



Roskilde University

Project 2 in Economic and Social Contestation

*The Battle for Education: Turning Point USA's fight for ideological dominance
through the lens of Counterculture and New Social Movement Theory*

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Date of Submission: 26.05.2025

Number of Characters: 131.884

Abstract

The world has become progressively more polarized, in no small part due to factors like social media. Education and academia are no exception to this phenomenon. In this environment, it is no surprise that an organization like TPUSA has risen incredibly fast. Using qualitative methods and semi structured interviews with students that are part of, or sympathetic towards TPUSA, this paper aims to explore how the organization contests what they view as an overtly liberal biased academic field. To examine this problem, this paper chose Counterculture and New Social Movement Theory. The findings suggest that TPUSA meets the key NSMT criteria, namely shared identity and network. Conservatism is also framed as a countercultural force, using Professor Watchlist to enforce ideological discipline. Lastly, TPUSA presents traits similar both to a grassroots movement and to a bigger conservative institution, challenging established notions of counterculture and new social movements.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction.....	1
2 Background.....	3
3 Literature Review.....	6
4 Theoretical Background.....	9
4.1 New Social Movement Theory	9
4.2 Counterculture.....	11
4.2.1 The Origins of Counterculture	12
4.2.2 The Sources of Counterculture	13
4.2.3 Hijacking Counterculture	14
4.2.4 The culture of TPUSA – right-wing or conservative	15
5 Methodology	16
5.1 Research Design.....	16
5.2 Participant Selection	17
5.3 Data collection	17
5.4 Data analysis	18
5.5 Trustworthiness.....	18
5.6 Ethical Considerations	18
5.7 Limitations	18
6 Interview themes and codes	19
7 The impact of social media	22
8 Analysis	24
8.1 Contextualizing TPUSA	24
8.2 Rebranding Counterculture	27
8.2.1 Institutional Power	27
8.2.2 Censorship narrative	29
8.2.3 Grievance politics	31
8.3 TPUSA as a new social movement.....	34
8.3.1 TPUSA as a networking machine	34
8.3.2 The identity of TPUSA	36
8.3.3 The conflict of TPUSA	37
9 Discussion.....	40
10 Conclusion	43
Bibliography	45

List of abbreviations

Blexit	Black Exit
BLS	Black Leadership Summit
CNP	Council for National Policy
CR	Campus Reform
LI	Leadership Institute
NSMT	New Social Movement Theory
PW	Professor Watchlist
SAS	Student Action Summit
TPM	Tea Party Movement
TPUSA	Turning Point USA
US	United States
WHNF	White Heteropatriarchal Nuclear Families
YLLS	Young Latinos Leadership Summit
YWLS	Young Women Leadership Summit

1 Introduction

In 2025, US colleges have become a focal point for ideological conflict and attracted the attention of the public eye. President Trump actively targets colleges, threatening to decrease or remove their public funding as in his view, they are pushing “critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content” (Seminera, 2025). Among them are elite colleges like Cornell, Princeton, and Harvard, the latter of which faces possible cuts of \$2.26 Billion (idem). In Harvard’s case, they justify these cuts because of pro-Palestinian protests, face masks, and academic bias (idem). Against this background, Charlie Kirk - founder of the organization Turning Point USA (TPUSA) - is currently touring campuses with his ‘American Comeback Tour’. The tour claims to fight “leftwing indoctrination in academia”, reclaim “the right to free speech”, confront “progressive misinformation head-on”, and to “offer students the facts they won’t hear in the classroom” (TPUSA, 2025a). Thus, colleges have become an arena for ideological struggle, navigating both governmental pressures and TPUSA’s presence. This paper analyzes TPUSA on college campuses, exploring how its activism is exemplary of the broader ideological struggle within higher education. Ideological struggle is not new, but the recent shifts have intensified its presence in the American context.

From 1992 to 2019, Gallup surveys show a significant ideological shift in the US, with the share of Americans identifying as liberal growing from 17% to 26% - and Democrats identifying as liberal growing from 25% to 51% (Saad, 2019). The early 1990s were marked by a post-cold war republican identity strongly tied with Cold War strength, counting with a majority of 38 to 40%, where most Americans identified as conservatives with moderate leaning tendencies (idem). In contrast, the late 90s were marked by the reopening of debates on gender, sexuality, and identity (Achouri, 2020). The Clinton presidency rebranded liberalism as centrist, normalizing these values in education and media, including Hollywood and sitcoms that portrayed diverse lifestyles as mainstream parts of American culture (Achouri, 2020). The Bush era on the other hand rebranded conservatism in the wake of the Iraq war, 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis, which led to significant disillusionment of the conservative party, where conservatism was seen as authoritarian and outdated (idem). Interestingly, it was Obama’s presidency and the rise of progressive identity politics that embraced a symbolically and politically powerful era for youth and minorities. Obama's presidency also showed an early

centralization of Republicans, 73% of Republicans identifying as conservative with no more than 8% identifying as liberal (Saad, 2019).

Specifically, the focus around identity politics and events such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and LGBTQIA+ rights brought TPUSA to emergence in 2012, challenging colleges as “strongholds of liberal ideology” and as a response to the outdated Tea Party Movement (TPM) (idem). The TPM peaked from 2008 to 2011 and was composed of mainly white middle-aged men challenging left leaning ideals, yet without the vibrant atmosphere of youth movements or organizations surrounding it (idem). Despite TPUSA lacking a clear path forward, its network of megadonors enabled Kirk to redefine the movement, giving its young members purpose and repackaging right-wing ideals to stand for morality and traditional Christian values. TPUSA started as an extension of the financial network surrounding the conservative movement. The aim was to cultivate new generations of conservative activists to combat and redefine academia from within. TPUSA became a way to amplify the existing reform in academia planned by the Leadership Institute (LI) with their Campus Reform (CR) (McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 6). Whereas the LI’s focus was on policy and producing intellectual frameworks to challenge progressive dominance, TPUSA repackaged policy and translate it to the youth through memes, activism, and public shaming. Thus, to compensate and motivate young activists, Professor Watchlist (PW) was launched in 2016. This grassroots site allows students to expose teachers and document ‘leftist indoctrination’ in the classroom (idem).

TPUSA emerged in a context of significant ideological loss for the conservative movement, including decreasing cultural influence among youth groups, reduced visibility in media, and increasing challenges within academia. By capitalizing on a well-established network of megadonors and employing innovative ‘in your face mechanisms’ - like campus debating, outing, and the meme culture around the group - TPUSA repackaged conservatism as rebellious and edgy. This paper examines TPUSA’s strategic ‘repackaging’ of conservatism - through grassroots activism, digital mobilization, and countercultural facets - in the context of academia. Specifically, this paper asks: How does TPUSA contest ‘liberal education’ through the mobilization and organisation of conservative college students?

2 Background

In the last two decades, American conservatism has undergone significant transformation, shaped by Donald Trump's presidency in 2016, but also the internet that has revolutionized communication. Traditional focus on formalized policy debates has shifted to an online realm reaching a much larger audience. Conservatism has become culturally reactionary, emphasizing the evil of 'wokeness' and a general opposition to progressive politics. Whereas US traditional conservatism has heavily focused on policy, law and institutions, this new wave of reactionary politics termed the 'Alt-Right' relies on identity politics, misinformation, and promoting hate speech in the guise of free speech (Franz, 2020, 15-17). It capitalizes on its media control and distrust in American institutions, further polarizing society and drawing a clear 'us versus them' narrative (idem). Especially interesting is the crisis of hegemony, or what has been termed the 'organic crisis', specifically around discourse, and how different political blocs have aimed to draw a picture of the current American reality (Hornstein, 2021, 7). Cultural hegemony over discourse is always in flux, being established through negotiated consensus and managed dissensus (Parks, 2020, 181; Golinczak, 2019). It is never fully set, as cultural hegemony is a "continuous process of identity, status, and belief being articulated, negotiated, and reproduced" (idem).

Many studies agree that the combination of popular celebrities and podcasters, alongside the movement's digital network, gained significant traction (Wilson, 2018, 1). Audiences perceive this network to protect a "particular way of life whilst drawing on an aggrieved sense of injustice at being conspired against by an unseen enemy" (idem). For example, politicians, conservative think-tanks, and right-wing pseudo media outlets have launched relentless attacks on universities and higher education, turning support into a partisan issue (Parker, 2019). Conspiracy theories have mainly surrounded highly sensitive topics, like 'Pizzagate', false allegations prominent in anti-liberal narratives, as well as 'white genocide', where black faculty members call for the death of white people (Bleakly, 2023, 510; McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 2). Through creating conservatively backed institutions, leveraging media, and producing emotionally charged content on sensitive topics, the Republican party has framed academia as a central conflict in America. In their view, students are 'being encouraged' to focus on identity politics rather than economic nationalism, cultural conservatism, or concerns about immigration and globalism.

The cornerstone of conservative preservation emerged in 1971 with the LI, created by Morton Blackwell. From the start, his vision was to establish institutions designed to seize and consolidate political power. The LI focuses on teaching and training young students, grassroots activists, aspiring politicians, journalists, and media professionals, funded by wealthy right-wing and libertarian donors with a revenue of more than \$23.6 million (McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 8). Blackwell understood these intuitions had little to do with ‘being right’ in connection with political victory, and rather that electoral victory was determined by the number and effectiveness of activists and leaders on each competing side (McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 6-7). As a result, Blackwell’s focus became political technologies, split into two categories: communication, and organization (idem). CR, the leading site for American college and campus news, came from Blackwell’s plan to seize political power. It was established in 2009 as a conservative watchdog focused on exposing leftist indoctrination, and is best understood as a “partisan surveillance apparatus that specializes in monitoring faculty and academic institutions within a right-wing panoptic framework” (idem). CR serves as a battlefield within American campuses, drawing a clear line between conservatives and liberals. It aims for conservative victory, which is defined as “any situation in which a college changes a policy, fires someone, or otherwise responds to concerns raised by the reporting on its site” (Schmidt, 2015, 1).

Similarly, Kirk, a prominent conservative activist, founded TPUSA in 2012. Like CR, its objective is to educate, train, and promote conservative values on college campuses through open debates and dialogues (Franz, 2020, 4). TPUSA launched PW in 2016: It aims to expose and document leftist propaganda within the classroom and accuse professors of offenses, using it as an opportunity to define TPUSA’s members as the protectors of free speech (Franz, 2020, 4). The Watchlist had 258 names and pictures of professors from 120 institutions by 2020, where each name has an associated profile naming their ‘infractions’ with direct links to the articles, often from conservative outlets such as CR (TPUSA, 2020; Franz, 2020, 8). This is just a small part of the Alt-Right’s broader conservative media network, where PragerU and others share the aim of influencing higher education by exposing what they believe to be liberal bias.

Behind these organizations, megadonors have shaped the influence of media, increasing the outreach of engaging videos through different platforms, ranging from less to more political (McCarthy & Kamola, 2021). Through this, well-funded organizations simplify conservative

ideas in ways that are appealing to apolitical audiences. The funding behind this movement takes place through a large web of megadonors fuelling the Leadership Institute, complemented by the Council for National Policy (CNP), which trains and forms new conservative activists backing the movement in future chapters (idem, 7). Through contemporary training, updated campaigns have made conservative values more palatable and less politically charged, yet highly emotionally charged. For example, platforms like Qanon, Reddit, and Parler often foster digital ‘wardens’ to protect against anti-American, radical, woke, socially or politically deviant people, being the most viewed videos of the group (idem, 6). Megadonors have centralized media funding over time, supporting the group’s long-term goals through structuring member participation and directing investments into think tanks and advocacy groups (Hertel et al., 2018, 128). One group that has benefitted from this is TPUSA. The image below highlights the conservative network supporting TPUSA, illustrating its financial backing, structure, and interconnectedness.

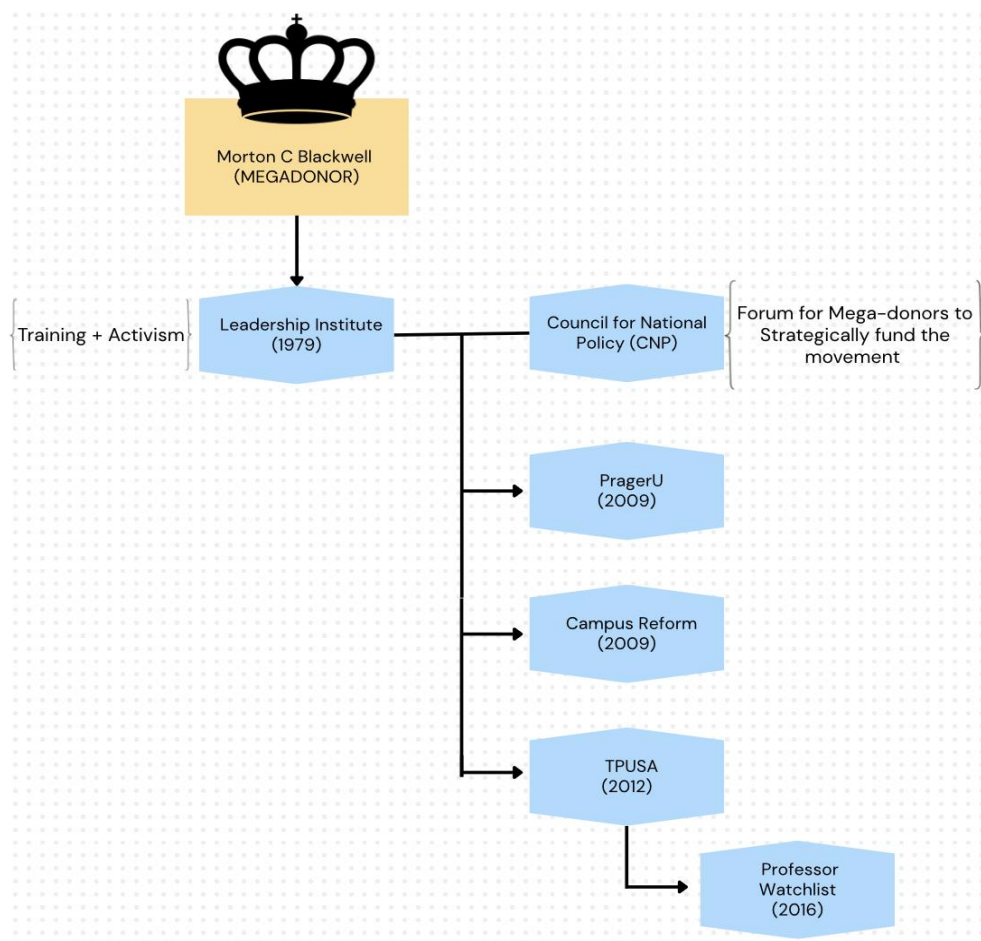


Figure 1: Structure, own creation

3 Literature Review

Since the early 2000s, US conservatism has shifted ideologically, mainly due to the rise of protective welfare policies and a focus on inclusive politics. The rise of ‘woke culture’ has strengthened the conservative movement, now implementing institutions and enforcing hierarchical structures that aim to prevent ‘wokeness’ from rising. The literature covering the conservative movement classifies it as ‘alt-right’, ‘fundamentalist’, ‘reactionary right-wing’, or even a ‘panopticon’ movement in accordance with Kamola and McCarthy’s extension of Foucault’s concept of power (Franz, 2020, 3; Letiecq, 2023, 1191; McGhee, 2021, 1; Kamola & McCarthy, 2021, 3). The main aim of the literature will be bridging how the conservative movements in the US may have perceived persecution based on their ideology, thereby becoming the underdog culture.

This will be visualized through Grguric’s text of (2021), a conservative supporter that seems to perceive leftist ideology since the late 2000’s as institutionally oppressing the right. By drawing on a historical perspective on how conservatism has been censored, a countercultural aspect will be revealed, showing how the movement has rebranded itself and adopted new ways of exhibiting their politics. This ‘rebranding’ has led to the creations of key organizations like TPUSA, successfully replacing the traditional TPM, operating as both a surveillance structure and as a morally virtuous organization. The literature highlights the exclusionary agenda of the ‘alt-right’ movement, which operates through a structure of harassment. Students are encouraged to expose their teachers as a result of “not being able to freely speak up in the classroom”, contesting a lack of open dialogue and ideological balance (McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 15). PW enforces this exclusionary agenda through students documenting cases of oppression, exposing ‘indoctrination’ or ‘injustices’ in classrooms (idem, 3).

The majority of the literature highlights the need for a reform in academia as the main path. However, other approaches argue that this ‘war on culture and academia’ is led by the need to restore the nuclear family and reinforce white heteropatriarchal supremacy through marriage fundamentalism (Franz, 2020, 9; Letiecq, 2023). This goes in tandem with structural oppression and unequal power relations that prioritizes White Heteropatriarchal Nuclear Families (WHNF) over any other social group (Harris, 1993, 1713). Scholars advocate for redefining and dismantling family theories, arguing that they have been dominated by white people who benefitted from marriage fundamentalism and ‘whiteness as property’ (idem).

The war on academia can thus be understood through the alt-right's supporters, like women, people of colour, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. To understand the position, influence, and interest of women within the movement and conservative media, McGhee (2024) utilizes the 'Uses and Gratifications Theory', as well as 'Parasocial Relationships'. He argues that, even though it seems contradictory for women to be drawn to a group whose exclusionary agenda limits their rights and safety, these perspectives offer valuable insight (McGhee, 2024, 55). This is especially relevant when examining how conservative public figures can position themselves as the sole voice of truth within a group that has been "unfairly ostracized due to their beliefs" (idem). McGhee (2024) presents women as media *consumers*, while Sykes & Hopner (2024) present women or 'trad-wives' as media *producers*, leveraging social media marketing and packaging traditional femininity as aspirational. Thus, trad-wives become a soft gateway into radical politics and nationalism. They play a key role online when attracting other women to the movement, blending the aesthetic of being a powerful and prosperous influencer with the ideology of a subservient housewife. They highlight the duality of economic and social incentives driving participation, exhibiting an alternative path to feminism that empowers them equally, if not more (Sykes & Hopner, 2024, 459). Interestingly, this source positions conservative women in different conservative spectrums, varying across social media platforms, depending on their level of regulation: Instagram strives for softer anti-feminism through aesthetic approaches, while Telegram serves as a cushion for extremist views (Sykes & Hopner, 2024, 462).

The literature also focuses on how organizations, like PragerU and TPUSA, capitalize on anti-communist discourses to acquire discursive predominance and a hegemonic status within the culture war (Hornstein, 2021, 6). Hornstein (2021) draws on Gramsci's concept of hegemony and argues that discourse is in a state of crisis. He suggests that power is built on political foundations, shaping how reality is constructed and understood. Here, widely legitimized social beliefs, or what Gramsci calls 'common sense', are challenged. Connections between citizenry and their political representatives are weakened, leading to an organic crisis: The old system collapses, yet no alternative viable option is presented. Within this void, former power holders struggle to resolve the crisis, forming an ideological vacuum that allows previously marginalized groups to step in and reframe the narrative, providing a solution to the crisis (Hornstein, 2021, 7). Within this vacuum, PragerU creates a relation of *super difference* to describe this crisis. On the one hand it views capitalism as an economic system for those pursuing success, including perfect responsivity between consumers and producers, and a

market where firms compete on a level playing field (Hornstein, 2021, 38). On the other hand, Socialism is depicted as a system of involuntary transaction that “can only occur at gunpoint” (PragerU, 2016).

The concept of the ‘panopticon’ introduced by McCarthy & Kamola (2021) - as an extension of and adapted from Foucault’s understanding of power - is ultimately used to analyse how the conservative movement aims to preserve conservatism in future elections. Surveillance mechanisms, like PW or CR, enforce ideological disciplines in universities, successfully training students to become ideological enforcers. Within this text, it is described how young and politically inexperienced students are paid to police teachers and institutions under the guise of ‘combating wokeness’ and ‘preserving morality’. Through monetary incentives, students are encouraged to expose teachers that express leftist views in class, which is seen as an attempt to sway conservative students towards liberal thinking. The so-called ‘outing’ system students have been encouraged to use employs short and poorly substantiated in-class documents (McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 12). They are based on individually experienced grievances that have reinforced the belief that leftist ideology is inherently evil (idem). As such, students tie this mission to personal gains, resulting in severe consequences, such as teachers losing their jobs.

Whereas literature has focused on different techniques that conservatism uses to build the ‘conservative enterprise’, a vacuum exists when it comes to viewing the countercultural and new social movement dimensions it presents. This reveals a critical dimension, where, rather than being solely categorized through ideology, this movement sustains itself through its countercultural strategies. Its approach, though exclusionary, is also constructive in redefining how cultural contestation is understood in academic literature. Strategies like *super difference* and *crisis framing* play a key role in shaping conservative discourse, allowing these movements to present themselves as the only viable option (Hornstein, 2021, 36). By strategically leveraging social media and ideological training, they work to establish long-term influence and dominance in the cultural landscape.

The literature advocates for a reinterpretation of counterculture, challenging its traditional association with leftist movements. It examines the foundational patterns that shape the movement, maps its internal hierarchy and grassroots structuring, and highlights the role of supporters in anticipating the movement’s gains. Essentially, aiming to reveal how

counterculture has been redefined and modernized by the alt-right to envision a new future for conservative movements and for counter culture as a whole. To complement the more theoretical aspect of counterculture, NSMT will provide a more practical insight to how TPUSA operates on the ground, their networks, different chapters, and will look at whether it fulfills traditional social movement characteristics.

4 Theoretical Background

This paper uses NSMT and countercultural theory to analyse TPUSA's role in academia within the US. These frameworks are ideal for understanding TPUSA, as they explain *why* social movements arise. NSMT provides insights into the network, identity, and conflict dynamics of movements, the countercultural perspective relies on historical aspects of the movement looking at the construction of conservative reality within the USA for the past decades. First, there will be a general overview of NSMT, highlighting the overlapping themes between social constructivist movement theory and new social movements, to then elaborate central criteria. Within NSMT, Diani (1992) developed the following definition of social movements:

“ [...] a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity.” Diani 1992, 13

Three main components can be drawn from this definition: There has to be a network between multiple actors, these actors need to share a collective identity, and there has to be a conflict which the movement opposes or tries to solve (Diani 1992, 17). Social movements have specific goals, values and interests, and actively and rationally employ strategies to achieve them (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2009, 18). By focusing on NSMT and counterculture, this paper delves into the cultural dynamics and value definition struggles central to TPUSA's contestation within academia.

4.1 New Social Movement Theory

As part of the social constructivist approach, new social movements focus on the symbolic production of meaning and construction of identity, emphasizing nonmaterial aspects over economic interests (Diani & Della Porta, 2006, 54; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009, 29). NSMT links the emergence of social movements to major structural and cultural changes within society (Diani, 1992; 5), the largest of which is certainly the emergence of the post-industrial, post-modern society (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009, 29). To understand

the *why* of social movements, it is imperative to know how actors “perceive and interpret their social-political context” (idem, 30). The socio-political context can be anything, from a different party in power, changes in family values, or also within the field of education, the latter of which is the concern of this paper.

During these changes, different social movements are competing to establish the dominant rules and to define meanings within society, often opposing other social movements (Diani 1992, 5). Through this opposition they also become “easily identifiable and differentiated in relation to other social groups” (Diani & Della Porta 2006, 37). This indicates the countercultural aspect of collective action, where movements not only oppose dominant norms within society but also aim to construct alternative values and identities with regard to other movements. Further core themes include:

“New social movement theorists, by contrast, have looked to other logics of action based in politics, ideology, and culture as the root of much collective action, and they have looked to other sources of identity [...]” Buechler, 1995, 442

The theorists Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci have shaped NSMT. Touraine argues that actors are increasingly capable of influencing and shaping “a system of knowledge”, where social movements engage in a struggle for the control of culture, which will in turn shape society (Buechler, 1995, 444). Melucci on the other hand argues that movements respond to conflicts that are increasingly connected with everyday life, including “symbolic codes, identity claims, and personal or expressive claims” (idem, 446). He also stresses the role of identity: As there is an overflow of influences on the personal identity, either through the rapid pace that changes society or the vast availability of different meanings, people feel displaced within society (idem). Therefore, it becomes a prerequisite for social movements to define their identity before they can engage in collective action (idem). Diani (1995) summarizes new social movements as engaging in symbolic and cultural conflicts to redefine societal values (Diani, 1995, 6). Combined, Touraine and Melucci highlight how social movements contest dominant cultural value and meaning systems by trying to influence knowledge and identity. These themes are directly relevant to TPUSA’s contestation within liberal-left academia, where they engage in cultural conflicts to consolidate conservative values.

Within NSMT, Social Constructionism plays a vital role: As Buechler (2013) explains, both emphasize how symbolic meaning, experienced grievances, as well as changes within a society

and identities are shaped by their surroundings (Buechler, 2013, 3). These approaches prioritize “creativity and agency, culture and meaning, emotion and morality” (Jasper 2010, 970).

“The social constructivistic perspective [...] concentrates on how individuals and groups perceive and interpret these conditions and focuses on the role of the cognitive, affective and ideational roots of contention.” van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009, 18

This also reflects eight core themes defined by Buechler (2013): *First*, he presupposes specific historic conditions under which contemporary collective action emerges; *second*, collective action is a response to these conditions; *third*, new social movements are no longer class based, as a shared ideology is more important than e.g. ethnicity or gender of a participant; *fourth*, this directly leads to a collective identity, which forms the basis of a (successful) movement; *fifth*, there has been a “politicization of everyday life”, making formerly private areas an arena for contestation; *sixth*, values take a centre stage, characterized by their pluralism and postmaterialist stance; *seventh*, cultural and symbolic contestation have emerged as the pillars of new social movements; and *eighth*, new social movements are “decentralized, egalitarian, participatory, prefigurative and ad hoc” (Melucci 1989 in Buechler 2013), prioritizing the value and identity of a movement over its organization (Buechler, 2013, 1–3; Buechler, 1995, 442). The main focus now lies on the “control of resources which produce meaning”, allowing social movement actors to influence not only their own, but also other people’s environment (Diani & Della Porta, 2006, 53). Contemporary social conflict is concerned with how information is distributed, how scientific knowledge is both created and used, and with how symbols and cultural ideas that shape individual and collective identities are developed (idem). Education is one of the most important resources that produces meaning: It is the origin of knowledge. It heavily influences people and thus shapes the future of a society, which explains TPUSA’s interest in the educational sphere.

While NSMT helps explain TPUSA’s organization and mobilization efforts, counterculture provides a more critical lens through which the movement frames itself. It is not just a ‘political force’, but a rebellious response to perceived liberal dominance, allowing it to make use of marginalization and resistance narratives in a truly countercultural manner.

4.2 Counterculture

In modern society, a growing gap between different lifestyles leads to “another source of problematization of social identities” (Diani & Della Porta, 2006, 49). This can lead to a conflict regarding the legitimacy of the dominance of one cultural form, be it emerging or traditional ones (idem). In this sense, social movements are a type of collective action whose

goal is to defend “certain models of behaviour and moral codes” (idem, 50). Diani and Della Porta (2006) highlight the significance of shifts within society:

“Various transformations in the private sphere and in forms of cultural production appear to have increased potential for conflicts of a symbolic nature. [...] Each of these can provide relationship and identity resources essential in turning some of the possible sources of inequality into a public debate, defining them as social problems rather than individual difficulties.” Diani & Della Porta, 2006, 50

Especially the focus on dominance between cultures is important for countercultural theory. Yinger (1982) defines counterculture as follows: “A set of norms and values of a group that sharply contradict the dominant norms and values of the society of which that group is a part” (Yinger, 1982, 3). Additionally, countercultures reflect an “opposition to the power distribution”, where elements of power have previously been legitimated by authority and cultural acceptance – this includes university administrations or faculties (idem, 5). Roberts (1978) views counterculture as a “value conflict with the dominant society” (Roberts, 1978, 113). While the definition of dominant society can be debated, this paper constructs TPUSA and their efforts on university campuses as a counterculture to the ‘liberal-left education’ within US universities. Such value conflicts within society often entail a “radical reorganization” of the dominant culture (idem, 115). The ultimate goal of a counterculture is to “create a better society” by providing an alternative that persuades the “dominant society” to change voluntarily (idem, 121; Bennett, 2012, 3). Countercultural actors focus on “those institutions which reproduce the dominant cultural ideological relation”, which could be within media, family, or education (Clarke et al. 1976 in Bennett, 2012, 4).

4.2.1 The Origins of Counterculture

The term counterculture first gained popularity in the 1960s, where it became associated with the hippie movement: Hippies opposed the dominant capitalist society through drugs, music, and their general lifestyle (Bennett, 2012, 3). Even though there have been some local subcultures and youth gangs, the hippie movement was among the first to spread beyond the local sphere and reach a global level (idem). Between 1965 and 1967, in the face of the Vietnam war, hippies opposed the war, the drafting of mostly young people, and the US attacking an independent country (Bach, 2020, 40–42). At the same time, they clearly stood against the ‘cattle-like’ structure of mainstream universities, where students are forced into small boxes and not allowed to think outside of them (idem, 42). Over time, the hippie counterculture was joined by the “New Left”, as both “confronted obstinate national political leaders committed to prolonging the Vietnam War” (idem, 100). The New Left remained a youth rebellion rather

than it became a counterculture, but the mix of the two led to more hippies joining “antiwar protests, while more New Leftists embraced hippie practices and styles” (idem). As Bousalis (2021) fittingly summarizes:

“The 1960s to mid-1970s counterculture generation was an era of change in identity, family unit, sexuality, dress, and the arts. It was a time when youth rejected social norms and exhibited their disapproval of racial, ethnic, and political injustices through resistance, and for some subgroups, revolt.” Bousalis, 2021, 1

Interestingly, there is disagreement about understanding the hippie movement: While some argue that the hippies are to blame for a “turbulent society”, others claim that a “turbulent society created the hippies” (idem, 3). This discussion can be transferred to any other countercultural movement, or those aspiring to be one. Does a counterculture arise because of problems within society, or does a counterculture create those problems? This question can be asked for TPUSA as well: Do they see a problem which they try to solve, or are they ‘just’ creating their own problems?

Taken together, the most important characteristic is that a counterculture stands in direct contrast to the dominant culture (Yinger, 1982, 43), or, to put it more bluntly, the status quo. In the case of the Hippies, they very clearly opposed the war-mongering of the US government through alternative modes of existing. This paper will examine TPUSA’s activities within academia, as it remains to be seen whether they are indeed opposing a dominant force, and if they are providing an alternative. They can just as much be an extension of the current status quo, and they simply view themselves as the victims of a perceived unfair education system.

4.2.2 The Sources of Counterculture

Countercultural processes are kicked off by certain conditions that animate individuals to take part in countercultural movements (Yinger, 1982, 51). Yinger (1982) distinguishes between structural and interactional, individual, and cultural sources of counterculture. Within the cultural strand, Yinger identifies two main motivations of countercultural tendencies: Opposition to a dominant culture on the one, and the feeling of disconnection and confusion caused by a lack of clear norms, values, or purpose, and the loss of meaning of symbols and traditions in society on the other hand (idem, 80).

The latter especially ties countercultural theory back to the social constructionist perspective of NSMT. At its core, counterculture laments an alienation of identity, caused by a perceived

loss of meaning within society. It is precisely this loss of meaning that becomes a major factor in the experiences of individuals (idem, 81), which thus inspires people to become active. Culture generally influences the way someone views reality: It has significant impacts on “the selection and interpretation of our beliefs, observations, and feelings” (idem). When this culture now no longer satisfies needs and instead abstracts reality and identity, actors negatively affected by this change may organize to get rid of this unsatisfactory culture (idem). The feeling of being lost, this feeling of anomie, only perpetuates countercultural tendencies within a society. It is one of the most dominant sources of conflicts between groups in modern society. While traditionally, counterculture was dominantly associated with ‘Marxist’ or ‘leftist’ groups, there has been a growing shift towards conservative or alt-right groups.

4.2.3 Hijacking Counterculture

Much like the previous ‘left countercultures’, right-wing counterculture claims the role of rebellion. By positioning themselves as the ‘true outsider’, conservative actors challenge the ‘dominance of liberal or leftist values’ in society, while framing their cultural influence as oppressive and portraying themselves as the disputant to this development (Bures, 2020, 29 - 31). Supporters of right-wing counterculture claim that what was previously the counterculture (referring to the left) has now become the dominant culture, and the once dominant culture has taken up the role of the marginalized one (Buchanan in Bures, 2020, 31). But instead of violent uprising or party politics, this type of counterculture adopts a “program for change based on shifting the boundaries of acceptable discourse within a society” that is less aggressive and opts for “cultural and intellectual work as a form of activism in a centre-left political culture” (idem, 39).

Nadler (2020) coins this dynamic “countercultural conservatism”, where conservatism itself is framed as a personal identity under attack, and conservative individuals are part of an “embattled cultural identity” (Nadler, 2020, 154).

“In the topsy-turvy world of countercultural conservatism, liberalism represents a socially conformist way of thinking and liberals seek to degrade and exorcise conservatives. The liberal disdain for conservatives – in this narrative – stems from fear. Conservative authenticity threatens a fragile liberal worldview that must be protected from inconvenience.” Nadler, 2020, 154

Within the US context, conservative movements “support anti-collectivist economic policies, fervent patriotism, and/or traditionalism and conventional morality” (Blee & Creasap, 2010, 271), the latter of which are particularly interesting for the focus of this paper. Countercultural conservatives make use of the “emotional force of identity protections to mobilize voters or

attract audiences” (Nadler, 2020, 158). Within this type of counterculture, (political) identities clash (idem).

As mentioned earlier, countercultures can focus their “antagonism” on different spheres within a society, and TPUSA very clearly chose the sphere of education. Their fight against academic institutions and the suppression of conservative ideals reflects this quite well. In their view, there is an overly leftist, liberal, and progressive bias within US universities. One of conservatives main arenas of contestation of campuses lies within political correctness: There is a “new conservative attack on university culture” (Hawley, 2022, 79). A variety of books published that ‘support this attack’ argue that “college professors are anti-American radicals [...], the intellectual foundation of the American republic is under assault, and students are coddled and never forced to face difficult questions” (idem, 80). TPUSA perfectly aligns with this notion, as it is their goal to “expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom” (Professor Watchlist, n.d).

4.2.4 The culture of TPUSA – right-wing or conservative

It is rather challenging to differentiate between conservative and right-wing movements, as most movements can encompass elements of both (Blee & Creasap, 2010, 271). According to Blee and Creasap’s (2010) distinction, conservative movements “support patriotism, free enterprise capitalism, and/or traditional moral order” and typically avoid violence as a primary tactic or goal (idem, 270). Right-wing movements focus on “race/ethnicity and/or that promote violence as a primary tactic or goal” (idem). Caiani (2017) expands right-wing ideology by including exclusionism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, nationalism, and traditional ethics (Caiani, 2017, 4).

Despite these distinctions, both conservative and right-wing movements use “similar strategies and rhetoric of vulnerability, fear, and threat” (Durham 2007 in Blee & Creasap, 2010, 271). Additionally, US conservative nationalists have pushed the agenda of US superiority to the forefront (idem, 272), which aligns with TPUSA’s agenda. Determining whether TPUSA falls under the category of a right-wing counterculture is a tricky question. TPUSA does not align with right-wing movements defined by racism, xenophobia, or (physical) violence (Blee &

Creasap, 2010, 275). However, it does show characteristics of countercultural conservatism by framing the conservative identity as being under threat and mobilizing students to defend it. This paper argues that TPUSA encompasses both right-wing and conservative counterculture. While its focus is neither race nor xenophobia, TPUSA does fit the model of a nationalist movement that prioritizes traditional values. Similarly, certain practices of TPUSA can be called violent to some degree. For example, they exert violence through initiatives like PW, where they systematically target teaching personnel, sometimes leading to serious professional repercussions for the victims, not to mention possible psychological scarring. If TPUSA can be classified as a counterculture will be discussed in the analysis.

5 Methodology

This chapter aims to elaborate on the methodology used in this research paper. It serves as a description of how we collect, process, and interpret the data we use for our analyses, along with how we selected the participants for the interviews.

5.1 Research Design

For this study, we are using qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, 1360). We have chosen this in order to have a greater degree of flexibility when attempting to answer the main research question:

How does TPUSA contest 'liberal education' through the mobilization and organisation of conservative college students?

Additionally, other sub questions emerged:

- *What role does social media play when shaping students and promoting TPUSA?*
- *Could TPUSA be considered a New Social Movement? Or is it a 'simpler form of activism', that does not reach the same level?*
- *Is TPUSA really a Counterculture?*

With the methods chosen, the participants are able to elaborate on their perspectives and experiences on the matter, providing more nuanced data. We have chosen this method because it offers us an in depth understanding of TPUSA and TPUSA sympathisers, giving us an insight into how and why people think in a certain way by having the opportunity to ask follow up

questions, allowing us to see the reasoning behind their choice to be part of TPUSA. This way, we can adjust our focus during the interview based on their answers, especially if we learn something entirely new such as TPUSA funding students and the relative lack of knowledge about PW. It also helps build trust, making the interviewees more open for discussion if there is a degree of flexibility.

5.2 Participant Selection

To ensure that the interviews yield relevant data, we used purposive sampling (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, 1361), and aimed to select between five to ten adults who are part of their local TPUSA organization or knowledgeable of them and align ideologically with conservative beliefs. As a result, we only selected people who are still in college or finished their studies recently (max 3 years prior to the interview). We selected our participants through various online platforms, where we posted digital flyers on multiple mainstream social media platforms (like Facebook, Instagram), but also more niche ones (such as Discord, Reddit, etc). Furthermore, we contacted the main Instagram accounts of TPUSA, given that it is one of the platforms where they are active the most. We invited people to participate in our interviews, giving them details about our project and leaving contact information through which they can reach out. Ultimately, we selected five participants, four of which are active in TPUSA, two of them being founding members of their local TPUSA chapters, while another is president.

5.3 Data collection

Before the online interview, each participant was required to give their informed consent (annex 2) on taking part in the interview and being recorded. The consent form was sent 30 minutes prior to the interview and contains information about the scope of the project, how their data is going to be collected and anonymized, but also their right to withdraw or cease their participation at any moment, as well their right to not answer questions. The beginning was dedicated to answering any questions and explaining the structure of the interview, detailing that there are several definitive questions that can be expanded into broader discussions with follow-up questions. After this, we started the interview and recording, asking the seven fixed questions, where the first ones are about conservatism in general. Afterwards, the questions are surrounding TPUSA and college education. Upon transcription, the audio recordings were deleted. For transcription we used Zoom recording and its speech to text features, as well as by hand refinements (annex 1).

5.4 Data analysis

After transcribing the interviews and performing an initial review, we thematically analyzed their contents in order to identify common themes among the participants. Based on these, we established a set of codes, identifying similarities and/or differences, topics and labelings and organized our data within them, thus helping us answer our research question (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, 1364). The most common codes included what role social media plays in their knowledge about conservatism, if they considered the US is politically polarised or not, whether they experienced bias in education, TPUSA as a cultural revolution and their sympathy towards Charlie Kirk. Those codes are used to create the following themes: polarization, social media, bias in education, Kirk, community-building, and impact.

5.5 Trustworthiness

In order to prevent any personal bias from affecting our study, the data from our interviews was kept as is, with minimal modifications (primarily the elimination of filler words such as “like” and “you know”, alongside unnecessary interjection like “uhm” or “hmm”), through direct transcriptions of the audio recordings. Furthermore, all data excerpts provide context wherever necessary to preserve the initial idea presented in the interview. Additionally, we tried to maintain a degree of political neutrality, bringing as little as possible of our personal opinions into the interviews.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

A crucial aspect of any research is to ensure the preservation of ethical standards. In this regard, several steps were taken. First of all, participants were provided with all the information necessary, so they could give their *informed* consent. We clearly explained the purpose and methods of our study, but also their right to cease their participation at any point without any repercussions. Throughout the interview, we offered reassurances like “if you are comfortable to answer/talk about it”. Secondly, any identifying information was removed from the transcripts and the identities of the participants are kept anonymous.

5.7 Limitations

Despite our best efforts, our paper did eventually face several limitations. Chiefly among these was finding participants for the interviews. We encountered difficulties while trying to select interviewees, something that was exacerbated by how many online conservative communities seemed to be quite closed off, limiting who can join and what they can post and communicate.

As a result, our sample of participants is relatively small and may not be an accurate representation of the broader community. This risk would have been considerably alleviated if we had been able to find a number of people closer to the upper limit we proposed for ourselves. Another limitation could be that the participants may have been overly cautious in the interviews, given that we are European and perhaps perceived as less conservative within their circles. As such, it may be possible that they omitted any negative aspects they may have voiced otherwise.

6 Interview themes and codes

After rereading and analysing the interviews, some recurring patterns were observed. Several thematically similar ideas came up multiple times and were compiled and categorized into themes. Ultimately, we arrived at six themes: polarization, social media, bias in education, Charlie Kirk, community-building and impact.

Starting off with the theme of *polarization*, almost every interviewee states that there is some degree of political polarization in the US which generally favors the left. This type of hostility is strong enough that some participants even feel as if they cannot talk openly about their political views outside of safe spaces. One states about politics: “with other people [...] I'm more reserved. I don't really want to talk about it because I just don't know how someone will react” while another mentions how they specifically lost friends since becoming more right-leaning. Beyond these two effects, there is a sentiment that conservatives are openly hated, at least by the opposing side. Notable things mentioned are liberals protesting TPUSA events, calling conservatives Nazis, or even violence, with one participant mentioning an incident where someone got attacked with a bike lock. Multiple interviewees link mainstream media to this polarization, considering it as incentivized to polarize.

Social media as a theme can be observed in all the interviews. From this, we could identify YouTube and Instagram as the main sources of social media content, though TikTok and Facebook were also each mentioned once respectively. For many participants, social media represents an entry point to conservatism, primarily through viral videos of Charlie Kirk, YouTube content, or by being introduced to more political creators by creators that could be considered apolitical. In a few cases, social media is also stated to be an important source of

news and information. It stands in opposition to mainstream media which is ‘biased and aims to push people to one side’, which is most often stated to be the liberal side.

On the theme of *bias in education*, almost all participants identify some degree of political partisanship that makes its way into classes, primarily through teachers. Teachers share their own political views during class and have a biased view of the subjects they teach. In one instance, an interviewee mentions how a teacher “would always praise left leaning politicians, and she was always trying to demonize right wing politicians. She spoke very fondly of Justin Trudeau and Gavin Newsom, but she spoke very ill of people like Winston Churchill, Donald Trump”, or in another interviewee’s case where a teacher said “this class is not for political conservatives”. The degree of bias can vary based on the university, the subject, or the location, as an interviewee points out, with an example of music school being particularly liberal. Despite this stated prevalence of teacher bias, this primarily seems to manifest as openly sharing their ‘bias’ with the class. When further questioned about it, none of the participants states that they have personally been affected by this in any way, grading or otherwise, but only heard of other people experiencing it. Although student bias is mentioned much less, it is nevertheless present in a few of the interviews. One participant mentions having protests against TPUSA during an event of theirs, another mentions they “have experienced hatred from students”, while a third mentions not feeling safe starting a local TPUSA chapter at their own university, instead opting to join one at a different college.

Despite being a central figure of TPUSA, not all participants mention *Charlie Kirk*. Three out of the five interviewees talk about him, with varying degrees of admiration. One participant characterizes Kirk as aligned with their views and as seemingly knowledgeable, but does mention that this is not necessarily a guarantee that he is actually as well informed as he appears. They are also saying that viral debate videos they watched involving Kirk felt more like an attempt to lecture inexperienced students and convert as many people as possible to conservatism. Another seems to have a particularly good opinion on Kirk, describing him as “one of the biggest political commentators in the country”, as “very well spoken” and as the reason why, after seeing viral videos of him, they decided to join TPUSA and start their own chapter. This participant describes Kirk's campus event as a standout moment in their college experience. The third interviewee focuses on Kirk’s achievements and ascension in the world of politics and political commentary, stating “Charlie Kirk, the man that he has become, the power that he has [...] he has met the president and the vice president multiple times, and Trump

knows about him”. Aside from this though, there is very little admiration for his rhetorical skills like in the case of the other two participants, who emphasize their ideological alignment more.

The theme of *community building* is present in all interviews, but to a higher degree in the case of those that are still in university and part of TPUSA. A common thread throughout the interviews is the fostering of a safe space for conservatives through TPUSA, allowing them to voice their opinions. This goes hand in hand with the perception of a higher degree of polarization and political hostility towards ‘right-wing people’: “TPUSA serves as a means to help young college students feel like it's okay to just learn about certain things, learn about our constitution, learn about what it is we really stand for when it comes to America”.

Community building is also present in TPUSA’s encouragement for people to start local chapters, with the main organization offering a lot of support to people who are interested: “there was one called TPUSA and they said to start a chapter at my school and they would give me merch”, “They were very supportive, sweet people [...] if I ever needed anything for my event, they would send it to me. [...] he would help me table and stuff [...] but I had good people at my side supporting me”. This also extends to keeping an active social media presence via Instagram. The organization also holds multiple events and summits, creating networking opportunities: “TPUSA has [...] summer events. So as a leader [...] I go through the CLS, which is the Chapter Leadership Summit”, “being a TPUSA president, I've met [...] conservative politicians in my county”, “being part of these organizations [...] just building those connections”. The interviewees also mention how a lot of the necessities for starting and running an organization are provided by TPUSA for free, including things like “activism kits”: “We don't really need funding. 90% of everything at TPUSA is free”, “if I wanted to go there this summer [...] I would not have to pay for tickets, plane tickets or anything. So a lot of it, it's free and a lot of it, I don't need funding from campus”, “TPUSA is amazing with how much it funds everything”.

Impact as a theme is less present in the interviews, though the idea does pop up in almost all of them. Here, participants emphasize the cultural change that they perceive happens because of TPUSA. They state that it allowed a more authentic conservative perspective to be shared with those on the opposing side: “Our biggest message is just to say like, hey, let's talk it out”, “we are a conservative leaning organization, but we always welcome people of the opposing

political spectrum”. Furthermore, TPUSA provides a safe space for conservatives to voice their opinions: “The animosity that left leaning people have towards Trump and those who support the conservative side actually does not make for a safe place to begin the chapter [...] I joined the DePaul chapter [...] much better history of keeping people safe”. The focus often lies on the idea of being part of something bigger, which is most often tied to the growth and size of TPUSA as an organization: “The fact that I'm part of an organization that has 2,000 chapters, [...] it's pretty incredible”, “I'm a part of something bigger, in this big, natural organization”. TPUSA members are part of a broader rightward cultural shift: “It sounds like a culture revolution”, “I feel like I'm part of something great. [...] I love that we are finally getting a voice in this world”.

7 The impact of social media

Due to social media's special role in TPUSA's activities and popularity, its key themes and impacts will be further analyzed in this chapter. This ensures an in-depth view on its impact, as it is prevalent throughout the entire analysis, including counterculture and NSMT. As a conservative organization founded in 2012 at the midpoint of the Democratic Obama administration, TPUSA placed itself squarely in the space of counterculture (Boedy, 2022). Within this context, and due to the leadership of a 19 year old Charlie Kirk, the adoption of emerging social media platforms comes across as a logical step (TPUSA, 2025d).

Social media plays an increasingly important role in the production and distribution of news content, while simultaneously providing a forum to discuss said content, the latter representing another key divergence from mainstream media (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019, 770). From the start, social media platforms have facilitated discourse and information exchange between people, standing in stark opposition to the traditional ‘broadcaster-viewer’ relation between mass media and its consumers (idem). On social media, anyone can participate, either by creating content, or by interacting with it, leading to people being much more involved, and not being limited to ‘spectating’ (idem). This has stimulated conversation and conversely changed the way in which political discourse and action occurs and is organized, leading to novel ways of activism (idem).

When listening to what the interviewees had to say about social media, some common threads and patterns can be observed. One such similarity can be seen in their choices of social media

sites and applications. The social media platforms that seem to influence this the most are definitely YouTube and Instagram, but on occasion also Facebook or TikTok, though the latter two are much rarer. On the other hand, almost all the interviewees have mentioned both YouTube and Instagram explicitly as platforms that they use. Even moreso, one of the interviewees mentioned making good use of Instagram by building up a noticeable following “I got some people to follow on Instagram and then I know some other people that go to different schools followed my Instagram page because they wanted a TPUSA community”.

Another common point is how social media acts as a sort of starting point for engaging with TPUSA or for shifting to the right, generally here from a more centrist or apolitical personal standpoint, though the specifics can differ for each participant. In quite a few cases, an entry point to learning more about TPUSA was coming across viral videos involving Kirk. In these, he is either speaking on various campuses, or participating in debates, which are often against random students and being contextualized as completely one-sided, with Charlie Kirk being positioned as the undisputed winner. For one interviewee, a rightward shift happened as a result of consuming more YouTube content, especially podcasts, among these being the one run by Joe Rogan. In the case of another, a shift was also as a result of YouTube content, but in a much more subtle manner. They were watching a content creator that produced primarily content presented as neutral, but also who platformed right wing influencers as guests, the one relevant for this case being Sneako. The interviewee mentioned him as being “known for talking about controversial topics” and who in turn introduced them to people further to the right such as Andrew Tate and Candace Owens, the latter being a frequent TPUSA collaborator. After this, the interviewee started consuming content from multiple other similar people, particularly through Instagram.

An additional way that some of the participants stated they use social media is for seeking information. For one person, COVID-19 also served as a catalyst of sorts for using social media to inform themselves, prompting them to engage with conservative influencers who were giving answers for why COVID-19 appeared and why “the world was shutting down”. A different interviewee said this outright “social media, especially YouTube, was definitely the place where I got a lot of my information from”.

Frequent collaboration with niche online celebrities also contributes to supporting a countercultural perception, with TPUSA frequently collaborating with social media influencers

like Candace Owens, Benny Johnson, Jack Posobiec, Laren Chen or Tim Pool (TPUSA, 2022). Despite all of them having substantial online followings, they are not perceived as mainstream figures, even while being guest speakers alongside Fox News presenters or Republican politicians (Franz, 2020, 16). This helps them see themselves as rebels and ‘underdogs’ fighting against the perceived dominance of progressive values, and as being victimized for their identities, whether via class, gender, or race (idem).

In contrast, when participants were talking about mainstream media, the general view was that it is “very liberal leaning” and trying to push people to the left and establish a left wing narrative, even going as far as stating in one case that the media is “endeavored to get people to vote against more conservative and traditional ideals”. One participant goes as far as saying that all mainstream media, even the outlets that align with their personal political views, is biased, focused on division and spreading misinformation and lies. This person further advises people to use more “centre news sources” or platforms like Groundnews and TLDR News which are either fairly unbiased or transparent about the political bias of news sources presented. Though not stated explicitly, this distrust of mainstream media can be argued as implying that social media is more trustworthy, truthful, less prone to censorship and unbiased.

8 Analysis

The theoretical framework, methodology, and interview themes set the stage for the following analysis, which explores TPUSA’s motivations, activities, and broader role in education. By analyzing its presence both on campus and online, alongside insights from interviews with (former) students who have engaged or sympathised with the movement, this paper examines TPUSA’s influence within the academic landscape. Through the lens of Counterculture and NSMT, the analysis explores whether TPUSA functions as a countercultural force and whether it has the scale and characteristics of a new social movement.

8.1 Contextualizing TPUSA

To better understand the viewpoints of TPUSA, and more broadly of the American conservative movement, one can examine the way they see the various political actors that make up the population of the US. Particularly interesting are demographics that would, traditionally, lean more towards the Democratic party, such as women, latinos, black people, but also transgender people, since, despite not representing a major population segment, they

are given significant attention by such movements (Center for American Women and Politics, 2025).

The aim of some groups is to win them over to the conservative cause: TPUSA organizes annual summits dedicated to this, like the Young Women Leadership Summit (YWLS), Young Latinos Leadership Summit (YLLS), and the Black Leadership Summit (BLS) (Dawson, 2019). Noticeably, there is a focus on younger people, who tend to lean more liberal than other, older demographics, likely a further attempt to ‘convert’ (Center for American Women and Politics, 2025).

Women represent a major focus of TPUSA’s views, as they represent a huge voting base that can be tapped for further support, making them an attractive target (McMichael, 2024). When talking about women and womanhood, conservatives tend to emphasize the need to protect and the idea of them being something ‘precious’, while also implying the existence of a threat that aims to dismantle these notions (idem). Oftentimes, this threat is more or less subtly identified as transgender people, with Kirk even declaring during one summit “How insulting, how repulsive it is, that womanhood is something that you can appropriate as if it is a disguise or a costume”, a remark clearly aimed at them (idem). Other times, modern feminism is seen as an ideological threat to womanhood. The addition of ‘modern’ to feminism likely stems from a fear of alienating women from conservative movements (idem). In this context, contemporary feminism is viewed as a force pushing women away from traditional family values and feminine ideals, and towards careers (idem). Motherhood and homemaking are important as well, the implication being that modern feminism actively discourages these notions (idem).

This view is also applied to ‘left ideologies’ more broadly. When talking about how women tend to lean more towards the left, responding to a question during an event, Charlie Kirk described such women as “depressed, anxious, lonely”, that their “biological clock is ticking”, evoking diminishing prospects of having a dating life or becoming mothers (TPUSA, 2025b). The result of this is portrayed as women “lashing out on the rest of society”, which translates to women taking up left leaning views (idem). In the same conversation, Kirk also proposes that this can be fixed by more women becoming stay at home mothers (idem).

When it comes to transgender people, however, the dialogue is much less about ‘conversion’ to conservatism and much more about antagonism. They are often viewed as a threat towards

women, as intruders in spaces where they argue that trans people do not belong (Rachel, 2021). For example, concerns have been raised about transgender women competing in women's sports, as critics suggest it could disadvantage 'biological women' (Elmore, 2024; Rachel, 2021). Another debate issue is that of transgender people's access to the bathroom (idem). A further point of contention is with regard to children and the idea of them being pushed into "trans ideology", arguing that children are nowhere near old enough to be making such a decision and that parents who oppose this are unfairly victimized (Allen, 2021).

Regarding race, TPUSA takes a similar approach as with women, emphasizing the attempt to reach out and convince young people of color, going as far as organizing events such as the YLLS and the BLS. Candace Owens, a collaborator with TPUSA, proposes the idea of a 'Blexit', the push to convince black people to leave the Democratic party (Nelson, 2019). Owens evokes slavery era imagery, connecting modern day black people to slaves and the left to a plantation, saying that the consistent voting tendencies of people of color are a sign of subservience without any benefit (idem). When trying to win over people of color, TPUSA looks for common ground over views where communities may be more conservative, like religion, traditional family values, immigration or abortion (Dawson, 2019). Another tactic is to try to minimize the blame on systemic issues and shift it towards the individual, not wanting to fix racism and government institutions, but to succeed in spite of these (Russler, 2020, 18). Such attitudes can lead to a certain alienation of black conservatives from their broader black communities, with their peers viewing them as traitors. Still, they are accepted by conservative movements, especially due to their presence helping to dispel accusations of racism (Moriyama, 2022, 106).

When it comes to WHNF, TPUSA tends to focus on different aspects, with a few common ideas being a denial of "white privilege", conveying a narrative that white people are forced to apologize due to the color of their skin and calling people racist if they push for this narrative (TPUSA, 2025c). In a sense, it tries to absolve white people (specifically white men) of any blame concerning racism, attempting to separate any racial disparities from discrimination (idem). However, to a degree, TPUSA seems to try to disassociate itself from the more extreme rhetoric regarding white people, publicly denying any link with white nationalism. This goes as far as removing white supremacist members, including the president of the Las Vegas chapter of TPUSA after a video had been discovered of him using racially offensive terms and "white power" (McCullough, n.d.). In fact, some white nationalist groups have come into some

sort of conflict with TPUSA, even mocking them for being too mainstream, ‘fake conservatives’, and not going far enough with racial rhetoric (Petrizzo & Candice, 2021).

8.2 Rebranding Counterculture

The term counterculture was first coined in the late 60s as a way for the alienated youth or the “dissenting culture” to challenge the norms enforced by the technocratic culture of the time (Roszak, 1969, 39). Whereas existing literature has already touched upon the alt-right movement and subgroups within the movement (QAnon) exhibiting countercultural features, there is a gap when it comes to describing the latest and exclusive ramification of TPUSA.

Despite acknowledging the limitation that this study will not be able to fully scrutinize the broader alt-right’s appropriation of counterculture or its narratives, it will focus on TPUSA and its affiliated projects. This paper examines whether TPUSA qualifies as a social movement by analyzing its alignment with classic countercultural literature. Furthermore, it examines whether TPUSA, significantly backed by the centralized alt right movement, adopts the rhetoric and form of traditional countercultural resistance, which includes performative campus activism and grassroots surveillance.

As a result, this paper will scrutinize if TPUSA is a movement itself, or if it is an indispensable organizational feature of the alt-right resurgence. Moreover, it explores whether TPUSA has co-opted counter-cultural strategies, asserting ideological dominance, despite traditionally preserving the status-quo in the US. Consequently, this section scrutinizes conservative constructions of reality. It explores how conservatives frame liberal institutions - like Silicon Valley and Hollywood - as oppressive institutions purposefully suppressing ideological freedom, whilst simultaneously mobilizing oppressive strategies to enforce ideological dominance. Through the analysis, this paper highlights how counterculture has been instrumentalized to become a tool for political polarization, while building a conservative enterprise around US academia.

8.2.1 Institutional Power

First, the focus is on one of the key countercultural features of the alt-right movement, namely, its subversion of traditional institutional power structures and mechanisms. TPUSA not only allows this movement to successfully mobilize youth activists but also fills an ideological compass within younger populations when it comes to combating ‘evil’ and ‘dangerous’ professors ‘filling students’ brains with ‘leftist propaganda’. Interviews conducted show that students not only feel part of a greater moral compass, but have been told that their voice is

finally valuable, as the movement has reached mainstream politics. To the question if they feel like they are part of something great, one interviewee responded: “Yes I feel like I'm even part of something great. I really do love this movement that has happened, and I love that we are finally getting a voice in this world”.

As previously mentioned, the aim of PW is to install a sense of ‘liquid surveillance’ acting as a ‘panopticon’, creating pressure within the classroom in which professors should fear students, who will expose them in the name of moral good (Lyon, 2010, 332; McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 3). Interviewee responses have shown that what might have looked evil in the past, such as getting your old teacher fired, can be justified in the name of a greater cultural war, one that is worth fighting as it finally gives unheard conservatives a voice. These student articles on the Watchlist have a significant impact despite lacking academic credibility or video proof. TPUSA’s strong social media presence and ideological influence on previously apolitical students amplify their reach. Professors in PW, exposed by students, are placed on an online list which can be accessed by anyone, with large credibility, being endorsed by the US government. It gives insight into how powerful discourses “both governmental and non-governmental, shapes who is recognised as Us and who is feared as Them”, defining who can be considered legitimate and who is dangerous (Gagnon, 2018, 112).

Additionally, TPUSA and their PW work in tandem with CR, aiming to preserve conservatism in the US. PW works by condemning teachers, stating what they did wrong as well as visually exposing them through their profile pictures in the Watchlist, acting as a form of liquid surveillance within the classroom (McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 12). CR complements the Watchlist, as it is America's leading site for college news and a partisan organization intended to “give conservatives powerful new weapons in their fight for the hearts and minds of the next generation of citizens, politicians, and members of the media” (Campus Reform, 2009). CR later on changed their moral vision, becoming a watchdog organization aimed at “exposing bias, abuse, waste, and fraud on the nations college campuses” by recruiting student journalists who strive to present stories with ‘accuracy, public accountability, and objectivity’ (Campus Reform, 2013). By 2012, in tandem with TPUSA, CR managed to not only fulfill an ideological moral compass for young activists, but also rewarded the punishing of liberal teachers. The rewards depend on the number of articles written per student, ranging from 50 to 100 dollars depending on the quantity of evidence presented (ranging from simple stories without real concrete evidence to videos showing professors expressing liberal preference) within the article

(Campus Reform, 2014). Unsurprisingly, the platform “went from publishing 489 articles in 2013 to 1675 articles in 2017”, where students writing these articles rose from 70 articles in 2014 to 807 in 2017 (Beard, 2020 in McCarthy & Kamola, 2021, 10). Especially interesting is the structure and exertion of this surveillance, as it has grassroots bottom-up features, including students being the ones to expose their elitist professors, thus controlling the information they are being taught. As previously but briefly discussed, since 2012, one of the main features of the alt-right movement mainly has been to defeat a new type of ‘academic elitism’, where it perceives that liberals steer the world narrative and frame what ought to be right and wrong. While this paper critiques the role of TPUSA in promoting surveillance and ideological practices to enforce conservative domination, it is essential to look at the movements counter cultural position, and how they construct their reality within the broader context of conservatism in the USA. One enduring pillar of the conservative movement around censorship focuses on the defence of the First Amendment, particularly stressing freedom of speech in the press. One interviewee references an experience of censorship against TPUSA: “A college in California had an event going on and people were tearing down their stuff, they were destroying their equipment. So it definitely is very polarizing.”.

When drawing on how liberals have censored the conservative movement, the 60’s to 70’s are often mentioned, where an all-time high for anti-war publishing and minority rights and gay pieces are highlighted (Grguric, 2021, 23). ‘State censorship’ went as far as having to involve the Supreme Court, e.g. when the New York Times tried to publish pentagon papers during the Vietnam war, which resulted in the federal government deeming this an act of treason (Corell, 2007). Conservatives often cite such instances, even though Nixon - a conservative - was the one attempting to censor leaks from the left-leaning *New York Times* (Grguric, 2021, 23). Although this case is historically associated with liberal-anti-war activism, conservatives reference it as being key in defending freedom of speech and institutional regulations on government power (idem). More recently, conservatives have framed themselves as victims of technological and liberal academic elites, citing the influence of Tech giants like Google and Facebook and the overwhelming presence of online information (idem).

8.2.2 Censorship narrative

Big Tech giants like Facebook and Twitter have repeatedly denied political bias, despite conservative claims that they ban and censor their content (idem). As a result, conservative giants such as Trump have argued that there have been far too many instances of unjustified

conservative censorship and fact checking (Brewster, Forbes, 2020). This perception of media bias resonates with conservatives, reinforcing distrust in mainstream media outlets. As one interviewee expressed: "I try not to look at the mainstream media because they are billion-dollar conglomerates, they make a lot of money on dividing people".

There is extensive research on censorship, where New York University academics found out that while big tech employees are mostly liberals, content moderators do not operate in the US: The ultimate goal is not to censor conservatives but rather to appease them (Durkee, Forbes, 2021). However, the notion of censorship has been hijacked by the conservative movement as a narrative of marginalization, aligning itself with the kind of counterculture that they previously opposed and deemed as communist or weak. One interviewee was particularly afraid of repercussions: "Basically I joined a club at my school called DePaul College of Republicans [...] but I never really attended any meetings because I was too scared this would hurt my future job opportunities.". This dynamic would later change after they joined TPUSA.

Due to the power of the conservative movement, extensive research was done regarding political preference in the hiring process. In 2020, Pew Research conducted surveys with a focus on social media censorship. Data showed 37% of adults in the US believe it is likely that social media sites intentionally censor conservative posts they find objectionable, whereas 36% show it is somewhat likely (Grguric, 2021, 23). The study also showed that 90% of Republicans believe it is likely social media sites censor their views, profiles, and groups (idem). As a result, three quarters of the US-American adults believe social media sites are involved in censorship, specifically targeting political elites (Vogels et al., Pew Research Centre, 2020).

Suspicion of censorship and targeted conservative elites reached its peak in 2020 to 2021, with the storm on the Capitol and Trump's ban on Twitter. Facebook replicated Twitter's ban, coming at the perfect time for Trump to be perceived as the ultimate underdog, being nullified of his online reach during the last days of his presidency (Grguric, 2021, 24). Twitter claimed Trump incited violence and was responsible for the incident, yet silencing a conservative president during his last days at the white house did not sit well with conservative supporters (The Guardian, 2021; Grguric, 2021, 24). It reinforced their anti-establishment and first amendment beliefs against censorship and tech giants (idem). Conservative beliefs were further solidified by the mainstreaming of BLM and Antifa riots, which took the focus away from

Trump's censorship to issues of inequality, solidifying the conservative ideology as countercultural (idem).

The Parler ban, an alternative social media platform launched in 2018, served as a key moment that reinforced the alt-right movement's belief that it was an oppressed, countercultural underdog. Parler was used by conservatives as a centralized political body to voice out concerns over censorship and general oppression, highly successful in gathering support and with the ultimate objective of preventing restraints from Tech Giants they previously experienced (idem, 25). The app quickly became the number one free app launched, where popularity was closely linked to social bias and censorship of the movement (Edelman, Wired, 2021). However, during the riot on the Capitol, the app was removed from the App store, Google and Amazon services, completely erasing it from the internet along with all its user profiles (idem).

At this stage, the political correctness that was 'installed by the left', quickly turned into exerting complete control of free speech as perceived by the alt-right movement. The Parler and Trump ban, as well as infringements of the First Amendment, were applauded by mainstream media, un-checked by state entities, showing conservatives that conservatism would no longer thrive in such a contemporary landscape. From a conservative perspective, they have been oppressed from discussing politics on their platforms, their leader had been banned by Tech Giants, and riots they did not support had been prioritized over the correct application of the First Amendment in many instances. As a result "conservatives had every right to consider themselves as being a form of counterculture" (Grguric, 2021, 25).

8.2.3 Grievance politics

Social media is particularly well suited to use by movements and activists, even more so at the time when TPUSA started gaining traction, as it was relatively new. Instead of what can be perceived as the rigidity and distance of legacy media, these platforms allowed for the free distribution of user-generated content, leading to a more 'authentic', intimate, and unfiltered experience (Franz, 2020, 14). This type of platform fits well with Kirk's style of rhetoric and debate, as he regularly tours American universities and films debates with students, then posting these videos online, generating viral content and gaining notoriety (idem). In recent years mainstream news and mass media have steadily declined in favor of social media platforms, with growing reach and user bases (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019, 770). This new media shares some similarities with legacy mainstream media, particularly that information

can be presented in ways that can distort the perception of the underlying facts, e.g. through recontextualization and omissions (idem). As a result, the social media presented, tends to prioritize engagement over journalistic and academic credibility (Franz, 2020, 14). The effect is an increase in the propensity of people being exposed to misinformation and conspiracy theories, a fact exacerbated by the lack of accountability that traditional news outlets and media would face in similar situations (idem).

The most popular and up-to-date conspiracy theories have evolved around Pizzagate, Jeffrey Epstein's death, and QAnon, mainly due to the polarized American context, growing distrust in institutions, and through the convergence of internet culture, thus allowing for the rise of anonymous users (idem, 20; Bleakly, 2023). Pizzagate emerged shortly before 2016, claiming high profile leaders like Hillary Clinton were involved in satanic rituals and the abuse of children in a pizza parlour in Washington DC (Bleakley, 2023, 510). Its legitimacy peaked in 2020, being closely connected to Jeffrey Epstein's suicide in 2019 and his links to the political establishment, proving almost impossible to be debunked as it quickly reached massive audiences on TikTok (Cosentino, 2020; idem). Rather than losing traction like other theories, Pizzagate swiftly moved across alt-right channels such as 4chan, 8chan and 8kun, enjoying more exposure than it ever would have through channels such as Twitter or TikTok and thus, to the most fitting of groups (Hoback & McKay, 2021). During Covid, the re-emergence of conspiracies provided a key gateway for organizations like TPUSA to thrive in a time of widespread isolation, rising skepticism towards government authority, and growing belief the pandemic was a tool for control. Countercultural movements thrive on a sense of betrayal, where such conditions draw in disillusioned individuals seeking belonging and answers, making TPUSA's anti-establishment messaging especially resonant for these individuals. This becomes evident in the experiences of one interviewee, where Covid made them more receptive for right-wing ideas:

“And then I started looking online. And then I discovered what is happening in this world. Like, why did COVID suddenly pop up? It seemed very strange to me at the time when the world was shutting down. And I think that opened my eyes up a lot and then I started seeing these conservative influencers, and then I slowly started getting into it.”

Central to grievance politics and imagined state persecution is the role of 4chan, particularly the posting of 'Q', a user claiming to be a government insider. Surrounding Q, users constructed a fictitious image of Trump as a heroic sleeper agent whose aim was to dismantle the corrupt

Washington elite from within, essentially forming QAnon (Cosentino, 2020). This catalysed a cult-like following across different forums, in which users collaboratively assembled bizarre far-right conspiracy theories centred on Trump's war against this previously mentioned 'cabal of satanic pedophiles' (idem, 37).

The previous section aimed to show how the alt-right has successfully hijacked the language and tactics of a counterculture that had characteristically been left leaning. It proved highly successful in framing conservatism as the underdog in a battle against liberal elitism, academic supremacy, and powerful institutions like Silicon Valley. In a conservative perspective, they have steered American contemporary ideological landscapes. Conspiracies like Pizzagate and Epstein's death have been reinforced through centralized platforms like 4chan and hashtags like #QAnon, embedding them in curated echo chambers. Within these spaces, Trump is not portrayed as a complicit elite, but rather as a sleeper agent fighting the corrupt establishment. Despite accusations of sexual misconduct and long-standing ties to Epstein, alt-right circles have managed to dodge critique, allowing their prophet to be seen as morally justified and virtuous, as data has proven (Bleakley, 2023, 521).

Such tightly managed ideological loops have allowed TPUSA to step into the battlefield and build upon something larger, a highly organized structure grounded in emotional narratives of censorship, surveillance, and generational betrayal. As a result, this section aims to spotlight that TPUSA capitalises on already existing grievances, framing conservative actors not as powerful actors, but silenced victims battling against the moral authority imposed by leftist academia. Through new and countercultural initiatives like CR and PW, this sense of persecution is institutionalized, incentivized, and monetized, transforming moral panic into a form of activism. Conservative students take a switch stance, from passive recipients of ideology to agents of surveillance themselves. Their aim is to expose professors in the name of free speech and to protect the First Amendment.

Ultimately, TPUSA's field operations and public campaigns, whilst proving highly influential in recruiting processes and shaping of political consciousness, are only the surface of the deeper institutionalization of conservatism in the US. Underneath this lies a complex system of conspiratorial meaning-making, algorithmic insulation, strategic victimhood, and a large web of megadonors whose influence is yet to be scrutinized. What once defined counterculture in the 60's - resistance to authority and establishment, anti-elitism, and the defence of academic

and expressive freedom - has been hijacked and reappropriated as a conservative youth revolution. TPUSA thrives within this context, presenting not just an organization, but an emotionally charged worldview situated in a complex socio-political landscape. This landscape extends beyond traditional conservatism, fuelled by grievance, conspiracies, extensive mega donor networks and significant political backing.

While analyzing TPUSA through a countercultural perspective provides insights into its ideological position, some of its activism aligns more closely with NSMT. Combining both allows for a more comprehensive understanding of TPUSA's role in social contestation.

8.3 TPUSA as a new social movement

To recall Diani's (1992) definition: A new social movement consists of a network, shares a collective identity, and responds to a conflict (Diani, 1992, 17). Thus, the main themes within TPUSA that need to be identified are: Network, identity, and conflict. Whether TPUSA fulfills all three main themes will be scrutinized through a combination of working with TPUSA's website, as well as the interviews, while critically discussing the both.

8.3.1 TPUSA as a networking machine

When it comes to creating a network, TPUSA does indeed do a fine job. It consists of different subgroups that are active in high school, college, and university campuses. In college, TPUSA has "800+ college chapters" and 48 field representatives, promoting "freedom-loving, American values" yet again (TPUSA college, n.d.). The 48 field representatives employed "empower and support students to host on campus activism events that drive impactful and engaging initiatives, and train others on campus" (idem). TPUSA also offers a free "activism kit" for high school, college, and university branches, making it particularly easy to start with and engage in activism. There is one general activism kit for high school and college each, as well as 12 specialty activism kits, ranging from topics like free speech to hunting (TPUSA student activism kit, 2025).

Beyond its 'physical sphere', social media is used to build communities of like-minded people, allowing them to be part of a family, connected through shared identity and ideas. This aspect is particularly important for people who see themselves as outsiders, since it emboldens them to express views, beliefs and experiences that they would not otherwise for fear of exclusion (Franz, 2020, 16). In a sense it can be argued that this builds upon a similar thing the conservative news platforms such as Fox News do by providing an alternative to "mainstream

news” (idem). TPUSA also tries to foster communities through its social media, especially through Instagram, where their main account has almost 3 million followers (Turning Point USA, n.d). Through their accounts, TPUSA maintains a very active presence, each chapter managing their own social media accounts and posting about events and initiatives. Even moreso, these accounts encourage people to start their own student initiatives and create chapters in their local areas, going as far as providing substantial funding to the students who are willing to organize this (Fuchsberg, 2023).

Community-building also translates into the ‘real-life culture’ of TPUSA. One interviewee, who was sent to the YWLS, recalls: “They gave me a scholarship for it and then I went to San Antonio. [...] I would check out their booths and there was one called TPUSA and they said to start a chapter at my school and they would give me merch [...]”. This person further elaborates that if at any point, they needed help with organizing TPUSA events on their campus, someone would come in and help. Beyond providing activism kits, TPUSA also funds travel to its events and summits, as noted by interviewee number 4: “There's a thing called SAS and Tampa Bay, Florida, which is about like a 20 hour drive for me. If I wanted to go there this summer and pay for it, I would not have to pay for tickets, plane tickets or anything. So a lot of it, it's free and a lot of it, I don't need funding from campus.”. TPUSA systematically replaces traditional campus structures with its own, integrating students into conservative networks and reinforcing conservative thinking. Another participant highlights the networking possibilities that TPUSA enables, while highlighting just how deeply interconnected and rooted within the broader conservative movement in the US TPUSA is. They state:

“I've got to meet a few politicians in our state. [...]. So it's definitely building connections with state representatives, organizations. [...] I want to get into politics in the future in some sort of way. [...] And being part of these organizations, especially for politics, in college, the best thing is just building those connections.”

This quote explicitly showcases TPUSA’s ability to tie young people to the organization in an unprecedented manner. Early on, they give students the opportunity to connect and network, which in the long run will benefit TPUSA and their cause. Through its vast network of clubs, chapters, and events, TPUSA has undeniably established a presence across American campuses.

These communities, online and offline, foster an identity that connects members while reinforcing their shared beliefs, including on conservative social networking sites. This

oftentimes leads to behavior similar to that exhibited by dedicated fans of sports teams, resulting in a rivalry where it is more important for their team to win and to save face rather than driving forward political discussion for the betterment of society (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024, 60-61). In essence, it becomes more important to protect one's own identity and not losing against the 'rivals', rather than the discussion of any particular topic. As a consequence, the principles at the core of the community are not particularly important, at least not in comparison to preserving this perception of winning against an outgroup and protecting the collective identity (*idem*).

8.3.2 The identity of TPUSA

As Buechler (1995) established, the identity of a movement is no longer dependent on ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. Instead, they are replaced by other factors, such as the values that a movement represents. The interview pool reflects this quite well, as participants consisted of: two women, three men; three people of colour and two white people; as well as one openly Muslim person and two openly Christian. Rather than being tied together by traditional markers like ethnicity or gender, TPUSA members construct their collective identity around ideological alignment, and especially their advocacy for conservative values and their resistance to the left. Melucci (1989) further stresses the importance of identity in the struggle of a new social movement, as the ability to engage in collective action presupposes a shared identity.

TPUSA defines its identity on their website in a pretty straightforward way. Undoubtedly, the core identifier centres around "restoring traditional American values like patriotism, respect for life, liberty, family, and fiscal responsibility" - what matters most are nonmaterial values. One interviewee agrees with TPUSA's focus on patriotism: "I think for the most part having a very pro-American view because I live in America and it would benefit to have a more pro-American view", clearly seeing himself being represented by TPUSA. Another argues that TPUSA is oftentimes portrayed as an extremist group, when in reality they are "just normal people that want to express their views". To him, TPUSA is ensuring a 'level-playing field', where it is about having a conversation and debating topics, no matter from what political spectrum a person comes from. Another interviewee agrees with this notion, stating that "In fact, we encourage people who differ from us, to just come along and see what we're about.". While TPUSA presents itself as a space for open debate, initiatives like PW contradict this claim by employing systematic pressure tactics that intimidate educators, rather than engaging

in genuine conversations. But, to their defence, this interviewee did not know about PW, so it could be that in fact his chapter is more moderate leaning, compared to other ones.

Several interviewees describe their conservative identity as being marginalized within ‘liberal-leaning institutions’. One interviewee, for example, recounts being labelled as extremist: “[...] because as a conservative in America, I am hated a lot. [...] I’ve been called a Nazi, I’ve been called saying that I’m a fascist, and I kill children, all that fun stuff”. This reflects a broader pattern, where TPUSA members perceive themselves as victims of ‘exclusion’. They continue to elaborate on this, viewing themselves as an advocate for others, who might be too scared to voice their opinions because of these accusations. Noticeably, the identity of TPUSA members is closely tied to perceiving themselves as a victim of liberal aggression and bias. The same victimization or ‘victim mentality’ liberals or ‘woke people’ have been so heavily attacked for.

So yes, while they identify themselves as a patriotic organization that defends traditional and conservative values in an ‘inclusionary manner’, clearly portraying a collective identity, this ‘inclusionary identity’ cannot be verified by the outside world, as reality and perception heavily clash. Similarly, the same question can be raised with regard to conflict: Does the movement address a genuine issue within higher education – that being liberal-left bias towards conservative ideas – or is it constructing a perceived grievance to advance its own ideological interests?

8.3.3 The conflict of TPUSA

As NSMT suggests, the foundation of collective action lies in politics, ideology, and culture. Regarding TPUSA, the central question concerns the nature of the conflict it claims to address. TPUSA explicitly frames itself as a response to perceived ideological bias in higher education, stating its goal is “to challenge the status quo and encourage free thinking – something too often neglected on college campuses today” (TPUSA, n.d.). Similarly, the movement aims to “help change the narrative in a space only the left has dominated for too long” (idem). These statements indicate that TPUSA *constructs* its conflict around ‘leftist dominance’ within academia, positioning itself as the defender of conservatism that seeks to fight this ideological homogeneity in educational institutions. Stephen Davis, a prominent black figure within the TPUSA universe, further elaborates on the supposedly ‘bad nature’ of the left:

“It should end with you. Reject the hateful narrative the left seeks to shove down your throat on a daily basis. Reject the notion that your neighbour wants to see you fail. Reject the notions that will divide us, because a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Davis, 2022

The analysis of the interview responses reflects this ‘us vs them’ narrative, as interviewees frequently describe their engagement with TPUSA as a battle against liberal dominance. The perceived conflict emphasizes the belief that conservative ideas and values are systematically oppressed within an overly left-leaning and exclusionary education system. Furthermore, nearly all interviewees agree on a political polarization of the US, with ‘the left’ or ‘the liberals’ being the dominant force, the root of this polarization. One interviewee directly links this bias towards conservatives to the influence of media: “However, because the media focuses so much on curating this idea that people should lean to the left or people should think a particular way”. This refers to the fact that (social) media is not only used as a tool to unite people, but also in an effort to further polarize them. Particularly on platforms like Facebook, the contemporary right has a clear advantage in their performance, being at evoking powerful emotions in the users through stoking fear and anger (Thompson, 2020). TPUSA participates in such tactics as well, contributing to this polarization and to making people more partisan. This is done through “flashy, sloganeering graphics” decrying cancel culture, overregulation, and an excessive government, but also through the deliberate targeting of professors and their characterization as ‘left-wing extremists’ (Fuchsberg, 2023). Since TPUSA is primarily involved in college campuses and on Instagram, this connects them with Gen Z students, a demographic that is the primary user of Instagram and that is especially susceptible to polarization and radicalization through social media (Taylor, 2019). Social media algorithms tend to connect users with content that reinforces their political views, deepening ‘echo chambers’ (idem). While these algorithms do not distinguish between different ideologies, emotional or reactionary content tends to generate more views, shares, and comments, making opposing perspectives less visible, thus further reinforcing their political views. Just one interviewee views the power of media and algorithms a bit more differentiated, stating: “[...], in terms of who dominates, I think it’s kind of like a back and forth [...]”.

However, a critical examination of ‘educational bias’ complicates TPUSA’s conflict narrative. Many interviewees do report professors expressing personal opinions, praising progressive politicians while demonizing right-leaning ones. Some recall professors who openly declared that their classes are not suitable for conservative students, reinforcing the narrative that academia is ideologically biased. However, when asked about direct personal experiences of political bias in education – such as biased grading or open repercussions – all interviewees denied having made those experiences themselves. Instead and most notably, all of the

interviewees recounted *second-hand experiences* of bias. This tendency is evident in the following quotes:

1. “I personally haven’t had much political bias. A lot of people in my club have [...]. So I’ve heard anyway, there are more terms of liberal-minded teachers and if you have a more conservative viewpoint, you don’t get graded as fairly.”
2. “[...] so I haven’t experienced a political bias [...].”
3. “[...] I personally do not feel like I have been affected by a bias.”
4. “[...] in college, I did not experience anything negative”

In one case one interviewees noted that their political alignment is unknown to teaching personnel, which may explain their lack of perceived bias. Others however – including founding members and chapter presidents of TPUSA organizations on their campuses – reported no first-hand experiences of institutional bias. That raises the question of whether TPUSA responds to an *objectively verifiable* conflict, or whether they construct the conflict themselves to push their own agenda. Having to depend on second-hand accounts rather than direct personal experiences strongly suggests that TPUSA’s conflict could mainly be rooted in perception rather than systemic oppression within education.

Regardless, all interviewees do describe their own reluctance to openly express their views due to fear of social or professional repercussions. This aligns with NSMT’s perspective that the socio-political context, the perceived reality of individuals, often serve as a mobilization tool within movements. They describe self-censorship to avoid possible backlash, concerns about future job opportunities when joining conservative organizations, or being private about their political views in general. Some of their experiences include:

1. “I never really attended any meetings [referring to meetings hosted by a conservative organization in their university] because I was too scared this would hurt my future job opportunities, right?”
2. “I thought we were friends. She dropped me. She didn’t like me very much after our November election... She said a lot of nasty things to me online and then we weren’t friends after that.”
3. “There’s people like me that are too scared to come out and voice their opinion, especially if they’re conservatives.”
4. “People lost friends. People lost connections with families because of what they stood for.”

5. “Some universities, when Charlie Kirk went to colleges like Kansas State, they tried turning it down.”

In no way does this paper denounce the personal experiences of interview participants. People do experience personal grievances related to their political beliefs, but it is very difficult to link them to a systematic suppression of conservative views within education, but rather outside of it. Still, TPUSA leverages this fear and portrays itself as a safe haven for conservatives, offering protection, the possibility to connect and network with like-minded peers, without this ‘societal pressure’. This fear strengthens TPUSA’s conflict narrative of conservative suppression, though not strictly within education, while it also strengthens its position as a safe haven. Interviewees consistently highlight TPUSA as an organization that provides them with a network of support and helps them find a footing on campus, creating an environment where they can openly express themselves.

9 Discussion

The analysis set the field for the discussion, giving us a set of findings that we could expand on. The discussion is split into the main two theoretical lenses that this paper uses, namely Counterculture and NSMT. Here, we restate our findings and unexpected results, identify and consider the limitations of our study, and explore options for follow up research.

The literature suggests that the alt-right has strategically hijacked countercultural narratives and strategies by positioning itself as the marginalized actor within American society. Being subjected to structural censorship and institutional suppression, their narrative of persecution has allowed them to mirror the tactics once used by the left, rebranding conservatism as the new counterculture. Since its origins the alt-right’s battleground has always evolved around academia. With institutional backing from the LI and megadonors, the movement has been successful in executing centralized plans to reshape conservatism, specifically tailoring to youth groups. Through traditionally countercultural mechanisms like grassroots organizations, including TPUSA, PW and CR, the movement has provided economic and moral incentives to surveil leftism in academia. Online forums have amplified activism, leveraging memes, symbolic culture, and anonymity to recruit and mobilize different youth groups. TPUSA has provided not only a physical and more reactionary form of activism within colleges, but has

also proven that media reach is essential to the ideological investment of people within the group.

By framing themselves as the oppressed, alt-right activists have risen, deploying the very frameworks of structural oppression and silencing they once criticized the left for. Conservatives have promoted and institutionalized ideological enforcement whilst claiming to protect freedom of expression. These double-faced techniques are evident when looking at recent developments. The alt-right's defunding of universities has raised questions over the sincerity of their commitment to free speech, as it depends on whether the context benefits the group. Thus, their alignment with trolling culture blurs the line between strategy, satire, and suppression, allowing them to deny responsibility and criticism while spreading hate. Conservative grievances against perceived leftist censorship, like Obama prioritizing BLM and Antifa or the IRS heavily targeting the TPM have been leveraged to justify conservative surveillance structures like PW and CR. Nonetheless, private actions by Silicon Valley like the Parler ban or Trump's deplatforming in 2021 spotlight questions regarding political bias in institutions. Conservative accusations of bias within Silicon Valley have often been disapproved and misinterpreted as state-backed leftist censorship, yet, lacking evidence and ties to progressive administrations. Conversely, conservative efforts have been heavily state-backed and principally centralized, proving much more efficient yet much more oppressive.

Ultimately, the conservative movement, with its grassroots and political organizations, has given the movement fluidity in redefining itself and adapting narratives to specific contexts of crisis. Visible in how the movement aligns with marginalized groups such as Gays for Trump, Latinos, Black conservatives and middle to low class youth, depending on the narrative that best serves the context. TPUSA has effectively replaced the TPM, introducing newer, more reactionary ways of politicking, attracting students eager to fight what is showcased as an unfair system. Thus, with the help of a heavily funded media and news outlet, again, showcasing politics as rebellious and 'cool', younger populations go online to seek more, falling for echo chambers and algorithms that have been purposefully made for recruitment. As a result, success of the movement does not rest on its ability to make policy or address issues, but rather on emotional proximity, narrative adaptability, symbolic trust, heavy centralization and funding, as well as its modernization and re-definition of politics.

Furthermore, it can be difficult to say with certainty that TPUSA is a New Social Movement, especially since it was founded relatively recently. Despite this, concepts typical of NSMT (network, identity, conflict) manifest themselves in how TPUSA operates. When it comes to their social media usage, they make great efforts to connect and reach out to people, reinforcing their network. They maintain a common identity by perpetuating a shared set of values through memes and online culture. Even through trying to reach out to their opponents and participating in discourse only serves to further push polarization and conflict. Beyond social media, TPUSA's actions and policies also reinforce polarization. They organize a veritable suite of conservative conventions and events, then pay for students' expenses when attending, on top of providing people with the material and financial backing necessary to start their own local TPUSA chapters. When it comes to identity, they have carefully created an outward image of caring more about shared ideas than 'identity politics'. Lastly, they foster conflict by debating younger inexperienced students with the purpose of 'lecturing' them, as an interviewee puts it, or organizing events and talks in 'liberal universities'.

There were several findings that were not expected. Though it is a very controversial PW initiative, none of the interviewees had ever engaged with it, despite being members of TPUSA. Another surprising detail was that, although there was a common sentiment that the faculty is biased in favour of liberals, *none* of the participants had ever directly experienced any negative effects. These two findings may relate: It could be possible that PW was more relevant after eight years of the Obama administration, and that now it may simply have become 'old news'. It could be that, without professors' perceived biases affecting conservative students through their grades or other ways, these students may not have any incentive to contribute to this list. This reasoning could in fact be inverted, with faculty 'reigning in' their bias out of fear of the harassment that could result from being added to PW.

Within the structure of this paper, some blind spots were inevitable. One limitation was the focus on interviewing students that are conservative and/or TPUSA members, leading to a one sided perspective. A complete picture would include talking with teachers and liberal students from campuses where TPUSA is active. Another weakness could be the focus on PW, especially given the fact that it is a nine year old initiative, meaning that it could be less important at the present time. A potential follow up study could address the first of these points by shifting the perspective onto liberal students and/or professors at campuses where TPUSA is active. Additionally, another possibility includes investigating if and what new social

movements and countercultures have resulted from the re-election of Trump and the takeover of political power by conservatives, including TPUSA.

Considering everything, it could be reasoned that TPUSA is in a strange position. Since its founding, there have been two Republican presidential terms, both under Trump. Despite this, they still try to pose as being in the opposition, rather than part of the ‘establishment’. Arguably, TPUSA are at a crossroads: Do they remodel their ideas to try to stay in the counterculture? Or do they transition fully to a new social movement?

10 Conclusion

This paper examined TPUSA through the lenses of NSMT and Counterculture, scrutinizing its role in ideological contestation within US education. Undoubtedly, TPUSA has shaken the landscape of US academia, becoming an integral part of the current collegial landscape. It built an interconnected network, providing students with support for their campus activism while (or for) promoting a collective conservative identity. Furthermore, it successfully frames itself as a countercultural force fighting ‘leftist dominance’ in academia. However, much of the conflict they claim to fight seems to be perception-driven rather than validated by a systemic suppression of conservative voices. This is evident from the interviews, which suggest that TPUSA relies on second-hand accounts of bias rather than first-hand experiences. This raises questions regarding the credibility of its cause: Do they respond to a genuine institutional issue, or do they construct their own ideological battle? A question especially relevant in 2025, as the pendulum is currently in favor of conservatives, evident by Trump’s defunding of colleges.

Nevertheless, TPUSA redefines conservatism as ‘rebellious and edgy’, which aligns with countercultural tactics. A historical conservative perspective reveals that conservative ideology may not have been censored, but overshadowed by hegemonic left-leaning narratives within the contemporary landscape. Younger generations, raised mostly under democratic presidencies, may have skewed perspectives of conservatism as marginal. Thus, key organizations like TPUSA could hijack countercultural strategies and narratives, presenting itself as the oppressed ideology despite being the dominant one historically (The Economic Times, 2024). TPUSA also shows characteristics of a new social movement, emphasizing identity formation, community-building, symbolic conflict, and cultural resistance. A core strategy of TPUSA is grievance politics, which is supported by social media, campus activism, and initiatives like PW. By framing conservatism as an ‘identity under attack’, TPUSA fuels a

‘victimhood narrative’ among its members, reinforcing the idea that conservative voices are systematically suppressed both in higher education and mainstream discourse. This view not only mobilizes support but also TPUSA’s anti-establishment position, despite its significant institutional and financial backing. As conservatism further gains political power, TPUSA could face challenges when it comes to maintaining its countercultural image. Whether it will transition to a formalized conservative structure or continue to act as a ‘reactionary ideological network’ remains unanswered as of now.

Thus, this paper urges for further research that includes perspectives from faculty, liberals, as well as looking at TPUSA’s evolution in shifting political dynamics, especially if conservative momentum persists. Regardless, TPUSA has claimed a spot as an influential force on college campuses, reshaping conservative activism through networking, social media, and ideological mobilization.

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