

The emerging post-liberal model of governance in U.S. higher education: A conceptual analysis.

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Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the emergence of a post-liberal governance model in the United States, diverging from both liberal and neoliberal traditions. This developing model prioritizes partisan interests over common or individual outcomes. Devised during and after the Second World War, liberal governance supported higher education as a public good, albeit with contested notions of the public, while neoliberalism emphasized efficiency and individual advancement. However, the post-liberal model positions higher education as a partisan tool, with Republicans challenging its independence and Democrats offering limited resistance. This shift is evident in curricular changes, legislative bans on diversity initiatives, and the installation of politically aligned university managers. While institutional independence persists, universities often comply with partisan demands, leading to a fragmented landscape where political influence varies across states and parties. The post-liberal model raises questions about the future autonomy and purpose of higher education in American society.

Full paper

Introduction

In this conceptual paper, we argue that a new governance model is prevailing in the United States. Breaking with the liberal and neoliberal governance traditions, the emerging post-liberal governance model that prioritizes partisan goods over the common good (liberal) or private goods (neoliberal). We predicate our analysis on two foundational ideas. First, we understand governance through the coordination and interplay of the state, academic estate, and market (Clark, 1983). Second, we assume both the aims and means of governance arrangements are determined politically through state contest (Pusser, 2016). Importantly, we understand governance models as abstract and idealized. Elements of each may exist in the same time and place.

Liberal and neoliberal governance

Through the *liberal governance model* of the mid-20th century, state governments regularized support for operations and the federal government funded academic research and financed participation

through student aid (Cantwell, 2018). Higher education's core work was knowledge generation and transmission for the common benefit, universities were trusted to govern themselves, and higher education became a central social institution (Cantwell, 2018; Marginson, 2016). Higher education was governed as a public good, but the concept of *the public* was contested. Formal and de-facto segregation meant that valuable seats went to white people (Thelin, 2021). Political realities of the Cold War hastened the end of legal segregation (Bell, 1980), signaling meaningful, though resisted, changes to citizenship and civic life (Allen, 2004).

As participation grew and became more inclusive, governance arrangements shifted. By the 1980s, university leaders and policymakers turned to an economic style of thinking that which prioritized efficiency over other goals (Breman, 2020; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2024). The *neoliberal governance model* of the late 20th and early 21st centuries governed higher education as primarily a source of private goods but remained rooted in a liberal social compact. Managers held out the prospect that they could direct market discipline into leaner, mission-driven institutions. Policymakers and university leaders even gave closer attention to serving students from diverse background in part because of a bipartisan consensus that benefits of human capital investment should be made available to all willing to work for it (Crow & DaBars, 2015). Participants became more representative of the country than under the exclusionary liberal model, this progress was understood by policymakers and university leaders in economic terms.

The emerging post-liberal governance model

Neoliberal governance weakened higher education's social position by repositioning higher education for individual advancement rather than furnishing knowledge for the common benefit. Concurrently, the political right grew skeptical of whether higher education was good for the country (Johnson & Peifer, 2017). Some states weakened their universities for partisan gain. A process of deinstitutionalization—eroding the public trust and state support on which public higher education depended—began to unwind the position of universities as independent, knowledge-driven institutions at the center of society (Taylor, 2022). The *post-liberal governance model* positions higher education higher education as a partisan good. The Democratic Party's preferences for higher education (Gándara & Jones, 2020)—affordability, accountability, access—remain consistent with the existing liberal and neoliberal models of the university. What the Republican Party wanted from higher education represented a more thorough break with the recent past. Political partisans are often skeptical of independent social institutions because they can produce outcomes that contest partisan power (Hacker & Pierson, 2020). The post-liberal model, which aligns higher education with the political party, is emerging quickly. In the 2020s, several states led curricular changes, enacted legislation that banned the use of diversity, equity, and inclusion criteria in campus operations and/or gutted academic freedom. These changes alighted the university with keeping with partisan goals and undermined institutional independence. In some cases, new university managers were installed to cement the changes.

Post-liberal governance does not make universities arms of a political party overnight. Substantial institutional independence remains, partly because universities size and complexity make them difficult to control. Higher education may resist partisan cooption, but leaders' responses often fall short of direct resistance to partisan overtures (Taylor, 2022). Universities sometimes exceeded the demands of new laws, enacting a "repressive legalism" (Garces et al., 2021). The post-liberal model is not evenly distributed across states. Neither is it limited to states that are controlled by the Republican Party. Right wing advocacy organizations, the rising salience of national politics in state elections, and the activities of high-profile donors can bring elements of the post-liberal university even to states with Democratic or

divided governments. Furthermore, few Democratic partisans vocally defend university independence. Republican politics challenges the liberal and neoliberal models, but Democratic politics offer few alternatives.

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