Student Movements: Counter-Mobilization in Response to the Alt-right

The rise of the alt-right across the United States is one of the most pressing contemporary issues in the social and political fabrics of U.S. politics. The formation of Trumpism has been one factor of many that have given the alt-right a space in American Politics. The so-called silent majority that is the staunch Trump and Bannon supporter has not only been empowered but is more vocal today than it has been in years. The alt-right has been invigorated within the last year, and their 'enemies' are paying the price. One of these enemies is higher education. While the alt-right has always publicly chastised higher education, they have not deliberately targeted and threatened professors of higher education in the ways they are today. Thus, as the alt-right becomes increasingly bold, aggressive, and heinous in their tactics to dismantle higher education, it begs the question of what forces are mobilizing against these pressures? Universities have done very little in response to these outside threats to protect their teachers. But what about the student body at these institutes? Some are mobilizing in opposition to the alt-right, and some are not. So why have some student bodies countered alt right smear campaigns against higher education and professors, while others have not? The question posed is salient for the times and has not been answered by literature thus far. Drawing on social movement theory, I contend that the varying degrees of student mobilization around the country in opposition to the alt-right vastly depends on the structure of the university, the student wealth at universities, and the existence of, as well as the size of leftist political student organizations on campus.

**Literature Review**

Scholarly research on political activism has been primarily concerned with grievance generation but has grown into other schools of thought. Historically researchers have focused on grievance generation and strain theory to explain how and why social movements occur (Buechler, 2004).  More recently, however, scholars have focused on political process theory which is the "dominant paradigm in social movements" today, deliberately focusing on the emergence of social movements (Zepeda-Millan, 2017). The contextual theories making up political process theory include political opportunities, resource, and ecological factors (Snow and Soule, 2010; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1988). Social movement scholars have generated copious amounts of research on movement emergence identifying four main theories to explore the advent of social movements on college campuses in: strain theory, political opportunities, resource mobilization, and ecological factors.

Strain Theory

Marx and Engels in their analysis of unequal distribution and their development of the ubiquitous grievance model asserted that people mobilized as result of grievances they experienced (Snow and Soule, 2010). Though grievances remained a vital component in explaining the formation of social movements, Durkheim's Social Strain Theory eventually dethroned Marx and Engel's explanations for why people mobilized. Scholars of Strain Theory suggest that collective mobilization is a direct response to the social change experienced by a collection of individuals (Snow and Soule, 2010). This framework established by three theses, disintegration, quotidian disruption, and deprivation represent the strains and social changes that people experience which can eventually lead to mobilization. First, the disintegration thesis posits that a disaster such as war or economic collapse weaken the social fabric that makes citizens mobilize (Coleman, 1971). The quotidian disruption thesis, in contrast, focuses on the disruption of day-to-day patterns in life as the dominant factor bringing people to protest (Snow and Soule, 2010). Deprivation thesis holds that citizens will mobilize when faced with disparaging life situations like unemployment or inaccessible healthcare (Snow and Soule, 2010). While scholars asserted that strain experienced by groups of people is a critical factor for understanding mobilization, researchers and theorists determined that stressful experiences are not the sole indicator for why people take to the streets. Theorists returned to more contextual conditions to try and fill the gaps in the literature left by strain theory. While strain theory still plays a significant role towards understanding movement emergence in general, it has proven insufficient for testing emergence in my student mobilization study.

Political Opportunities

Political opportunity structure theory is the first contextual condition in the literature that attempts to explain the emergence of social movements. Political opportunity structuralists contend that social movement emergence is reliant on an individual's ability to collectively and openly address their grievances (Snow and Soule, 2010). Moreover, citizens can address their grievances in open political systems and institutions (Tarrow, 1998). Structuralists hold that open political systems occur when there is a shift in political alignments, influential allies, and a low repressive capacity from authorities (McAdam, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). In other words, scholars argue that when political regimes shift in power, if social movements find allies within the institutions they are challenging, or when authorities in power are unlikely to squelch their cause, there is a legitimization crisis that social movements can capitalize on (Snow and Soule, 2010). Basically, social movement theory scholars argue that challenges of authority are the purpose of social movements, and political opportunity structuralists assert that challenges to authority occurs in open political systems and institutions (Tilly, 2001; Snow and Soule, 2010). For my study, which looks at the process of how student movements emerge in defense of academic freedom, structuralists would assert that universities should be more conducive to protest, because they are decentralized, they have more points of access for pressure, are left-leaning, and contain allies within the school.

Resource Mobilization

Next, resource mobilization theorists directly challenge the theory of political opportunity by linking resource deployment to the emergence of social movements (Snow and Soule, 2010). Scholars of resource mobilization throw out concepts of system accessibility in political systems and institutions and focus primarily on resources as the key factor for social movement organizations (SMO) and social movement industry (SMI) emergence (McCarthy and Zald, 1973 and 1977). Resource mobilization theorists hold that an SMO's ability to accumulate and channel human, material, moral, cultural, and social organization resources into a cause is the defining factor in movements emerging and persisting (Snow and Soule, 2010). What is more, scholars argue that with resource accumulation comes greater legitimacy for SMOs which is key to movement emergence (Snow and Soule, 2010). While there have been challenges to resource mobilization theory in cases where protests arose among populations who lack traditional resources (Zepeda-Millan, 2017), the theory has remained a staple in explaining movement emergence receiving wide-ranging scholarly support (Snow and Soule, 2010). According to this theory, universities with more student wealth should have more protests.

Ecological Factors

Finally, some scholars have pointed to ecological factors as better indicators for movement emergence. Ecological factors are special arrangements in physical spaces that facilitate mobilization (Snow and Soule, 2010). Spatial arrangements can vary from the proximity of schools (Zhao, 2001) to the establishment of free spaces (D'Emilio, 1983). Zhao (2001) argues that the proximity of schools in Tiananmen Square facilitated the diffusion of ideas, increased networks among students, and promoted collective action. What is more, D'Emilio (1983) qualified free spaces as an essential element in the emergence of the Gay Liberation Front. These ecological factors foster political challenges to authority by creating a physical space for discussion, collaboration, and strategic planning (Snow and Soule, 2010). More importantly, scholars have pointed to pre-existing structures in settings like schools or churches as indicators for movement emergence (Morris, 1981). While resource mobilization or political opportunities may play a role in a social movement, equally important are ecological factors in movement emergence. By "providing the organizational infrastructure, associational connections, and free spaces in which to organize, strategize and aggregate", ecological factors play a massive role in the emergence of social movements (Morris, 1981; Snow and Soule, 2010; Zhao, 2001; D'Emilio, 1983).

Organizational Isomorphism and Student Mobilization

Literature shows that social movements are dynamic, contain complex interactive systems, and emerge because of a combination and culmination of multiple factors. Scholarly research has produced explanations for movement emergence, but the rise of alt-right attacks on academia and student counter-mobilizations have demonstrated a gap in the literature. Current literature on student mobilization in a university setting examines the organizational structure of colleges and the qualities of the student body. Soule (1995) identifies "organizational isomorphism" as an organizational homogenization process that resulted in the acceptance and implementation of divestment policies by universities in the U.S. The adoption of divestment policies resulted in student-led anti-apartheid protests that diffused across college campuses. From this theoretical framework, my study will attempt to show that while universities are homogenizing spaces where ideas and policies frequently diffuse between campuses (Soule, 1995), any potential for student mobilization becomes obsolete without pre-existing organizational networks and ecological factors to incite student activism within the university (Freeman,1973). In other words, organizational isomorphism is essential when it coincides with pre-existing organizational structures and ecological factors that facilitate student mobilization within individual universities.

**Methods and Discussion**

This study will utilize a quantitative case study approach to assess why some student bodies mobilize against the alt-right on college campuses while others do not. Quantitative case studies are beneficial in establishing causal relationships to test theory and identifying factors that influence an outcome by employing deductive analysis (Creswell, 2014). This study will use quantitative statistical methodologies to determine what structural factors facilitate the student social movements in response to the alt-right. The methodological framework used in this study includes causal-comparative research through a progression of analyses attempting to cross-correlate university structures and student mobilization variables to produce the result "r" (Williams, 2007). Selective sampling of university websites and other statistical databases that provide information on institutions will be used to collect the data for this study. This study will examine a handful of the universities that have had professors who were targeted by the alt-right campaign: Princeton, Texas A&M, North Dakota, Syracuse, Trinity College, and Drexel.

In quantitative research, data interpretation, coding, and manipulation may bring researcher bias into question. I do not claim to be unbiased when it comes to the mobilizations countering the alt-right's attacks on higher education and administrators because I have been a participant and leader in the protests at Drexel. However, I believe my participation benefits my research. Being an activist has given me insights into organizing student protests and the different forces at play. Moreover, my activism helps me understand the structural aspects that play a role in student activism and what structural aspects need to be examined quantitatively. I propose this analysis with the perspective that there is some disproportion in student activism at universities across the country in response to the alt-right threats. This study will offer insight towards understanding the structural factors that enable or even promote student activism.

This study will examine correlations between student activism and the type of institution, the average student wealth at each university, and the number of leftist organizations on campus. The study will utilize the Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) to classify universities into four distinct categories. Then, extracting and coding data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), University factbooks, and the Equality Project will show the wealth of the student bodies and percentage of first-generation students. Lastly, the university websites will be used to locate the number of leftist organizations. Universities will be organized into four categories: liberal arts, doctoral-granting, or comprehensive, or research institutes. Additionally, student wealth, percentage of first-generation students, and the number of students given Pell Grants will show how well-equipped students are to mobilize, and finally, the number of leftist organizations illustrate the number of spaces created for networking within these universities.

The purpose of this research is to quantitatively assess why some students are mobilizing today and others are not. This study looks at this question in a structural framework. In other words, examining how the structure of a university affects activism related to the theory described above as political opportunity structures. To start, I will use Soule's (1995) strategy by classifying institutions into four categories. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching defines liberal arts colleges as those that emphasize baccalaureate degrees, and award above 40% of liberal arts degrees. Comprehensive institutions offer multiple baccalaureate degrees and master's degrees, awarding more than 40 masters degrees in at least three disciplines each year. Doctoral institutions offer many baccalaureate degrees as well as 40 doctoral degrees per year. Last, Research institutions offer baccalaureate and doctoral degrees but are also committed to research (Soule, 1995). The universities I intend to study will be classified into these four categories based on the above guidelines. The results will demonstrate any difference there is between the different institutional structures. A propensity for liberal arts colleges, for example, to have more student mobilizations in response to the alt-right suggests that liberal arts colleges are more open systems than other types of institutions.

In addition to institutional structure, I will observe student wealth. A multipronged approach will be used to find indicators for mobilization based on the structural theory of resource mobilization. First, I will measure the number of students attending the universities in my study from the top 1% versus the bottom 60% based on the 2016 and 2017 cohort mobility reports form Equality of Opportunity Project. Second, I will determine the number of first-generation students present at the university. Fewer first generation enrollees would indicate a wealthier institute because college and wealth are correlated. Finally, I will gather data from factbooks created by each university that will show the percentage of the student body that is receiving government assistance to attend school through a Pell Grant. Universities with a fewer number of students receiving Pell Grants will indicate wealthier student bodies. After coding this data, I will be able to determine which universities receiving threats from the alt-right have wealthier populations and whether there is any correlation between student wealth and mobilization.

A final structural aspect of universities is their leftist student organizations. Following Soule (1995), I will employ "college guides like Peterson's and Bimbach (1984) to ascertain the level of leftist student organization on campus." While McCarthy and Zald (1977) argue organization is a precondition to mobilize and falls under resource mobilization, I evaluate organizations and the space they create for plotting, planning, and networking as ecological factors. Moreover, I will use college guides and websites to determine the number of leftist organizations on campus and determine if there is a correlation between the number of organizations and student activism. Left-leaning organizations will be qualified as any campus organization that represents, deals with or affiliates with left-leaning principles in the contemporary political climate.

Overall, understanding the structural aspects of universities that facilitate student mobilization will contribute to the literature on student movements in opposition to the alt-right. In theory, the sort of university, make-up of the student body, and the number of leftist organizations should indicate the propensity for students to protest the alt-right smear campaigns across the nation. These theoretical predictions grounded in political opportunity, resource mobilization, and ecological factors will undergo rigorous analysis to determine their credibility and determine why some students mobilize in opposition to the alt-right while others wait by the sidelines.

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