

## **The Political Silence at Hampton: A Push for Open Discourse at HBCUs**

*By Liam Taylor*

HAMPTON, Va. — Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have long been seen as the heartbeat of Black political consciousness, where student-led protests, sit-ins, and policy debates have helped shape national movements.

From the civil rights marches of the 1960s to the Black Lives Matter activism of the 2020s, these institutions have served as powerful incubators for civic leadership and public discourse. But at Hampton University — a place steeped in that legacy — some students and faculty say the spirit of free political exchange has gone quiet.

Students who identify as conservative or moderate say they feel unable to express their beliefs, citing fears of social isolation, academic retaliation, or being misunderstood. And it's not just Hampton.

Across the country, some students at HBCUs say ideological diversity is dwindling, replaced by a quiet but forceful expectation that everyone falls in line with liberal views.

“There’s no clash because the political climate of Hampton University is pretty much one-sided in favor of the liberal party,” said John Fleming, a political science student at Hampton.

Fleming is not alone in that observation. Arsema Yohannes, another Hampton student, said it’s rare to hear conservative views in public campus settings.

“I don’t really see a lot of conservative ideals on this campus,” Yohannes said. “I feel like those that do have conservative values will not speak out about it because they kind of understand the detriment that it can bring on themselves.”

Dr. Powell Young, a professor at Hampton whose expertise includes Urban and African American Politics, estimates that about 80% of students at the university are politically liberal or aligned with the Democratic Party.

“Surprisingly, I’d say about maybe 20% of the people on this campus are conservative, which is kind of high for an HBCU,” he said.

Despite the presence of conservatives, Young and others say that conservative students are more likely to self-censor in class discussions, on campus forums, or in student organization events.

Alexis Young, president of Hampton’s Political Science Club, agreed. She said that even though she’s open to hearing different ideas, she personally feels pressure to conform.

“I do feel pressure to be aligned with other thoughts of my Black peers,” she said. “Just because everybody in the classroom might think a certain way.”

In interviews, multiple students described a campus environment that discourages disagreement — not through explicit policies, but through a shared assumption that everyone is politically aligned.

“I don’t feel very comfortable really saying some differing opinions,” said Young. “Even if it’s not something I necessarily agree with, but something I’d want to bring up and maybe see if that point of view is valid or not.”

At HBCUs nationwide, conservative student organizations are increasingly rare. According to the College Republican National Committee, Texas Southern University and Tennessee State University had active chapters in the past (*HuffPost*, Oct. 29, 2012).

That trend is visible at Hampton, where no officially recognized conservative organizations exist.

Florida A&M University (FAMU) is the exception. In 2024, student Charrise Lane successfully re-established the school’s College Republicans chapter — but not without resistance.

“Being threatened these days doesn’t faze me, but being threatened by students ... shook me,” Lane told NBC News in February 2024 after receiving anonymous threats on the campus app Fizz (*NBC News*, Feb. 21, 2024).

According to a report by the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions, Black students at Florida HBCUs expressed a wide range of political beliefs — many of which didn't cleanly align with either major party ("The Other Black Voter," 2022).

While liberal values were common, researchers noted an undercurrent of frustration with both Democrats and Republicans.

"Political party dissonance" was a recurring theme. Students often said they supported specific policies or candidates, but not entire platforms.

One student told researchers, "I only know who they are when I see a candidate running for office and they have a 'D' or 'R' by their name. The parties don't mean nothing to me."

HBCUs have historically aligned with the Democratic Party — a legacy that continues today. In the 2020 election, more than 90% of Black voters supported President Joe Biden, according to Pew Research.

And among younger Black voters, progressive causes like racial justice, education access, and healthcare equity are top priorities.

A 2018 study published in *Frontiers in Education* found that first-year students at HBCUs were more likely to report high levels of social agency — valuing goals such as promoting racial understanding and influencing social values — than their peers at non-HBCUs (Palmer et al., 2018).

These priorities often align with Democratic platforms.

"For many students, it's not about being a Democrat because of the party label," said Dr. Young. "It's about being aligned with the values they feel most impact their communities — economic equity, racial justice, health care, education."

Black youth voters also report being skeptical of political messaging, especially on social media and in negative campaign ads.

In the Rutgers study, students said they often “blocked or muted” political content during election season, describing it as disingenuous or misleading (“The Other Black Voter,” 2022).

According to *Open Campus Media*, many students at HBCUs feel that politics can feel “inaccessible” or performative, and that even those who vote don’t always feel represented by either party (*Open Campus*, April 29, 2024).

But despite disillusionment with parties, their policy focus often leads them toward Democratic candidates — especially those who support police reform, student debt relief, and access to healthcare.

“I get people died for me to vote,” one student said in a focus group. “But what are you bringing to the table that will help me?” (Center for MSIs, 2022).

While the majority lean left, a small but growing number of students say they’re finding political homes on the right — or at least in conservative ideas.

Before enrolling at Hampton, Carl Gray had always considered himself conservative. But during his college years, he said, there were few opportunities to express his values without backlash.

“I often felt that I was being indoctrinated rather than taught,” said Gray, a 2006 Hampton graduate, in a 2012 interview with *HuffPost*.

Gray identifies as a Democrat by registration but holds conservative values rooted in personal liberty, fiscal responsibility, and religious belief. He told *HuffPost* that these principles are not foreign to the Black community — they're embedded in its history.

“HBCUs with churches leading the way were the catalyst for much of our revolution,” Gray told *HuffPost*. “Now, we’ve switched our position to want to give the government more rights to our livelihoods and lifestyles than it would even have under the Constitution.”

“I believe conservatism speaks to the essence of us as a people,” Gray said in the *HuffPost* interview. “Historically, we are a God-fearing people who know how to take care of ourselves and help.”

Daniel Davis, a graduate of North Carolina A&T and former GOP candidate for Connecticut state legislature, also shared his views in the same *HuffPost* article.

“This is why I started a conservative organization at North Carolina A&T,” Davis told *HuffPost* in 2012. “Not to preach what I believe, but to show that there’s another side.”

“My advisor of the club said that that is not what college campuses are to do,” Davis said in the *HuffPost* article. “They are to challenge students by sometimes offering them differing opinions and allowing them to choose for themselves.”

Shermichael Singleton, a former HBCU student and staffer on Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign, told *HuffPost* he faced stereotypes that being a Black conservative meant being disconnected from his identity.

“I think the biggest stereotype about Black Republicans is that we wish to be ‘white’ or must dislike being Black,” Singleton told *HuffPost* in 2012. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“I definitely recall many debates and many challenges by school administrators,” Singleton told *HuffPost*. “The experience was at times upsetting and unfortunate. That said, I am grateful for the handful of classmates and friends at the time constantly pushing me to stay true to who I am.”

“I do feel pressure working to debunk the stereotypes,” Singleton said in the *HuffPost* interview. “Because I care about the state of things that affect America... and how the greater impact of these issues often affect minority communities even more.”

Some students say that while they don’t want to promote conservative ideas specifically, they want to create more space for genuine dialogue across political lines.

“I feel like if we were able to have more differing opinions, maybe we’d be able to see where we cross and intersect in our beliefs,” said Alexis Young.

At Hampton, student organizations do host political discussions, but several students said the university itself lacks a strong institutional push for political diversity.

“No, not the university itself,” said Young. “But I think organizations do a good job of trying to bring in different discussions about what’s happening in the nation.”

A February 2024 report by *Open Campus Media* found that while civic engagement centers at some HBCUs are working to increase political participation, students still feel that the university as a whole needs to do more to promote open discussion — particularly for students who feel out of step with the dominant views (*Open Campus*, Feb. 21, 2024).

Dr. Young said the absence of structured, cross-ideological debate — whether through guest speakers, forums, or open discussions — is a missed opportunity.

“Students should be challenged to think critically about issues beyond their immediate environment,” he said.

Despite their frustrations, students like Gray, Davis and Singleton say they are thankful for their time at HBCUs — even when it was difficult.

“I definitely recall many debates and challenges by school administrators,” Singleton told *HuffPost*. “It made the time I spent at this HBCU uncomfortable, but I’m grateful for the handful of classmates who pushed me to stay true to who I am.”

For all three, the end goal isn’t necessarily to convert students to conservatism, but to normalize ideological diversity within Black academic spaces.

“The party realizes it will not advance and remain relevant if we do not bring in more youth and minorities,” Gray said. “I challenge people to do their homework and not automatically write off conservative candidates.”

With Donald J. Trump in his second presidential term and the country sharply divided along political and cultural lines, some students say the stakes for political discourse on campus are

higher than ever. Whether students lean left, right or somewhere in between, many agree that more honest, respectful conversations are needed.

“I just want us to talk more,” said Alexis Young. “Not argue. Just talk.”