly identical ways, but the perpetrators and victims are reversed, and the interpretation of events reflect mirror opposites, generating two accusations matching in structure but with contradictory roles to reflect, essentially, incompatible accounts—unless, of course, all parties are guilty as charged, but I am doubtful authors or others would agree this is the case, especially as the conflict is outlined and defined above by Serwer (L2) and Charen (R2). This incompatibility is only exaggerated in the next and final partisan group, Group 1.

Group 1: Ulrich Baer (L1) and Heather Mac Donald (R1)

Mac Donald's (R1) assessment of "snowflakes" builds from an argument most influentially put forward by Greg Lukianoff, which argues "snowflakes" suffer from a psychological disorder due to over-protective parenting and that students should learn cognitive behavioral therapy "so as to preserve their mental-health in the face of differing opinions" (Mac Donald). The main issue Mac Donald takes with this argument is they take "activists' claims of psychological injury at face value," reasoning white heterosexual males should also experience the same

levels of psychological trauma "as the outraged young women who claim to be under lethal assault from the patriarchy" if over-protective parents truly caused mental illness. Instead, she argues, the issue is ideological, and such outbursts are the result of a "profound distortion of reality" (perpetuated by academia) that understands "Western culture as endemically racist and sexist," which results in the "forceful silencing of contrarian speech," including "the greatest works of Western Civilization" (Mac Donald).

Mac Donald (R1) rejects the popular dismissal that these actions are just a "phase that will end once the 'snowflakes' encounter the real world," countering that the "graduates of the academic victimology complex are remaking the world in their image" through practices like affirmative action or diversity training, which emphasize a faulty "competitive hierarchy of victimhood." To address this issue, she argues "faculty and campus administrators must start defending the enlightenment legacy of reason and civil debate," but she infers this can only ease the "symptom" (i.e., the threat posed to free speech) of the larger issue: "the ideology of victimhood," which will still, regardless, "wreak havoc on American society and civil harmony" (Mac Donald).

In comparison, Baer (L1) also understands students' actions to be informed by academic thought, particularly the shift that occurred in the 1980s and 90s legitimizing "personal experience and testimony, especially of suffering and oppression" over reason and argument, which had historically dismissed these testimonies as "unreliable, untrustworthy, and inaccessible to understanding." In fact, it is on these grounds Baer (L1) rejects defining students

as “snowflakes,” arguing, “Widespread caricatures of students as overly sensitive, vulnerable and entitled ‘snowflakes’ fail to acknowledge the philosophical work carried out” in this shift, which recognized the “asymmetry of different positions when personal experience is challenged by abstract arguments” and the restriction of speech that occurs when individuals or groups are delegitimized and made to “defend their human worth” in public debate.

Students, Baer (L1) argues, though “roundly ridiculed by an unholy alliance of so-called alt-right demagogues and campus liberals as coddled snowflakes,” are actually fighting to expand free speech, and recognized the true threat to free speech was to minorities’ “rights, legal and cultural, to participate in public discourse” in our “new reality” where insults and threats are again “sanctioned by the most powerful office in the land.” Though he finds the issues “to which students are so sensitive” to be “benign” within the university, he emphasizes that, “coming from the campaign trail and now the White House, these threats are not meant to merely offend,” but to “discredit and delegitimize whole groups as less worthy of participation in the public exchange of ideas.” Rather than dismissing students as “snowflakes,” he concludes, “we should thank” them for “keeping watch over the soul of our republic.”

While Baer’s (L1) argument fights to secure and reestablish the legitimacy of students claims to injury and personal testimony of discrimination, Mac Donald (R1) argues the very opposite—that these claims are the result of a “profound distortion of reality” and academia has “led” students to imagine they suffer from endless discrimination, and thus they should be considered *il*legitimate claims to

injury. The asymmetry in public discourse between victims and perpetrators to which Baer (L1) refers in his justification for students' actions is likely the very type of "victim hierarchy" Mac Donald (R1) understands to be futile. Both authors see academic influence in students' arguments, but they attribute vastly different evaluations of this influence, one that allows students to confront reality and work to uphold free speech and the other as spreading a false representation ("distortion") of reality that threatens free speech. Baer (L1) urges readers away from a concept of free speech as robust debate that leads to the truth, arguing it is the false representation of free speech that endangers it, while Mac Donald (R1) understands the Enlightenment concepts of reason and debate to be the very solution for threats to free speech. And while Mac Donald (R1) worries "snowflakes" threaten the "greatest works of western civilization" and "civil harmony," Baer (L1) believes them to be guarding the "soul" of our republic.

Each author understands their opposition to be led by false conceptions and false claims to injury that are taking over our current "reality" to the detriment of free speech, though these threats are diametrically opposed. And for all they appear to *directly* oppose one another, the conflicts that engage one another do not often stem from *disputes* that engage one another (i.e., they represent a comparison across two distinct accusations), and the conflicting "realities" at play give the impression they could not possibly gain rhetorical purchase with one another, regardless of whether or not further investigation into these conflicting posits of reality may reveal stases of fact, definition, or otherwise.

While authors' arguments of "snowflake" depict contrary facts, definitions, evaluations, *and* realities, they depict strikingly similar rhetorical strategies and purposes: to dismiss the legitimacy of opponents while simultaneously presenting them as a major threat. These strategies indicate affective polarization and delegitimization serve primary roles in authors' use of "snowflake" in this study, which brings us to the next final section of section of this study's findings.

Examples of Current Trends of Political Discourse in Selected Samples

Along with points of stasis, I also looked for examples of the political discursive trends discussed in the literature review above in order to situate "snowflake" in its current rhetorical climate and answer my third research question: How might the stasis points encountered in the arguments surrounding "snowflake" help us better understand the nature of our current discursive climate? What new insights might they provide about our current problems? The problems addressed in my literature review include hateful, attacking language; affective polarization, or the display of extreme dislike or fear toward the opposing party; delegitimization, or the understanding of opponents as illegitimate discursive partners or the effort to cast them as so; and moralization, or the tendency to bind political identity, beliefs, and assertions to core values of right and wrong.

While there is no absence of hostility in these texts, direct verbal hostility through insults or threats is relatively scarce. Other than passing comments by Charen (R2) and Knighton (R3) using "snowflake" itself as an insult toward

students ("What these little snowflakes want is repression" (Charen) (R2); "students support violating others' right to speak or listen to speakers who disagree with their special snowflake sensibilities" (Knighton) (R3), hostile discourse largely remains a *topic of discussion* in these texts rather than a character *of* these texts. While they do not often exhibit primary examples of hateful or attacking language, their commentary about such language does provide a means to gauge their sentiments about its role and presence in our political discourse. For one, it demonstrates authors recognize hateful and attacking language to have a strong presence in our political discourse, especially in their political opponents' discourse. These examples also demonstrate authors understand hateful and attacking language to be, by varying degrees, threatening to our democracy; though, in the contexts of these arguments, it is not presumed to threaten the *character* of public discourse so much as the *freedom* of it.

While these examples are certainly interesting and worthwhile, I narrow my focus in this section to examples of affective polarization and delegitimization, as these discursive trends interact with the findings above most prominently. Moralization certainly plays a large role in these instances as well; however, it typically arises through rhetorical behaviors of affective polarization and delegitimization, and so moralization will be explored as it arises through these other discursive trends. The examples demonstrated below reflect apparent themes in affective polarization and discrimination examples across several texts; for brevity's sake, however, I detail only the most poignant examples of

these themes. After outlining these examples of affective polarization and delegitimization in the text at large, I then demonstrate their activity in relation to “snowflake” specifically.

Affective Polarization

Affective polarization represents the degree to which “partisans view each other as a disliked out-group” (Iyengar et al. 2) and harbor strong negative feelings such as fear, frustration, anger, and dislike toward opposing party members. In searching for examples of affective polarization, I looked to direct expressions of fear, anger, or contempt toward the opposing party as well as rhetorical efforts to establish clear boundaries between partisan in-groups and out-groups, such as efforts to set up an “us-versus-them” dichotomy or portray the out-group, or opposing party, as fearsome, threatening, or contemptable and align in-group affiliation in opposition to these traits.

Most examples of affective polarization can be observed in the stases of quality recorded in the disputes above, as affective polarization predominantly surfaces in these texts through efforts to establish opponents as grave threats while diminishing the threat posed by the author’s affiliated party, especially from left-leaning sources. Left-leaning authors significantly dedicate more energy than conservatives to directly establish partisan in-group and out-group boundaries and to emphasize the threat posed by conservatives as opposed to students or liberals, though this could be due to the nature of their arguments as a defense. What is more interesting is the most direct examples of this behavior represent

left-leaning arguments of place in the debates over free speech on college campuses, depicted in table 8 below.

Table 13 Affective Polarization and Left-Leaning Arguments of Place

Author	**Argument of Place**
McClennen (L3)	"While the alt-right wants everyone to look at colleges as hostile to free speech it is actually the right itself that currently poses the biggest threat to the First Amendment."
Serwer (L2)	"But the greatest contemporary threat to free speech comes not from antifa radicals or campus leftists, but from a president prepared to use the power and authority of government to chill or suppress controversial speech, and the political movement that put him in office, and now applauds and extends his efforts.
Baer (L1)	"The issues to which the students are so sensitive might be benign when they occur within the ivory tower. Coming from the campaign trail and now the White House, the threats are not meant to merely offend. Like President Trump's attacks on the liberal media as 'enemies of the American people,' his insults are meant to discredit and delegitimize whole groups as less worthy of participation in the public exchange of ideas"

In the examples above, each author dismisses the threat students or liberals pose to free speech in order to establish and emphasize the far greater and graver threat posed by conservatives, demonstrating clear in-group versus out-group behavior in the binary it establishes and, if not fear directly, the conviction that conservatives are a group *to be feared* for the threat they pose to free speech and/or our democracy.

The arguments left-leaning authors pose to discredit or dismiss the belief students and/or liberals pose a threat to free speech also often explicitly serve to heighten the severity of the threat they understand conservatives pose to free speech or to emphasize boundaries of us-versus-them. For example, in McClennen's (L3) effort to establish students' innocence in the threat they pose to free speech, she argues not only do alt-right speakers "entice students to push

back on their scheduled appearances" but also that the "the right is orchestrating the negative press over campus free speech." As she claims, the right is responsible for instigating campus conflicts as well as circulating unethically biased data ("funded by the right wing, ideologue billionaire Koch brothers") gathered by unsound methods ("conducted by a UCLA professor with absolutely no polling experience of any kind") supporting a false representation of students as threatening to free speech. After she presents her counterargument (more reliable data "suggests colleges and college-educated people… are the best champions for First Amendment rights") McClennen (L3) immediately moves to reassert her conviction that conservatives pose the *real* threat: "The real risk to the First Amendment comes from older Americans, especially right-leaning ones, not college kids." As McClennen's (L3) arguments work to delegitimize the threat students pose to free speech, they simultaneously work to reinforce the villainous characterization of conservatives in order to, presumably, fortify or magnify her portrayal of the threat she understands conservatives to pose.

Serwer (L2) poses a strikingly similar argument to establish conservatives as the greater threat to free speech while extending forgiveness toward students, but Serwer's efforts to establish in-group and out-group boundaries and examples of strong, apparent negative sentiment toward opposing party members most commonly (and most emphatically) occur in his distinction of opposing moral beliefs across partisan lines. He begins this demarcation with a forthright causal claim that "profound differences" in moral values across partisan lines is the true source of campus conflicts, arguing student conflicts do not

involve free speech protections but are actually “a conflict between groups over the value of particular ideas,” a natural symptom of every society and one “to be expected between groups in the polity that have profound differences of opinion over moral values.”

Serwer (L2) expands his articulation of the boundaries he understands to separate and define partisan moral differences—and consequently the boundaries of partisan moral identity—by increasingly drawing sharper and more extreme moral contrasts as his argument progresses:

- “The Nazi-punchers of Antifa remain a fringe—albeit one whose use of organized political violence is **decidedly limited and non-lethal compared to** the right-wing extremists who have inherited centuries-old traditions of **terrorism and murder**, and who have received the **tacit approval** of the president as ‘very fine people’” (Serwer) (L2).
- “That **does not** make Antifa the **moral equivalent of Nazis**, nor does it make that movement a more **pressing threat to free speech** than those who hold the reins of the state and use that power to stifle dissent” (Serwer) (L2).

Serwer diminishes the threat posed by Antifa by directly comparing it to the threat posed by conservatives, framing Antifa as comparatively “limited and nonlethal” and characterizing conservatives as morally associated, by Trump’s public endorsement, with “terrorism and murder.” He also directly opposes the moral threat posed by Antifa against those posed by Nazis, and he continues to further associate conservative morals to Nazis (“That’s a vision of ‘free speech’ that the

Nazis rioting in Charlottesville would be delighted with") and racism ("hardly far afield from… Goldwater's 1964 candidacy… whose opposition to the Civil Rights Act was core to his victory in the white South and cementing the regions turn towards the Republican party") throughout his argument. Through depicting conservatives as associated with terrorism, murder, Nazis, and racism through direct moral contrast against students and liberals, Serwer (L2) demarks powerful boundaries of moral partisan identities, establishing the out-group (conservatives) as depraved and unethical in these moral associations as compared to the in-group (students/liberals) as comparably morally sound in their protests against conservative immorality.

Comparatively, right-leaning sources seldomly draw or emphasize distinctive boundaries between partisan in-groups and out-groups, though that is not to say right-leaning authors do not engage in these rhetorical behaviors *at all*: while right-leaning authors rarely establish or emphasize in-group and out-group boundaries directly between *liberals and conservatives*, they often engage in in-group/out-group identification behaviors with *other groups*, particularly students and academia. Moreover, clear associations between students, academia, and liberals drawn elsewhere in conservative arguments, like Charen's (R2) specification of "liberal academics" or Mac Donald's (R1) characterization of "student thuggery against non-leftist viewpoints," do present a case that in-group and out-group demarcations between conservatives and students/academia could also represent *partisan* affective polarization. At the same time, left-leaning authors also associate age and education to be significant indicators of partisan

in-groups and out-groups, like McClennen's (L3) distinction that the "real weak link" to free speech is "older adults, especially uneducated and right-leaning ones," suggesting hostile partisan sentiments reach beyond partisan identity to include age and educational demographics as well in these texts.

In right-leaning articles, in-group and out-group behavior is most forthright from Charen (R2), who pauses her argument often to emphasize her disapproval of behavior she associates with students and faculty and to distance association with her own group's disposition. Such evaluations of behavior serve to establish rules of conduct for in-group eligibility, a phenomenon especially evident in Charen's (R2) condemnation of the victims in her examples of student repression. After revealing the unseating of both Wolfe and Christakis due to student protests (and emphasizing the threatening degree to which students wielded authority in these instances to instigate this result), Charen (R2) pauses twice in her argument to mock their following apologies:

- "Wolfe has since apologized, **groveled** ('my apology is long overdue'), and resigned. **Good riddance**" (emphasis added).
- "The target of that vulgar outburst has now **executed a full kowtow**. He invited students to his home and **prostrated himself**: 'I care so much about the same issues you care about… I'm genuinely sorry… to have disappointed you. I've disappointed myself.' Yeah, **we're all disappointed in you, fella**" (emphasis added).

Not only does Charen (R2) mock students' and activists' conviction and justifications behind their protests, she also turns on the victims she might

otherwise be presumed to defend, ostensibly because their apologies acknowledge responsibility to the wrong students accuse them, demonstrating that to acknowledge student accusations as representative of true and justified moral objection is a violation of in-group roles of engagement and revokes in-group eligibility ("good riddance"; "we're all disappointed in you, fella"), or "define[s] the limits of social behavior" of the in-group (Postmes et al. 690).

Instances of affective polarization in these texts primarily work to establish difference/distance between moral values of partisan affiliation, like Serwer (L2) and Charen (R2) above, and/or to establish political opponents as dire threats while diminishing the threats perceived by one's own political party—also often through establishing deficiencies in opponents' moral evaluative standards among several other tactics of delegitimization explored below.

Delegitimization

Delegitimization in this study refers to the view one's opponents are or the effort to cast one's opponents as illegitimate discursive partners in public debate. I identify delegitimization through the direct or indirect presentation of opponents and/or opponent's claims as illegitimate—or incapable of contributing value or substance to public debate and unworthy of respect, consideration, or engagement. Typically, delegitimization involves an attack on the character of one's opponent accompanied by the insinuation or claim said flaw invalidates the opponent's participation or contribution in the present debate.

In this way, as explained in the methods above, delegitimization follows similar rhetorical moves to ad hominem arguments, or arguments that attack the

personal character of discursive opponents in order to discredit their claims or participation. Indeed, examples of delegitimization in these texts overwhelmingly align with the criteria and rhetorical strategies of the major ad hominem subtypes identified by Douglas Walton. To take advantage of the conceptual and evaluative framework provided by Walton's analysis, the delegitimization findings in this section are organized and conceptualized according to the ad hominem subtype argumentative strategies they match.

With the exception of Baer (L1) (whose main argument is directly about delegitimization's effects on public discourse), authors in this study devote a substantial portion of their argument toward discrediting their opponents' legitimacy in the present debate and collectively engage in all ad hominem argument types and subtypes Walton addresses. These include the direct ad hominem, or personal attack, through all five subtypes (aspects of character): veracity, cognition, prudence, perception, and morals; the consequential type ad hominem, where authors attack opponents' veracity or prudence by accusing them of inconsistency or hypocrisy, like McClennen's (L3) claim that "it is perhaps one of the great ironies of the new 'alt-right' that they are the ones throwing fits about free speech" because "it was only a short while ago" that the right "was at the foremost of all sorts of censorship"; the bias type ad hominem, where authors accuse opponents of having a vested interest, hidden agenda, or some other sort of bias impairing "open-minded" participation in the exchange (Walton, "Ethotic Arguments and Fallacies" 201), like Baer's (L1) argument that "conservative media outlets… see these stories as politically useful and amplify

such stories for their audience"; the poisoning the well attacks, which act as an "extension of the bias ad hominem" to indicate one's opponents' bias is fixed absolutely and they will not consider other perspectives, like Mac Donald's (R1) accusation students will turn away "any remotely conservative speaker"; and tu quoque arguments that retort to ad hominem attacks against oneself or one's group by responding in kind: to "retort 'You're just the same,' or 'You're just as bad'" (Ad Hominem 16), like all three left-leaning arguments of place in the dispute over free speech. Though, as Walton acknowledges, all types of ad hominem ultimately may be said to reflect an argument of the first type, a direct (abusive) personal attack (120). Of the five direct ad hominem sub-types—referring to the five "aspects of character" one may attack to prove one's opponent's character is "bad," or "deficient in his role in a dialogue" (Ad Hominem 215)—the sections below report the most salient examples of the three sub-types (or character aspects) authors most frequently use to delegitimize opponents in these texts: prudence, perception, and morals.

Attacks on Prudence

To put forward an ad hominem attack of prudence is to argue one's opponent's "bad character for prudent judgement" serves to delegitimize their claims or participation in the present argument (Walton, Ad Hominem Arguments 215). In the samples of this study, attacks on prudence most often attack opponents' judgement as overly emotional or ruled by emotion as opposed to logical, measured reasoning. Examples such as Baer's (L1) light barb against "reflexive defenders" of free speech, Serwer's (L2) condemnation of conservative

legislator “triggered” by oppositional views, and Mac Donald’s (R1) bewilderment over student commentary that “exploded with sympathetic rage” demonstrate a sample of the range of severity and strategies by which authors dismiss opponents judgement as controlled by emotion versus logic.

Charen (R2) depicts the most extreme examples of delegitimization through attacks on opponents’ prudent judgement, painting students as “natural radicals” who are “brimming with self-righteousness, unaware of how easily violence can spread, and stimulated by the scent of blood in the water.” Through this attack, Charen (R2) implies students are so controlled by radical, animalistic passion they are incapable of exercising measured reason at all in the public sphere unless administrators “instill respect for freedom of thought,” and thus their claims of discrimination or injury by discrimination should be devalued or considered less credible.

Attacks on Perception

To launch an ad hominem attack of perception is to argue one’s opponent “has bad character for realistic perception of his situation,” and therefore his argument should be dismissed on the grounds that his perception of events under dispute is flawed or untrustworthy. Authors in these texts attack opponents’ perception most frequently by dismissing opposing claims based on their failure “to acknowledge” (Baer; Serwer; McClennen) (L1; L2; L3) some component of reality or by implying opponents are in fact completely removed or separated from reality (e.g. “a profound distortion of reality” (Mac Donald) (R1)). Most often, this attack specifically delegitimizes the harm or injury the opposition perceives

as entirely false or significantly less pervasive than the opposition makes it out to be, as when Mac Donald (R1) asserts, “Students have been led to believe they are at personal risk from circumambient bigotry” (Mac Donald) (R1). It is also the main argument authors use to dismiss the initial dispute in arguments of place: “the silencing of speech is a massive problem, but it is a symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality” (McClennen) (L3).

Attacking Opponents’ Morals

To present a moral ad hominem direct attack is to argue opponents have a “bad character for personal moral standards” of direct consequence to the legitimacy of opponents’ particular claims (Walton, Ad Hominem Arguments 215). For example, Serwer’s (L2) association of conservatives with terrorism, murder, Nazis, and racism presumably serves to present the case that conservative arguments affecting diverse populations of America should not be trusted to be in line with the moral standards of our community and thus should not be given legitimate consideration. Mac Donald’s (R1) and Charen’s (R2) warnings of the moral values and traditions students and liberals attack through their arguments (“greatest works of Western civilization” (Mac Donald) (R1); “offend every principal enshrined in the Bible and U.S. constitution” (Charen) (R2); “the soul of our republic” (Baer) (L1)) similarly attack the legitimacy of opponents’ discursive participation by undermining the character of their moral alignment.

Some efforts authors make to delegitimize opponents’ emotional expression or appeals also serve to attack or discredit opponents’ moral standards. Emotions like outrage, offense, and sensitivity involve forms of moral

judgment because they are informed by a sense of “right” and “wrong” structures of relation expected in a given society (e.g., it is wrong to treat others like X, so you are right to be offended by it); accordingly, views one is unreasonably outraged, offended, or sensitive also involve moral judgements, and typically require one dismiss or reject the moral offense implied by that emotion’s expression in order to delegitimize that emotion. For example, Charen (R2) dismisses the moral objection in student protests when she mocks Wolfe’s and Christakis’s apology to students, or when she discredits the legitimacy of students’ appeal to emotional distress in response to Michael Brown’s death by framing it as “to shield so-called ‘marginalized students’ from feeling upset after a black criminal, Michael Brown, was killed by the police officer he had assaulted” (Charen) (R2). Here, Charen re-frames the moral conditions of this issue (i.e. the wrong or harm committed and by whom) in order to delegitimize students’ claims that these events were morally objectionable, and therefore to extend incredulity toward students’ moral standards in their evaluations of the harm they perceive.

Affective Polarization and Delegitimization in “Snowflake”

Affective polarization and delegitimization frequently work to establish opponents as threatening and to discredit opponents and their claims—especially through attacks to opponents’ claims of injury, be they moral, emotional/psychological, or legal injuries— but their interaction within arguments of “snowflake” demonstrate intriguing relationships between “snowflake,” delegitimization, and affective polarization. For one, as an *ad hominem* itself, arguments regarding “snowflakes” are often presented to explore specifically on

what grounds its representation legitimizes or delegitimizes the claims of the group to which “snowflake” is attributed. Interestingly, the most common and powerful tactics of delegitimization throughout these texts attack the same qualities “snowflake” itself attacks, depicting opponents as overly emotional (bad character of prudence); unreasonably upset, offended, entitled, or sensitive (bad character of moral standards, as understood by their claim to moral offense); and “unable to grasp reality” (McClennen) (L3) (bad character of perception).

The degree to which authors delegitimize opponents according to specific characterizations of “snowflake” appears to directly correlate to the severity of harm or threat authors believe those opponents to pose—though, this correlation works in different ways for left- and right-leaning authors. “Snowflake,” in these texts, is often directly associated with those who threaten free speech through invoking intolerance for opposing or offensive ideas, again likely due in part to the topic of these arguments but potentially also due to the character of “snowflake” itself. For left-leaning articles, to deny these qualities also typically works to deny students’ threat to free speech by defending their rightful injury, like McClennen’s (L3) claim, “students are characterized as hostile to free speech when what they really don’t like is hate speech, racism, sexism, bigotry, and Nazis.”

In these instances, left-leaning authors deny the delegitimization “snowflake” implies toward students by defending the legitimacy of students’ injury and, through this legitimacy, prove threats from students to free speech false. Most often, these claims of defense simultaneously serve to delegitimize

opponents' claim to injury and situate them as the true perpetrator, like McClennen's (L3) argument that the right is using college campuses "as staging grounds to foster violence and provoke conflict." Finally, left-leaning authors typically reverse delegitimizing claims of "snowflake" back to conservatives and, in re-assigning these characteristics, establish the "true" threat posed by conservatives: "even as they portray liberals and leftists as weak snowflakes, conservative complaints about political correctness often reflect acute sensitivity to liberal or left-wing criticism—criticism that when they can, they try to silence through opprobrium" (Serwer) (L2). For left-leaning authors, whoever represents the true "snowflakes" appears to represent the greatest threat.

Right-leaning authors similarly use characteristics of "snowflake" to delegitimize students' claim to injury and diminish the in-group threat accused by opponents (regarding accusations of discrimination) (e.g., "such maudlin pleas for self-preservation are typical" (Mac Donald) (R1)) and emphasizes the threat students pose (e.g., "those racist texts include works by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Rousseau and Mill" (Mac Donald) (R1)). Notably, despite the fact that right-leaning authors who argue students *do* pose a threat to free speech equally treat "snowflake" as synonymous to those who threaten free speech, they still challenge particular characterizations of "snowflakes" toward students in their arguments. Unlike left-leaning authors, however, right-leaning authors deny aspects of "snowflake" in order to *further* delegitimize students' claim to injury and magnify the threat they pose.

For Mac Donald (R1) and Charen (R2), characterizations of “snowflake” appear so delegitimizing they do not convey the appropriate level of threat, and they challenge particular characterizations of “snowflake” (specifically those concerning emotional injury, i.e., “hypersensitivity” (Charen) (R2) and “psychological injury” (Mac Donald) (R1)), in order to exacerbate the threat students/liberals/academia are already understood to pose to free speech and society:

- “Many observers dismiss such *ignorant tantrums* as a phase that will end once the ‘snowflakes’ encounter the real world. *But the graduates of the academic victimology complex are remaking the world in their own image*” (Mac Donald; emphasis added) (R1).
- “There has been some tut-tutting, even among liberals, about modern university students’ *hypersensitivity*. But let’s not kid ourselves—though it is *couched in the language of safety, what these little snowflakes want is repression*” (Charen; emphasis added) (R2).

That “snowflake” is treated by right-leaning authors to be too delegitimizing to convey an appropriate level of threat is especially evident when these examples are compared to Knighton (R3), the only right-leaning author not to challenge any characteristics of “snowflake,” who views students as so inept as to pose no threat at all: “keep this up, and you’ll continue to push your own philosophy toward the dustbin of history.”

While the delegitimizing characteristics of “snowflake” appear compatible with left-leaning authors’ arguments that their opponents (the true “snowflakes”) represent the real or larger threat, for right-leaning authors, some delegitimizing characteristics of “snowflake” appear necessary to redact in order to assert opponents (though still “snowflakes”) pose a legitimate threat. In sum, although the conditions and strategies of its use prove varied and flexible, the rhetorical purpose of “snowflake” remains consistent: to characterize the condition of opponents’ illegitimacy that aptly corresponds to the level of threat they pose.

V. DISCUSSION

#1. What Underling Tensions or Stasis Points do Arguments Underlying and Surrounding "Snowflake" Reveal?

To contribute greater understanding toward the public sentiments driving our current political discourse climate, particularly those inhibiting meaningful rhetorical exchange across partisan lines, this study uses stasis theory to identify and examine the points of conflict underlying and surrounding the use of "snowflake" in six opinion pieces arguing over whether student "snowflakes" threaten free speech on college campuses. Thus, the first and most direct research question this study aims to answer is, "What underlying tensions or stasis points do arguments underlying and surrounding 'snowflake' reveal?"

Though conflict and contradiction abound across partisan lines in these articles, the procedures of this study revealed few *true* potential points of stasis. Regarding student threats to free speech, Mac Donald (R1) and Baer's (L1) conflicting definitions of free speech (where Baer (L1) understands the "shutting down [of] rhetoric that undermines the existence and rights of others" to constitute the necessary conditions of free speech and Mac Donald (R1) understands it to restrict free speech), represent the most promising contender because their contradictory arguments show the greatest potential to be reduced to this specific conflict (i.e., their opposing arguments regarding student protests could be understood to stem directly from these contrary definitions). It is possible Serwer's (L2) definition of free speech also reflects a stasis of definition as he insists in his claim that the debate about free speech on college campuses

is conflicted by a (false) definition of free speech ("are not actually concerned with the First Amendment protections"), though there is less direct evidence to support right-leaning authors explicitly disagree with his definition of free speech as the protection of speech from government control or if this disagreement would impact their initial arguments.

Certainly, there are also wildly conflicting definitions of student protests as well, including "violating others' right to speak or listen to speakers who disagree" (Knighton), "soft-totalitarianism" (Mac Donald) (R1), "fascist," "authoritarian," (Charen) (R2), "symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality" (Mac Donald) (R1), "attempt to ensure the conditions of free speech for a greater group of people" (Baer) (L1), "conflict between groups over the value of particular ideas" (Serwer) (L2), and "a manufactured hysteria" (McClennen). These contradictory definitions in turn create contradictory evaluations of the severity of threat students pose, with left-leaning authors dedicating significant effort to diminish the threat students pose to free speech and right-leaning authors (with the exception of Knighton) dedicating concerted effort to magnify that threat. McClennen (L3), however, represents the only true potential stasis of quality in the dispute over free speech, as she is the only left-leaning author that does not work to prove student protests do not threaten free speech (i.e., that they should not be defined or characterized as such). Though she asserts "free speech is in no way threatened on college campuses" (McClennen), her argument in general seeks to prove their actions are rather *less* threatening than ("real" and larger)

conservative threats to free speech and conservatives should be considered primarily responsible for students' actions.

Conflict regarding discrimination, on the other hand, remains entirely unclear. Right-leaning authors refer to claims or examples of discrimination with such skepticism and suspicion that this conflict appears at first glance to be an issue of fact (i.e., that right-leaning authors do not consider discrimination to exist as an issue *entirely)*. Charen (R2) and Mac Donald (R1) clearly reject the *legitimacy* of discrimination as an issue, at least as it applies to claims of student protesters, but common use of facetious and dismissive comments like "so-called 'marginalized students'" (Mac Donald) (R1) and their emphatic rejection of students' or activists' claims to injury by discrimination heavily insinuate they may not perceive discrimination to present a problem at all. Yet, neither Mac Donald (R1) nor Charen (R2) deny its existence outright, and it is possible these rhetorical maneuvers represent their rejection of the label as students or liberals apply it or their dismissal of discrimination as a *serious* issue. For all Mac Donald (R1) and Charen (R2) appear to encourage the reader to doubt discrimination's existence as an issue entirely, and despite the fact their arguments in many ways depend on their dismissal of discrimination, they do not clarify the precise nature of their doubt towards it, and it is unclear whether or not their contrary views toward discrimination reflect an issue fact, definition, or quality.

It is likely conflict over discrimination as related to student protests specifically or even as an affliction of society in general may need to be resolved before the true conflict in disputes over free speech and "snowflake" can be

identified. However, while discrimination is certainly a pivotal issue in the surrounding disputes, whatever type of stasis this conflict may reflect does not appear to solely account for the vast contrast between the definitions authors give student protests above or the definitions they give their political opponents below in arguments of “snowflake.” I take this to suggest that though conflict regarding discrimination (of any type) likely plays an important role in the conflict of the neighboring disputes in these articles, it does not fully account for the conflicting *nature* of these arguments.

Stasis is also difficult to pinpoint in the dispute over “snowflake,” aside from a conflict of fact between McClennen (L3) and Knighton (R3) regarding statistical figures of students’ perspective and attitudes toward free speech. Authors generally appear to agree a “snowflake” is defined as a hypersensitive, weak, coddled, and entitled person, especially someone who censors or represses free speech through sensitivity to criticism or intolerance of opposing views. Except for Knighton (R3), they also appear to agree these characterizations do not accurately or completely define students or liberals.

However, across partisan lines, authors deviate from the characterizations of “snowflake” for entirely opposed purposes: left-leaning authors work to redeem students’ character while right-leaning authors work to magnify their threat and illegitimacy. Definitions are partially in conflict as right-leaning authors generally agree to some characterizations of “snowflakes” while left-leaning authors denounce them all—but these conflicts do not appear to characterize the rupture separating contrary evaluations of authors’ political opponents because right-

leaning authors tend to build their arguments around the aspect of “snowflake” they *reject* in students (i.e. the definitional aspect in agreement across partisan lines). Rather, the contradiction of quality in this dispute appears to stem from the fact that arguments that convey agreement in definition are all presented through arguments of place and often appeal to conflicting realities.

Stasis theory’s framework is designed to offer a foundation to analyze conflicting arguments of accusation and defense to identify the *precise* point of contention by assuring agreement for each type before moving forward to the next: if lower-level types of stasis are in agreement, then the point of conflict in the next type should identify the true point of contention. However, despite the fact that these articles demonstrate few conflicts of fact (with the potential exception of discrimination), the conflicting definitions and evaluations emerging from these agreements of fact and even agreements of definition appear decidedly disjointed, and the points of conflict identified in all disputes do not quite provide the clarity they are intended to. Even for Mac Donald (R1) and Baer’s (L1) arguments, which depict the most promising point of stasis, the conflicting definitions do not appear to truly capture the bone of contention at play in their arguments and perspectives or explain how they create such contrary definitions of student protests as “keeping watch over the soul of our republic” (Baer) (L1) and a “symptom of a profound distortion of reality” (Mac Donald) (R1).

Undoubtedly, this is likely in part because these definitions are influenced by contradictory assessments of discrimination. I also believe, however, the several stases of place and contested “realities” across these texts largely

compromise the structural framework stasis theory is intended to provide, at least as far as it can be seen to provide this for a textual analysis. As more than half of opinion pieces analyzed in this study make arguments of place in their main arguments of free speech and their dispute over “snowflakes,” a significant portion of data gathered in this study involves not quite a disagreement of fact (which would require authors deny the conflicts on college campuses occurred, for example)—but a *separation* of fact.

Arguments of place disrupt agreements of fact through the two rhetorical moves that comprise them: 1) to dismiss or disengage from the initial dispute and 2) to redirect conversation toward a more pertinent or prevalent issue at hand. In this process, authors dismiss the initial dispute which shares an agreement of fact—over conflicts on college campuses, for example—in order to establish a new issue unique to their own argument, introducing new facts to the fray, such as threats posed to free speech by conservatives (Baer; McClennen; Serwer) (L1; L2; L3). These new lines of argument introduce separate accusations, for which the accompanying defense is not represented in opposing arguments to evaluate properly through stasis theory. Though I took advantage of the opportunity presented by these arguments to analyze two similar accusations side-by-side in the disputes over threats to free speech and “snowflakes,” the similarities and differences across these accusations do not reflect true stases because they do not concern the same issues.

Compounding this separation of facts are the conflicting assertions of “reality” accompanying arguments of place in these articles in its *first* rhetorical

move—to disengage from the initial dispute. In order to assert the dismissal of the initial dispute entirely, or, as Finlayson describes it, “to win before argument has begun” (555), authors in these texts consistently rely on alternative or conflicting concepts of reality to justify their claims: “the reality of the millennial generation” (McClennen); the “expected” reality of a polity that represents “profound differences in moral opinion” (Serwer) (L2); ”overlook the fact that a thorough generational shift has occurred” (Baer) (L1); “profound distortion of reality” (Mac Donald) (R1); “the truth is universities are and always have been ripe environments for absolutism” (Charen) (R2).

These conflicting assertions of reality inevitably shape and inform the definitions and evaluations authors continue to make in their arguments. As a result, regardless of the fact that authors agree generally about the “facts” under dispute, their interpretations of these facts are drawn not necessarily from the facts themselves, but from the opposed realities in which authors understand these facts to have taken place, diversifying the shared foundational base of “factual” assumptions authors use to define, say, the conflicts on college campuses, and severing the means by which contrary definitions such as “a manufactured hysteria” (McClennen) (L3) or “fascism” (Charen) (R2) may be understood to directly conflict with one another. These findings lend support to Finlayson’s hypothesis that arguments of place “may be particularly important” because they represent “attempts to set the boundaries of political argument” (555). As I will argue, I take these findings to indicate the boundaries and premises on which they are established should be accounted for independently

of place or fact in stasis theory if it hopes to articulate the true bone of contention in political discourse.

Stasis theory offers a means to identify the true bone of contention only if agreement is gathered along its types in order, using agreed upon facts to construct following definitions that then inform evaluations, and so on, until the precise point of contention becomes clear. Without a clear tether holding contradictory definitions and evaluations together through agreed facts, or, in the case of these articles, what "realities" authors perceive to house and give meaning to these facts, stasis theory as applied to the arguments in this study is not capable of fulfilling its ultimate purpose—to identify the *precise* point(s) of contention—because arguments of place and assertions of conflicting realities effectively replicate the fracture that stems from a disagreement of fact—which, as the lowest-level stasis, alters and distances all subsequent types. When considering the theoretical premises of stasis theory, which holds the true bone of contention as the exact conflict that creates such fragmentation, I propose the fractured arguments of this study indicate the type of conflict driving such opposition may not yet be accounted for in the traditional types of stasis—that perhaps a theory designed to address judiciary conflict in the homogenous culture of Classical Greece (which enjoyed a more cohesive base of shared norms, especially ethical norms of character (Adamidis 234) that are highly contested in the present study) cannot appropriately account for the nature of disagreement in such a diverse and globally-connected society as our own.

What is also interesting about these arguments of place is they appear to coalesce around arguments of "snowflake." The contradictory accounts I survey above through arguments of "snowflake" appear to directly correlate to authors' arguments of place in both the dispute over "snowflakes" and "free speech." And, just as "snowflake" is typically launched back in public discourse to accuse those who first used the term as "snowflakes" themselves, all arguments of place from defendants (left-leaning authors) serve to launch nearly identical accusations back to the accusers (right-leaning authors) in their re-directed argument. Across partisan bias pairs, these arguments typically reflect mirror-opposite accusations, reversing the roles of perpetrators and victims and swapping the tools or objects of oppression between free speech and discrimination to create incompatible accounts. For example, while Charen (R2) argues students claim false sensitivity to *discrimination* in order to secure fascistic control of *free speech* to the detriment of all freedom, Serwer (L2) argues conservatives use false claims of *free speech* violations in order to *discriminate,* which he similarly concludes is a "vision of an unfree society" (Serwer).

What is consistent in these cases are the rhetorical strategies authors use to prove their argument. Across all accusations and arguments of place in these articles, authors demonstrate and rhetorically employ strong feelings of fear, dislike, and distrust of opponents through their efforts to establish opponents as severe threats and exert significant energy to discredit and delegitimize opponents and their claims, especially their claims to injury. This suggests both affective polarization and delegitimization represent prominent players in the

arguments that work to fracture stasis theory's foundational framework and further distance opposing arguments from direct conflict with one another, the implications of which I further explore in the following sections of this discussion.

Collectively, the findings above survey the stases and tensions discovered in this study and comprise the answer to my first, most direct research question: What underlying tensions or stasis points do arguments underlying and surrounding 'snowflake' reveal?" What these stases and tensions in turn reveal about the state of our political discourse, however, is best explored through the remaining questions of this study. The following sections of this discussion address each of the remaining questions in turn. I conclude with a recognition of this study's limitations and then offer potential implications these findings bring to future research—primarily that the structure of stasis theory may need to be re-assessed in order to better accommodate and reflect the nature of contradiction in contemporary political discourse.

#2. How Might the Stasis Points Encountered in the Arguments Surrounding "Snowflake" Help us Better Understand the Nature of our Current Discursive Climate? What New Insights Might They Provide about our Current Problems?

To answer my second research question, which aims to discover how the tensions and stases outlined above may illuminate, shape, or be shaped by the conflicting sentiments driving our current discursive climate, I first briefly outline the patterns and rhetorical behaviors associated with the most common examples of our current climate in the articles of this study (affective polarization,

delegitimization, and moralization) and then discuss how these trends function in arguments of “snowflake” specifically and what this in turn suggests for the function of “snowflake” and delegitimization in political discourse. Finally, I explore how affective polarization and delegitimization interact with stases of place to disrupt agreement of fact across opposing arguments and characterize potential root stases at play in these disputes.

Affective polarization, delegitimization, and moralization all appear as prominent figures in authors’ arguments across these texts. Evidence of affective polarization is clear in issues of quality and arguments of place as authors work to establish their opponents as dire threats (e.g., “the biggest threat” (McClennen) (L3); “the greatest contemporary threat” (Serwer) (L2); “under severe attack” (Baer) (L1) who endanger not just free speech but also “the Enlightenment legacy of reason and civil debate,” “American society and civil harmony” (Mac Donald) (R1), “the soul of our republic” (Baer) (L1), “the greatest works of Western civilization” (Charen) (R2), and “free society” itself (Charen; Serwer) (R2;L2). Authors also frequently engage in in-group and out-group behavior (for groups stretching beyond partisan affiliation to include other demographics like age and education) by diminishing the threat purportedly posed by their in-group and emphasizing the threat their out-group poses. This in-group and out-group behavior, along with the hostility, fear, and derision that frequently accompany it, is also often exaggerated when authors differentiate moral boundaries of partisan identity, like Serwer’s (L2) claim that “Nazi-punchers remain a fringe... albeit… decidedly limited and non-lethal compared to

the right-wing extremists who have inherited centuries-old traditions of terrorism and murder."

Certainly, these findings corroborate scholarship that argues affective polarization is a growing and prevalent concern in political discourse (Abramowitz, The Great Alignment; Abramowitz and Webster; Garret and Bankart; Iyengar and Westwood; Iyengar et. al.; and Rogowski and Sutherland) as well as Abramowitz's claim that such partisan affective polarization marks a divide along other demographics as we become increasingly more polarized (The Great Alignment 72). That examples of affective polarization in these articles frequently involve and are often exaggerated through demarcation of moral boundaries also supports Garret and Bankart's argument that moralization exacerbates affective polarization (3). This finding also identifies moralization as a rhetorical tool authors use to establish in-group and out-group boundaries across partisan lines to magnify the perceived threat of their political opponents and deemphasize the threat of their partisan in-group.

Interestingly, though delegitimization is discussed in the literature review as an effect of affective polarization and moralization, it similarly appears to function as a tool authors use to engage behaviors of affective polarization. Authors often diminish the in-group's threat and assert the threat of the out-group by delegitimizing opponents' claims to injury. For example, McClennen's assertion that students do not pose a threat to free speech because "'alt-right' personalities… keep trying to entice students to push back on their scheduled

appearances” both proves students innocent and conservatives threatening through accusing them of bias or inconsistency.

Delegitimization serves as a primary rhetorical tool authors use to dismiss opponents claim to injury through all disputes. The character aspects right- and left-leaning authors most collectively target to delegitimize opponents include attacks on their character for prudence, perception, and morality: that is, authors in this study most often delegitimize opponents’ claims to injury by asserting emotional reasoning impairs their opponents capacity for prudent judgement (e.g. “stimulated by the scent of blood in the water” (Charen) (R2)), opponents’ claims do not accurately account for the reality of the situation (“fail to acknowledge” (Baer) (L1); “ignores” (McClennen) (L3)) or indeed are completely severed from reality (“profound distortion of reality” (Mac Donald) (R1)), and opponents’ claims to injury and/or emotional appeals are based on faulty moral values (“that’s a vision of free speech the Nazis rioting in Charlottesville would be delighted with” (Serwer) (L2)). Ultimately, these attacks serve to delegitimize opponents’ claims to injury in such a way that diminishes the threat such injury accuses of one’s own in-group and makes room (and reason) for authors to re-establish their opponents’ as the “true” threat. The rhetorical functions affective polarization, moralization, and delegitimization serve in these texts are best witnessed through their relationship to arguments of “snowflake” and arguments of place.

The Rhetorical Function of Affective Polarization, Moralization, and Delegitimization in Arguments of “Snowflake”

As an *ad hominem* itself, “snowflake” often engages in delegitimization directly, and arguments deliberate over the degree to which certain groups

should or should not be considered a “snowflake” typically argue over the degree to which characterizations of “snowflake” render discursive opponents illegitimate. Either due to topical focus of “snowflake” in this study or the partisan sentiments that animated the use of “snowflake” in our public sphere to begin with, the character qualities authors most collectively attack to delegitimize opponents are the same character qualities “snowflake” itself attacks: “snowflakes” are overly emotional (bad character of prudence); unreasonably entitled, upset, offended, or sensitive (bad character of moral standards, as understood by their claim to moral injury or importance); and “unable to grasp reality” (McClennen) (L3) (bad character for perception).

The degree to which authors delegitimize opponents according to specific characterizations of “snowflake” directly correlates to the severity of harm or threat authors believe those opponents to pose, as the manner in which authors apply its characteristics allows them to prove opponents’ injuries false and assert the greater threat opponents pose—though, left- and right-leaning authors appeal to the delegitimizing qualities of “snowflake” in different ways to assert opponents’ threat. For left-leaning authors, whoever represents the true “snowflakes” represents the greatest threat, as authors work to deny the delegitimizing characteristics of “snowflake” and apply them to conservatives (e.g., “conservative complaints about political correctness often reflect acute sensitivity to liberal or left-wing criticism—criticism that when they can, they try to silence through opprobrium” (Serwer) (L2)). For right-leaning authors, some delegitimizing qualities of “snowflake” must be dismissed in order to reflect

students' true level of threat (e.g., Mac Donald's (R1) dismissal of students' "psychological injury" allows her to assert the greater threat posed by their "distortion of reality" and Charen's (R2) dismissal of students' "hypersensitivity" to assert they truly want repression, as compared to Knighton (R3), who does not challenge the characterization of "snowflake" toward students and who sees them as no serious threat).

What both right- and left- leaning authors share in their deliberations of "snowflake" is an effort to reject the legitimacy of their opponents' injury and an effort to assert that the power they wield to influence others *through* these false claims to injury represents a dire threat. Left-leaning authors appear able to establish opponents as threats *and* "snowflakes" despite the delegitimizing effects "snowflake" brings; when comparing these arguments against right-leaning authors who first disprove the delegitimizing effects of "snowflake" in order to assert opponents' true level of threat, the different degrees to which the delegitimizing qualities of "snowflake" can be said to interrupt perceptions of threat appear to boil down to the degree of power the group of "snowflakes" may believably wield or have previously wielded, and therefore how far-reaching the effects of their false injuries may be conceived:

- "The issues to which the students are so **sensitive** might be **benign** when they occur within the ivory tower. **Coming from the campaign trail and now the White House,** the threats are **not meant to merely offend**." (Baer; emphasis added) (L1).

- "Many observers dismiss such **ignorant tantrums** as a **phase that will end** once the 'snowflakes' encounter the real world. But the graduates of the academic victimology complex are **remaking the world in their own image**" (Mac Donald; emphasis added) (R1).

In this way, "snowflake" represents a rather flexible tool authors use to establish a baseline of illegitimacy toward opponents from which they may then highlight or dismiss particular qualities as suited to their argument or circumstance in order to assert opponents as simultaneously illegitimate *and* villainous.

Though these authors use "snowflake" differently in order to delegitimize opponents, it is clear these acts of delegitimization similarly work to discredit opponents claims to injury and lay the necessary groundwork to prove the degree of threat authors understand both in-groups and out-groups to pose. And while the recognition that delegitimization serves as a primary tool for affective polarization is indeed a worthwhile discovery to better understand how these trends function rhetorically in the public sphere, how delegitimization and affective polarization interact with arguments of place suggest they are not only common rhetorical strategies but also crucial indicators of the conflicting rationalities driving such fragmented opposition in these articles. Though arguments of place and contrary realities make true stasis difficult to discern, authors' use of delegitimization and affective polarization in the two rhetorical moves of place (which also, importantly, coalesce around conflicts of "snowflake" and defining political opponents) helps to better characterize the root stases that may be at play beneath these arguments to cause such fragmentation.

Affective Polarization and Delegitimization: Characterizing the Fracture in Rhetorical Purchase

While delegitimization of all sub-types is used to prove opponents' injuries false and threats dire throughout these arguments, one type in particular—attacks on perception—characterize all arguments authors use to disengage from the initial dispute (the first rhetorical move of place). That is, all authors who make arguments of place justify their dismissal of the initial dispute by asserting a crucial aspect of reality is unacknowledged or disregarded by opponents (or, in Mac Donald's (R1) case, entirely "distorted"), proving their claim to injury illegitimate and the current debate misguided. From here, authors then always redirect the conversation (the second rhetorical move of place) to the "true" and greater threat posed by their opposition—their most direct examples of affective polarization. The conflicting realities severing relation between opposing arguments arise through attacks of perception that give license to shut down the original argument and launch a separate accusation—further severing the rhetorical purchase of opposing arguments.

In other words, delegitimization and affective polarization characterize the precise mechanisms that disrupt rhetorical purchase across opposing arguments. But what does this tell us, exactly? Are the authors motivated to launch arguments of place *because* they are affectively polarized? Do affective polarization and delegitimization serve as the catalyst for such fragmentation through their very hostile nature? Or are they merely symptoms of the conflicts driving such fragmentation? The answer is likely in part all of the above, but the true cause of this correlation is more complex than the findings of the present

study can hope to represent. In any case, it cannot be denied affective polarization and delegitimization *characterize* such fragmentation, which indicates they are indeed important sites of inquiry to better understand the conflicting rationalities that comprise our current political discursive climate.

Following the theoretical premise of stasis theory, which situates the true conflict as the foremost contradiction that disrupts all further types, it stands to reason the root conflict in these articles may be housed in the conflicting rationalities driving arguments of place through rhetorical behaviors of affective polarization and delegitimization, either through stases located in other, related disputes (like discrimination) or perhaps even through some level of conflict not fully accounted for in stasis theory's traditional framework (i.e., one other than fact, definition, quality, policy, or place). Certainly, such an appearance of conflicting "realities" signifies a blatant (if still yet amorphous) conflict of "truth." That these efforts and conflicting realities are aimed to prove injuries either true or false and greater or lesser also marks these disputes as a struggle over what groups should be considered legitimate victims or perpetrators in these conflicts.

As I will demonstrate in answer to my fourth research question, such a struggle inherently involves conflict between moral evaluative structures and may be further illuminated through recent rhetorical scholarship of affect and emotion. First, however, in order to further clarify these points of conflict I contend characterize the root stases at play in these articles and better reflect on the implications they bring to our current discursive climate, the following section will

explore a body of discussion I believe best captures the tensions and rhetorical fracture surveyed above: “post-truth” politics.

#3. How is the Use of “Snowflake” Indicative of Existing Tensions or Stasis Points Across Partisan Lines? In what ways have People Previously Conceived these Stasis Points, and how Might “Snowflake” Offer New Perspectives?

My third research question aims to explore how the tensions and stases discovered in this study may have been previously conceived/discussed in scholarship and how their specific function in the arguments of this study and/or how conceptualizing them through stasis theory may offer new insight to these conversations. For this question, I focus discussion toward the conflicts that fracture the foundational structure stasis theory ought to provide—arguments of place and conflicting realities—as I believe these fractures provide insight toward the root conflicts driving such incompatible arguments. I explore their similarities to the tensions expressed through the conflict theorized in academic discussion of “post-truth,” which I believe best speaks to the nature of contradiction at play in these underlying conflicts and best characterizes their type of conflict. Through this exploration, I examine the rhetorical similarities these conversations share with the findings of this study and speculate what insights this scholarship and the present study might provide one another.

Building from the work of Illan Baron, Frank Fischer, and Jonathan Mair, who understand “post-truth” to be representative of wider partisan epistemological tensions, I argue the contradictory realities at play in the

arguments of this study and their subsequent rhetorical fragmentation are indicative of the same types of conflict and rhetorical fracture as those of “post-truth,” and that these struggles over legitimate truth and knowledge manifest in public debate to disrupt rhetorical purchase through greater and more nuanced varieties than the typical brash and jarring examples of dissonant truth in “fake news,” “alternative facts,” or climate change denial to include phenomena like “snowflake” or the conflicted arguments of this study. That is, I contend the epistemological tensions shared between conflicts of post-truth and of those analyzed in this study further supports Baron’s call to action that those concerned with post-truth (and, ultimately, as I will also argue, stasis theory) must explore beyond contestations of “true” or “false” empirical facts to consider other modes of meaning-making and knowledge production that structure the meaning of “facts” and delineate standards of “true” or “false” if they wish to truly confront issues like “post-truth” politics and their arresting effects on political discourse.

“Post-Truth” Politics and Our Epistemological Struggle

In both popular discourse and academic debate, the term “post-truth” is often amorphously ascribed to various conditions of our political discourse or societal psychology, and a number of scholars note its lack of a conceptually coherent definition (Fischer; Gibson; Kirkpatrick; Vogelmann). Some follow the definition *Oxford Languages* provides when “post-truth” won the 2016 word of the year, which denotes a condition “in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” In this context, authors are clear to distinguish “post” does not signify a period “after” or

beyond truth but rather indicates the “marginalization,” “trivialization” (Hussain), “irrelevance” (Warren 610), or “instability” (Boler and Davis 75) of truth, or the relegation of facts to “at best… secondary considerations” (Fischer 134). Often, scholars call on the term “truthiness,” coined by Stephen Colbert, referring to a belief founded in what *feels* true (Fischer 134). As Fischer holds, “post-truth” is typically seen to characterize “a political culture in which discussion and debate are shaped by emotional appeals disconnected from the empirical details of policy issues. They relate to the repeated assertion of arguments and issues that ignore expert opinion and factual refutation” (Fischer 134).

In Timothy Gibson’s effort to establish a more firm definition of post-truth, he observes the discussion of post-truth is typically split under two strains: the first as a “narrow approach” that uses “post-truth” “to describe specific rhetorical strategies that trade heavily in deception, misinformation, and emotion” and to identify “unethical actors” that “pollute the public sphere with misinformation and emotional appeals” (what he equates to essentially a “cousin” of propaganda) and the second as to signal a new, broader “era” or “political-epistemological landscape” in which citizens cannot discern true from false and continue to fall prey to “deceptive forms of political persuasion.” Though, Gibson criticizes this second strain too for overextending a mythical historical condition of truth, citing John Corner’s “wry” retort that such “eras” are “presumed to be distinct from a previous ‘‘era of Truth’ we apparently once enjoyed’” (Corner 1100, qtd. in Gibson). Instead, he counters post-truth politics refers to a set of “rhetorical strategies” that arise through “the circular relationship between the endless

reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions that anchor truth claims" (Gibson).

Yet, for all the varied and nuanced attempts to characterize the essence of "post-truth," or, as Vogelmann puts it, to "give name to what appears to be a quantity and quality of untruth in politics," I align with Baron, Fischer, and Mair's perspectives' in that I consider arguments that situate, define, characterize, or analyze claims according to a particular standard or quality of "truth" (by either earnest or duplicitous means) to invariably reduce to an epistemological struggle, or a reflection of the evaluative legitimacy standards and interpretive frameworks of truth and knowledge in political discourse in various iterations of—often outright—conflict. For both the characterization of "post-truth" and of "snowflakes," this struggle emerges most obtrusively as a clash between postmodernity and modernity epistemologies, or, to risk overgeneralization, a clash between relativism and positivism.

Indeed, there is a sizable group that blames postmodernism outright for both the condition of "post-truth" and student "snowflakes," along with its oft-related issues like political correctness, multiculturalism, identity politics, intersectionality, and threats to free speech, claiming by varying degrees that postmodernism's academic philosophy of "widespread incredulity" (Kirkpatrick 313) toward truth and its rejection of Capital 'T' Truth (absolute, ideal, or fundamental truths) in favor of plural or infinite "true" interpretations permeated throughout society to permit a weak, "anything goes" authority over facts and the scattering of foundational truths. These conditions are then posited as fertile

grounds by which a number of nefarious groups can deploy “truth” in harmful, unethical, or incoherent ways, including “hawked” “in the marketplace of ideas” to the highest bidder (Kirkpatrick 318); manipulated by several groups to undermine the credibility of empirical science, including dangerously relative liberal academics, immoral conservative thinktanks motivated by financial and political gain, and ignorant climate change deniers and anti-vaxers (McIntyre 27); or seized by students to pursue a politically correct agenda and repress free speech. The similar ties of postmodernism in “post-truth” and student “snowflakes” lends a degree of credence to the connection I will soon clarify between the epistemological conflict regarding “post-truth” and the conflicts of this study, but, first, I wish to illustrate how direct contestations of epistemological frameworks regarding “post-truth" generate intriguingly similar patterns of conflict and stasis discovered in this study regarding college “snowflakes.”

In reading scholars’ descriptions of “post-truth” politics and its effects on political discourse, there are a number of intriguing parallels to the character of conflict they describe and those evident in the articles of this study. First, it is clear when scholars of “post-truth” describe its harmful effects to political discourse as “gridlocked” (Kirkpatrick 330), exhibiting a “lack of movement” (331), or “obscuring the root causes” of the case (Warren 612) they see “post-truth” to create a sort of stasis, or understand it to cause debate to, abruptly, no longer *be in* stasis (i.e., it leads participants to a debate in which they are no longer arguing over the same thing). For example, Warren wonders if “messages rooted in

emotion, rather than fact, skew the debate (to the extent that there is any) to such a degree that we are fighting the wrong fight?" (623).

Interestingly, affective polarization appears to play a prominent figure in the issue of post-truth as well: scholars often posit its characteristics of strong negative sentiment and out-group behavior to be a direct cause of "post-truth" politics as well as the stasis they understand it to create, though they refer to these qualities indirectly or by other names like "political tribalism" (Gibson), "political paranoia," "mistrust and hostility" (Fischer 143, 140) or "otherization" (Warren 611). Finally, reflecting on the curious recirculation and attachment of the relativist/positivist struggle, Baron describes a pattern of conflict not unlike the circulation of "snowflake" in the public sphere or the paradoxical accusations of this study in what he calls an "odd convergence of claims," where the similar accusation that a party's "relativist tendencies" have led them to "turn[] their backs on evidence" has found purchase for both the left and the right on various occasions (83).

Though, Baron continues to counter those on both sides that claim relativism endangers society's grasp on "truth," stating, "That both left and right would eventually have to deal with debates about facts is a sign not that there are no facts, or that facts cannot be tested, but rather that we have forgotten exactly what facts are" (83). To scholars such as Baron, Fischer, and Mair, to center discussion of "post-truth" toward the peril of facts is to ignore that facts exist as a part of a broader system(s) of knowledge production and their standards of legitimacy and the role they serve in different narratives are not

systems that can always or only be judged by empirical standards. That is, they argue the condition of "post-truth" is not about conflict over data or facts but rather the "meanings attached to them" and the sociopolitical functions or goals such knowledge may serve (Fischer 142).

The irony in arguments that decry postmodernism for dismantling truth is they accurately identify the issue at hand as an epistemological conflict and a condition of plurality within those frameworks, but to set it under a positive/relative dichotomy is to misrepresent actual practices of knowledge production and meaning-making and to confine the debate by structures that cannot hope to identify the problem at hand. As Baron warns, to argue relativism threatens objective truth is to establish all knowledge reducible to a true/false dichotomy where "truth" is considered valid by scientific empirical standards alone—or by "terms of the 'scientists'" (73)—standards that cannot hope to evaluate the conditions by which knowledge is structured in social and political contexts (73-78) because it "ignores the power of narratives and meaning" (73). As Baron puts it, "it does not matter whether there is or is not an objective world of facts out there if we don't accept the knowledge that describes this world as valid" (82).

While the authors in this study do not reject climate science or deploy the sorts of bald falsehoods typically characterized as "post-truth," upon closer examination, their direct rejection of opponents' interpretation of reality reflect a strikingly similar epistemological conflict to that of "post-truth" and disrupts rhetorical engagement in nearly identical ways. In both arguments classified as

“post-truth” and those of this study, we see a propensity for arguments of place (like the dismissal of climate change, for example), accompanied (if not fueled) by affective polarization, that reject the validity of opponents’ interpretations of reality and facts involved in such a way that fractures rhetorical purchase and redirects the priority issue to the greater threat posed by opponents.

For example, Fischer’s examination of climate change denial found deniers’ disagreement with climate science is rooted in their fear that the socio-political *application* of these facts by a partisan group they severely mistrust will lead to the destruction of important American values (143), effectively leading to an arrested conflict that, though appears to concern contrary facts, in reality involves contrary narratives through which participants *make sense* of those facts—narratives that do not appear to interact or share compatible logics beyond their mutual hostility and utter dismissal of opponents’ legitimacy. When we compare this example to the arguments of this study—which often dismiss the dispute and their opponent’s reality, arguments, and data according to faulty interpretive frameworks authors understand to be constructed by strategic, self-serving bias (Charen; McClennen; Serwer) (R2; L3; L2), moral corruption (Knighton; Mac Donald; Serwer) (R3; R1; L2), or delusion (Mac Donald) (R1), and under these new schemas of interpretation exonerate in-group members and explicate revered values and ideas under attack by opponents—the mechanisms of conflict appear strikingly similar.

Just as the true nature of conflict between climate scientists and climate deniers cannot be identified nor resume effective negotiation between opposing

views (or, as Baron also claims, “produce knowledge that has political purchase” (Baron 156)) without contending to and directly engaging these contrary interpretations, I contend the true stasis at play to create the fractured arguments of this study cannot be fully recognized without first identifying how and which epistemological frameworks conflict to create such contrasted interpretations of what is meaningful *about* student protests or what gives meaning *to* them. That is, in order to truly understand the conflict creating such contrasted definitions and evaluations of student protests as “an attempt to ensure the conditions of free speech for a greater group of people” that guards “the soul of our republic” (Baer) (L1) and a “symptom of an even more profound distortion of reality” (Mac Donald) (R1) that will “wreak havoc on American society and civil harmony,” one must first look to the contradictory realities Baer (L1) and Mac Donald (R1) insist give meaning to student protests and legitimize their arguments, to the interpretive frameworks and networks that establish these realities and what they prove, and on what contrary standards of legitimacy these frameworks and networks are based.

This could, perhaps, be said of any conflict, a reason I will soon argue indicates we must adapt the conceptual framework of stasis theory. Or it could be that in societies or groups where participants in debate share similar interpretive and evaluative standards, as it likely was for the more homogenous society of Classical Greece (Adamidis 234) from which stasis theory emerged, conflicts can be easily addressed by interrogating contrary facts, definitions, evaluations, or policies alone. Yet it cannot be denied that we share a diverse nation, one for

which the varied perspectives we engage and experiences we share are broadened and complicated further by the globalized (and tribalized) digital media and communication channels of our technological age. Given such a landscape and the divisive, distrustful rhetoric that it proliferates, I find it unsurprising that we might find the nature of our disagreement more complex, that the arguments of this study and "post-truth" show us we have vastly conflicted epistemological frameworks at play in our polity. To precisely identify and engage conflict we must first expand our ways of perceiving and approaching our disagreements.

What makes conflicts like "post-truth" and "snowflake" unique is that they expose knowledge validity standards in *direct* conflict and are likely exacerbated by the strong moral and socio-political investments and implications attached to such validity standards. This is perhaps one reason delegitimization and affective polarization serve such prominent roles in the arguments of this study. While characterizations of "post-truth" typically concern conflict regarding validity standards of empirical evidence and its political significance, arguments about "snowflakes" typically involve conflict over the validity of moral injury, political identity, and/or public discourse, validity standards that similarly carry significant political importance.

To continue from Mac Donald (R1) and Baer's (L1) contrary definitions of student protests, for example, they both identify a strand of academic thought to give meaning to student protests and characterize the reality from which they interpret the problem at hand: one in the shape of philosophical progress ("the

philosophical work that was carried out, especially in the 1980s and '90s, to legitimate experience" (Baer) (L1)) and the other as indoctrination ("the overriding goal of the educational establishment is to teach young people… to view themselves as existentially oppressed," and understand "Western culture as endemically racist and sexist" (Mac Donald) (R1)). Authors then use these contrary interpretations to justify arguments of place that establish "correct" and "incorrect" interpretations by which the injury claims of one's "in-group" are considered legitimate and claims of one's "out-group" illegitimate. For example, Baer legitimizes the injury protesters claim by arguing the injuries of those who claim student protesters threaten free speech are based on false interpretations because they "fail[] to acknowledge" the generational shift that ratifies the actions students protest *against* as morally wrong and *restricting* of free speech, while Mac Donald (R1) argues students' claims to injury of discrimination are illegitimate because they are based on a "profound distortion of reality" perpetuated by academia, legitimizing conservatives' claim to injury by asserting this distorted reality represents the greater threat: ideological takeover. The effect of such direct contestation of validity is to create two wildly contradictory opposing narratives that cannot hope to engage one-another because their standards of evaluation and interpretation prove the other's irrevocably false and inherently dangerous. Arguably, arguments of place or conflicting realities are much more probable for conflicts such as these, as participants are more likely to believe their opponents' interpretation of the entire problem to be false, requiring

them to call on the “correct” interpretation in order to establish their own argument, distancing rhetorical purchase even further.

I take the fractured arguments of this study to be driven ultimately by an epistemological conflict similar both in nature and effect to those of “post-truth.” Such similarities, I argue, indicate the epistemological struggles that make up “post-truth” politics manifest in public discourse through a far greater variety of iterations typically conceived (i.e., in debates where the apparent conflict regards the validity of empirical evidence) to include conflicts that involve direct, contradictory contestations of other validity standards as well. Actors interpret, construct, and evaluate normative claims of sociopolitical knowledge through multifaceted networks of meaning that involve not just facts but also identity, experience, and ethics. While one may call upon empirical data to construct or challenge such claims, it is this “socio-cultural practical reason” that “determines the degree to which” these facts “will be considered important for or relevant to a particular course of action” (Fischer 141). The validity of such claims in practice is determined by a far greater variety of contextually determined epistemological frameworks involving not only empirical reasoning but also affective and moral reasoning as well.

If, indeed, the flagrant mistruths of Trump or Brexit are just “caricatures” of “post-truth” that “gloss over a more foundational problem… about the role of knowledge production and the relationship between knowledge and politics” (Baron 73) and if the “the constructivist perspective understands real-world events to be made up of a rich and multi-faceted set of factors, of which empirical

data is only one part” (Fischer 139), then it stands to reason the epistemological struggles evident in “post-truth” likely surface in public debate not just through apparent contestations of valid facts, such as climate science or inauguration attendance, but likely also through other types of knowledge that concern us, such as, in the articles of this study, contestation over the validity standards of political identity (“snowflakes”) or moral injury (offense, discrimination, repression of freedom). This indicates those concerned with “post-truth” ought to expand their consideration of these epistemological struggles and their disruption to rhetorical engagement toward wider samples of contested “pieces of knowledge” (Baron 121) that govern conflicted legitimacy standards to fully confront the issue of “post-truth” and its arresting effects on our political discourse.

#4. What Additional or Root Stasis Points in our Political Discourse may be Revealed through Analyzing the Arguments Surrounding “Snowflake”?

In the fourth research question, I seek to identify what additional or root stases this study reveals building from and/or informing the conflicts explored in answer to previous questions. In this section, I build on connections established in my discussion of “post-truth” to argue the contradictions discovered in these articles are driven primarily through conflict along moral cognitive structures of affect and emotion across partisan lines, using George Lakoff’s *Moral Politics* and recent scholarship in rhetoric of affect and emotion to build my case.

The points of contradiction and potential stases identified by the methods of this study do not appropriately account for the nature of contradiction or type of conflict across opposing arguments; however, as I argue above in my

comparison of “snowflake” to “post truth” politics, the true point of conflict, or root stasis, appears to lie within broader epistemological struggles that house and/or give rise to such direct and hostile contestations of validity standards like those of “post-truth” politics and arguments of “snowflake.” I argue these findings suggest the lowest level of stasis—fact—cannot accurately support a foundational structure to identify contention in the public sphere for which facts only serve a portion of the foundational knowledge authors use to construct their arguments without also accounting for the structures by which conflicting facts, definitions, or evaluations attain validity and the interpretive and affective contexts in which they are conceived. To identify the precise conflicts creating such contrary definitions, evaluations, *and* realities in these texts, I contend, requires an investigation into how and which epistemological frameworks conflict to create such contrasted interpretations of what is meaningful *about* the facts at hand and what gives meaning *to* these facts.

Though such analysis does not match the framework of this study, these findings do allow me to speculate as to what levels, if not exactly which logics, these arguments may be said to exhibit epistemological conflict, especially when considering recent scholarship that endeavors to map the terrain of other modes of reasoning like moral or affective/emotional reasoning. Conflict regarding moral evaluative frameworks, for example, is almost certain, as Baron and Fischer both insist “meaning cannot be divorced from ethics” (Baron 84): regardless of the types of knowledge in conflict and their relationship to political action, the validity of such knowledge always depends on one’s “ideological conception of the good

society” (Fischer 141). When conceiving morality as an epistemological framework shaping argument and types of conflict, it is important to consider how moral evaluation interacts with and relates to the particular context of the problem at hand and the participants involved.

It is useful to think of examples like George Lakoff’s *Moral Politics,* which maps the metaphorical concepts that construct (and conflict) liberal and conservative moral reasoning along two “family-based moral systems” (the “Strict Father” and “Nurturant Parent”), linked by a “common understanding of the nation as a family, with the government as parent” (22; 23). Interestingly, the picture Lakoff draws of these two moral systems side-by-side, of “virtually the same metaphors for morality but with different—almost opposite—priorities” (11-12), “put together out of the same elements, but in different order, [and] radically opposed” (35), captures well the perplexing opposition observed in the present study across accusations of “snowflake,” whereby paradoxical arguments mirror across identical frameworks of accusation. In fact, the partisan moral frameworks Lakoff establishes in his book could be said to directly align with and clarify the nature of much conflict across opposing arguments in this study.

Conflict regarding discrimination, for example, may be further clarified as a conflict between Strict Father’s moral order with a priority toward competition and hierarchy and the Nurturant Parent’s moral focus toward helping others and priority toward fair distribution (163). As Lakoff explains, the Strict Father model understands competition and hierarchy as moral and instructs a moral priority to maintain the “natural order,” or the “order of dominance that occurs in the world”

(81). Essentially, those who are obedient, self-disciplined, and “fit enough to survive… in a difficult world” are considered moral, and morality is rewarded with success; competition, in this way, allows us to “discover who is moral” (68). This moral understanding of the natural order, hierarchy, and competition serves to “legitimate” existing social power structures as “natural and therefore moral,” situating counter-movements to such power structures like feminism as “unnatural and therefore counter to moral order” (82). By this framework, concepts like multiculturalism and affirmative action are also considered immoral because they undermine the moral value of competition and “promote moral weakness” (228).

If one applies this framework to Mac Donald’s (R1) argument, it offers a compelling explanation for how she understands students’ claims of discrimination to reflect a “profound distortion of reality” that will “wreak havoc on American society and civil harmony,” and offers prospective grounds on which her argument may be said to directly conflict with Baer’s (L1) argument. Under the Strict Father worldview, the idea of a minority-based “ruthlessly competitive hierarchy of victimhood” (Mac Donald) (R1) would seem preposterous because it implies the natural order is determined by outside social forces, which is “inconsistent” with the natural order established through self-discipline and competition. In the Strict Father model, hierarchy cannot be blamed on one’s minority status because it is a “ladder… to be climbed by anybody with the talent and self-discipline to climb it” (Lakoff 203). The concept of a victim hierarchy would also be viewed as immoral, in that it inverts the natural “moral” order of

existing hierarchies and undermines the ethic of competition, threatening the "very moral foundations of society" (Lakoff 203). From here, one can assume Mac Donald (R1) considers the "ideology of victimhood" to reflect a "profound distortion of reality" because it represents a false interpretation of the social structures that make up her reality and core constructs of right and wrong.

If Mac Donald's (R1) claim that the "academic victimology complex" threatens free speech follows the Strict Father metaphorical reasoning of moral boundaries, this framework may also provide insight toward Mac Donald's (R1) motivation to present her argument of place , which dismisses the issue of free speech to re-focus attention toward the greater threat posed by students' "profound distortion of reality." Under the Strict Father model, moral boundaries are understood by "freedom of motion," so those who "impose… moral views on others are seen as restricting the freedom of others" (Lakoff 86). However, while defending moral boundaries is an important value, defending moral order (i.e., the priority for moral hierarchy and competition described above) is considered a greater moral priority (Lakoff 100). These networks of moral evaluation may explain the constructs of reasoning that lead Mac Donald (R1) to explain that though "the silencing of speech is a massive problem" (potentially because they restrict freedom by "imposing… moral views on others" (Lakoff 86) through indoctrination—breaching moral boundaries), the greater enemy is the set of ideas itself, or the "distorted" "academic victimology complex" (Mac Donald) that corrupts moral order.

In contrast, Baer's (L1) definition of student protests as "an attempt to ensure the conditions of free speech for a greater group of people, rather than censorship" and his alignment with a reality governed by the philosophical work "to legitimate experience" and "resolve the asymmetry in discussions between perpetrators and victims of systemic or personal violence" (Baer) (L1) could be attributed to the Nurturant Parent's priority for empathy and fair distribution, which prioritizes "helping people who need help," including helping those "'trapped' by social and economic forces to "'escape'" (203). If we assume Mac Donald (R1) and Baer's (L1) reasoning follows the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent moral systems and then compare these conflicts as they relate to their distinct epistemological structures, one may then posit a potential core conflict across opposing arguments regards contrary interpretations of and moral/political investments in social hierarchy and power structures.

However, it is always important to maintain a flexible, inductive approach toward assessing any type of epistemological structure, as variations will shift among individuals and over time. One should also not assume any *one* type of reasoning to be at play in a given argument, as these frameworks engage (and potentially conflict) in distinct networks of other evaluative structures stimulated by the particular problem and context at hand in a given individual and group. Locating these networked systems of reasoning is likely necessary if one seeks to *precisely* identify the points of conflict between opposing arguments.

One such accompanying evaluative structure that is also likely invoked in the conflicts of this study regards structures of affect and emotion, and recent

scholarship in the rhetoric of affect and emotion helps to shed further light on the precise points of conflict in such assessments. To view emotions rhetorically involves understanding emotions as socially constituted evaluations that require appropriate social scripts to be recognized by others (Gross; Leake). It demands one draw one's attention to the contingencies by which emotional currency, to borrow Gross' metaphor of emotional economy, is haggled and deliberated, enabled and repressed, or afforded and withdrawn across rhetorically mediated "structures of relation and discourse" (Leake 11). In other words, the social attachments of the individuals involved, the communities to which they belong, and the nature of their relationships as well as the complex networks of social histories, goals, values, and logics at play in a given social context inform the appraisals involved when expressing emotions and the conditions by which it is considered socially *appropriate* or *reasonable* to claim authority to *feel* a particular emotion.

Emotions commonly disputed in this study such as outrage, offense, sensitivity, and empathy all share similar "structures of relation" (ibid.) because they involve in some form a moral judgment. Nussbaum's cognitive structures of compassion establish useful frameworks to assess moral emotions like rage, offense, or empathy. As Naussbaum claims, to experience compassion is to recognize a number of essential components: the event of a *significant* harm, injustice, or suffering experienced by an individual or group; the suffering or harm was undeserved, or at least out of proportion to what is considered deserved; the individual's suffering matters, as a communal obligation (what Nussbaum calls

eudemonistic judgment); and, often, the identification and accusation of the perpetrator/agent responsible (321). These are the very criteria by which victim status is considered to be established as well, and victim status is frequently viewed a necessary condition for these emotions to be recognized among social actors (Leake 3). Such judgements of wrong or victimhood necessarily implicate the inverse valuation: a representation of what entitlements citizens rightfully share (such as the right to not be harmed without provocation, or the moral right to avoid undue suffering, or the right to free speech, for example). Attitudes about what citizens are collectively entitled to, and degrees by which these entitlements are realized in different contexts, expose and shape dominant attitudes about who is considered responsible and for what kinds of consequences, which constitute the conditions by which responsibility—and, therefore, innocence or victimhood—may be assigned (Leake 8).

If there is any shared commonality across arguments analyzed in this study, especially those that appear to disrupt rhetorical purchase most forcefully, it is that they share a dispute regarding which groups involved ought to be considered legitimate perpetrators or victims: all issues of place, definition, and quality center around contrary interpretations of what and whose harm is valid, who is responsible, who is innocent, and who deserves our sense of shared community or empathy. That dispute over both the legitimacy of emotions such as offense and outrage and claims to victim status require judgements based on the same morally evaluative criteria discussed above in Nussbaum's criteria for compassion (i.e., the recognition of a serious harm/wrong/threat, the innocence

of the victim(s), the sense of eudemonistic judgement, and the responsibility of perpetrator), and that these criteria are exactly those which are most conflicted across partisan lines in this study, leads me to predict the most precise conflicting logics at play in these arguments (and, likely, all arguments of "snowflake") take place along this moral cognitive structure of emotional reasoning and the political implications such knowledge represents.

#5. Are the Stasis Points Reflected in "Snowflake" Indicative of Incompatible Rhetorics across Partisan Lines? If so, how can Stasis Theory Help Us Better Understand how to Address Political Discourse Issues Going Forward?

Finally, in answer to my last research question, I demonstrate how the contradictions across these arguments are indicative of incompatible rhetorics across partisan lines for their lack of rhetorical purchase and reflect on the significance this finding brings to the rhetorical character of our public sphere. Ultimately, I do take the findings of this study to reflect, at least to a certain degree, incompatible rhetorics across partisan lines. Before I explain how, however, I find it useful to briefly return to the theoretical stance from which I evaluate political discourse and its function in the political sphere.

A rhetorical political analysis generally does not aim to criticize or evaluate political discourse as successful or unsuccessful but rather simply seeks greater understanding (Finlayson 559; Hauser 273). As Hauser reminds us, "to dismiss these transactions as flawed is to dismiss the means by which society posits the order of its own representations" (273), and so the norms he proposes make up the "conditions" of the public sphere (contextualized language, permeable

boundaries, activity, believable appearance, and tolerance (76-90)) should not be used consider discourse valid or invalid because such standards are only “derived from actual discursive practices” (61).

Yet, the discursive practices of these texts appear to directly undermine several of these norms, and, in many ways, their conflicts designate these norms in outright contestation. Activity, or the “presence of multiple perspectives,” for example, is explicitly contested in arguments of free speech. These arguments could also be considered a direct contestation over who is legitimate and whose claims deserve weight—or who may be granted “believable appearance” and “tolerance” in the public sphere (78), as delegitimization of opponents’ and their claims serves a pivotal role in authors’ arguments, and the only argument for which it does not is a direct pea for legitimacy (“recognized as fully human” (Baer) (L1)). The strongest cases of affective polarization play a part here as well, as the overriding goal on majority appears not only to secure one’s own believable appearance and tolerance but also to destroy one’s opponents’ believable appearance and tolerance. As believable appearance and tolerance represent a schema of validity standards themselves, these norms likely prove commonly unstable in direct epistemological struggles like “snowflake” and “post-truth.”

And while epistemological struggles in political discourse are by no means new, the tendency to present arguments of place and contrary reflections of “truth” serve to foreclose rhetorical engagement and allow authors’ arguments to operate under independent premises from their opposition, effectively severing a

common reference world by which they may interact. The fractured rhetorical purchase that results is, I believe, cause for some concern. While common reference worlds can vary naturally across a polity, Hauser warns "such cleavages may deepen and widen to the point where those in disagreement… cease to share a common reference world," at which point, he argues, "they are no longer capable of forming as a public" (70). Severed not only from a shared dispute or base of facts but also from a shared interpretation of meaningful or true reality and authoritative validity standards, the opposing arguments of this study reflect severely disconnected reference worlds, and by firmly rejecting and demonizing opponents' standards of reasoning and establishing independent premises, authors appear entirely *unwilling* to join as a public. Indeed, authors' almost hopeful allusion toward the extinction or takeover of opponents' ideas (like Knighton's (R3) argument that students will "continue to push [their] own philosophy toward the dustbin of history" or Serwer's (L2) view that some ideas ought to be "consigned to the fringe" of society) suggests goals to bridge this chasm through equal cooperation may have already been abandoned or disfavored for the prospect of outright domination.

In effect, due to such independent reference worlds and corrosion of rhetorical norms by which we may come together as a public, these arguments lack the necessary rhetorical purchase to effectively engage one another—incompatible in the sense that they do not meaningfully interact nor do they appear capable of (or even amenable *to*) interaction. Though these rhetorics may not be *inherently* incompatible (I would like to think there is still hope yet), the

effect is nearly the same: the very forms, arguments, and structures of reasoning foreclose engagement and interaction with opposing arguments, compounded by open attachments of fear, hostility, and outrage. Certainly, the articles of this study represent only a limited sample of our discourse as a whole, but similar patterns of rhetorical disruption characterized by affective polarization and delegitimization surface in conflicts like “post-truth” and I predict several other domains of our political discourse as well, suggesting such arrested arguments are not rare exceptions to an otherwise well-functioning public sphere. Without a direct and honest investigation from both the public and its scholars into the different modes of reasoning and structures of relation at play beneath these arguments and their relationship to one-another, our ability to identify the true point of contention and resume negotiation of opposing views appears rather bleak.

To that end, how might stasis theory help us move forward? I have argued above the fractured nature of these arguments largely undermines the foundational structure stasis theory is intended to provide, as lower-level type stases do not adequately appear to account for the contrary arguments they depict. I believe stasis theory is unable to appropriately account for the type of conflict in this study because these arguments concern primarily epistemological conflicts, which I conceive as the “root stases” in these arguments disrupting all subsequent types of stasis. While such epistemological struggles are likely exaggerated in direct contestations of validity standards like arguments of “snowflake” or “post-truth,” they no doubt play a role in all political discourse.

I contend a theory for which fact serves the only foundational basis from which all subsequent types of disagreement are expected to arise through a shared framework of relation is ill-equipped to accommodate and reflect the precise nature of contradiction in the public sphere because it cannot account for the structures by which contrary arguments arise through conflicted interpretive frameworks, modes of reasoning, or validity standards. I argue we must adapt stasis theory to include a means of conceptualizing epistemological conflicts if we are to accurately locate the types of conflict in our public sphere and if stasis theory may hope to serve as a rhetorical tool of invention to help overcome this rhetorical divide. Ironically, this argument conflicts with Finlayson's call for a Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), on which much of the theoretical and methodological approaches of this study are inspired.

In his article titled "From Beliefs to Arguments," Finlayson argues rhetorical analysis ought to *replace* the very types of interpretive analytical strategies one might pursue to conceptualize epistemological conflict: "ideational and interpretive analyses have tended to examine the wrong object, which ought to be not ideas but arguments: their formation, effects and fate in the activity known as persuading" (552). Finlayson criticizes these interpretive approaches for treating the formation of beliefs and rhetorical exchange as independent processes (550), and yet his proposed alternative to conceptualize these beliefs from a strictly rhetorical perspective appears to create the inverse problem: we cannot separate the arguments from their individual formations of beliefs. Rather than discarding one for the other, I believe the findings of this study demonstrate

rhetorical and interpretive processes and analytical approaches *both* need to be treated as interdependent and interconnected parts of one larger, recursive whole.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Beyond the limitations of stasis theory, which I will return to shortly, the discourse samples analyzed in this study represent some limitations as well. One is that these texts present independent arguments rather than an *exchange* of arguments. It is possible the severity and permanence of rhetorical fracture identified in this study is greater magnified in these samples than if they had had the opportunity to engage with, respond to, and affect one another. While it is valuable to investigate broad samples of argument in our political discourse to recognize larger patterns or identify shifts in perspectives over time, I do believe future studies, if geared toward greater understanding these conflicts at the epistemological level, will find more value in the analysis of *direct* exchanges so as to better understand how these logics directly confront one another, ideally in a context where analysts may pursue additional lines of questions to interrogate how participants structure their understanding of the problem or their relation to opponents and opposing arguments.

Additionally, the sample size of this study represents only a fraction of our political discourse at large, so it is important to acknowledge these findings can only make limited assertions toward our broader discursive climate. However, I believe the similarities between these arguments and those of “post-truth” demonstrate that the rhetorical patterns in this study are indicative of larger

epistemological struggles in our political discourse. Ultimately, stasis theory was ill-suited to provide a full conceptual framework to accommodate the nature of contradiction in our public debate or locate its *precise* points of conflict without attending to these epistemological conflicts. For this reason, I argue stasis theory must be adapted to include a conceptual framework to identify types of conflict along epistemological structures in a given debate.

At this point, I wish to clarify what such an adaptation might look like. I do not imagine epistemological conflict can be neatly packaged into one type of stasis and then situated somewhere precisely before or after fact. Rather, I imagine it would need to represent its own system(s) of categorical types of conflict understood as separate but interrelated to types of stasis. In this way, types of stases and types of epistemological conflict would be understood as separate systems of evaluation that inform one another and together provide a conceptually whole representation of the bone of contention. I also imagine the "types" and "levels" of epistemological conflict would require inherent flexibility to capture the way these structures may vary according to the problem under dispute or shift over time and, more importantly, to respect the variety of ways they may fluctuate across different contexts and through the intersection of particular groups with varied, competing identity claims who bring different social, political, and affective attachments to the problem(s) at hand.

To identify which types ought to conceive the framework of an epistemological conflict, one should seek to establish the networks of evaluation at play. For example, I predict the articles of this study depict conflict primarily

along moral cognitive structures of emotion that concern victim/perpetrator evaluations. In this case, I would treat the structures of this reasoning (recognition of harm, evaluation of guilt/innocence of victim, eudemonistic judgement, and identification of responsibility) as one might treat the levels of fact, definition, quality, or policy and investigate where opposing arguments reflect conflicting interpretive frameworks and validity standards. Then, I would analyze how these conflicts inform the meaning *of* or are rhetorically characterized *by* conflict along traditional types of stasis.

However, there is still much work to be done in conceptualizing the structures alternative modes of reasoning in political discourse. I encourage analysts not only to reach across disciplines to consider how work in affect and emotion, cognitive science, cultural sociology, and ideational and interpretive analyses may inform efforts to identify conflict along epistemological structures but also to conduct further interpretive analyses of our own.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify points of stasis across six opinion pieces debating whether student "snowflakes" threaten free speech to improve our understanding of the forces disrupting meaningful rhetorical exchange across partisan lines. While this analysis revealed few true stases due to several conflicting realities and arguments of place, I believe this study still proves valuable toward this goal.

First, this study indicates affective polarization and delegitimization as important sites of future inquiry as they characterize the rhetorical mechanisms that fracture rhetorical purchase across opposing arguments. Through comparing the rhetorical characteristics and effects of the arguments in this study to academic discussion of "post-truth" politics, this study also demonstrates that arguments of "snowflake" are similar to those of "post-truth" in both nature (direct contestation of validity standards) and effect (rhetorical fracture and arrested conflict driven through affective polarization and delegitimization), and that these issues represent wider epistemological conflicts in our political discourse. Following the theoretical premise of stasis theory, which posits the true point of conflict disrupts all subsequent types of conflict, these findings suggest the "root" stases at play in these articles are housed in within these epistemological struggles, most likely those along moral cognitive structures of emotion regarding victim/perpetrator evaluations.

This study also brings important implications toward the use of stasis theory for political discourse analysis. As a foundational basis of fact proved

ineffective to identify true points of conflict amid conflicting epistemological structures, these findings demonstrate that in order for stasis theory to offer an adequate conceptual framework through which to conceptualize conflict in the public sphere it must accommodate a means for conceptualizing conflict within epistemological structures of interpretation and evaluation. However, despite the fact that stasis theory requires a theoretical update, I contend this study nonetheless testifies that a return to this older, largely forgotten theory can provide fresh perspective that allows us to understand our current discursive climate in new, clear ways.

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