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From dorms to demonstrations

The campus protests across the US aren't primarily about the Israel-Hamas war but stem from other, deep-seated issues: alienation and radicalisation

The campus protests that have spread to universities in every part of the United States are not about the war between Israel and Hamas, despite the heated rhetoric around this topic. Most of the students who are protesting know little about the conflict, its history and its ramifications for international politics. Few of them cared deeply about the issue before the horrifying Hamas attack on Israelis on 7 October 2023 and the militaristic response of Israel's government. What motivates the protests are two historical dynamics that long pre-date the current moment: alienation and radicalisation.

College students in the United States and other countries are more alienated from older generations than their recent predecessors. Crucial years in their social and emotional development were distorted by Covid-19, when they were forced to connect digitally rather than in-person. They formed bonds with other young people in similar circumstances, but they did not build relationships with teachers, coaches, employers or other adult mentors. Many feel on their own, abandoned. And the collective desire in so many societies to forget about Covid-19 means that they cannot talk about how it affected them. The denial of their reality by most adults makes students cynical. I see it in my own students who are talented, but somewhat hopeless.

Under attack

Cynicism and hopelessness have seeded anger (and sometimes violence) because struggling students feel that they are frequently under attack from politicians in the US. As I have written elsewhere, the Republican Party has waged a war on universities for at least a decade. Elected officials like House Speaker Mike Johnson, Representative Elise Stefanik, Senator Ted Cruz, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Texas Governor Greg Abbott have attacked faculty and students for pursuing racial and gender justice, for demanding forgiveness of exorbitant tuition loans and

for seeking access to safe abortions. Republican policy positions run against the views of the vast majority of college students.

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For this reason, Republicans across the United States have created barriers to political participation for young people. Republicans simply do not want them to vote, and when they vote, Republicans often allege 'fraud'. Some obvious examples of voter suppression stand out. States like Florida and Texas require voters to register a month in advance with a proof of permanent address, which is often difficult for students to document. These and other states also place voting locations close to older voters, farther from universities and downtown residential areas. Gerrymandering means that rural areas with older voters are overrepresented; dense urban areas with younger voters are underrepresented. And Republicans across the United States are seeking to limit early and absentee voting — flexible voting options that young people who work and study full time value.

Alienation from Republican politicians has contributed to widespread student distrust of university leaders who frequently succumb to the pressures of Republicans (as happened with the firing of the presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania) or the demands of donors aligned with Republicans. Students almost universally blame university leaders for giving in to the interests that have disrespected and disenfranchised young, educated citizens.

Unfortunately, the Democratic Party has failed to draw the support of young people either. For the Democrats, the problem is not offensive positions, but a party structure that is dominated by older, mainstream politicians. They are boring for young people, they lack any connection to their world, and they seem too compromised and unprincipled. In the case of President Biden, students see a decent but old man who is more of a political operator than a moral leader on issues that matter to them — including climate change, social justice and humanitarianism.

A feeling of homelessness

That is where the Israel-Hamas war influences the protests so urgently. Despite the extreme violence and suffering in the Middle East, many

college students see a consistency in US support for Israel, with few conditions, that frustrates them. Why isn't a Democratic president able to exert more influence to change the behaviour of the Israeli government in Gaza, where civilians are currently starving? Why isn't a Democratic president able to press Arab allies, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to help civilians? For students who do not appreciate the complexities of foreign policy, the White House appears to be playing an old game in a world with urgent new problems.

Between Republicans and Democrats – the only two choices in the US political system – young people feel homeless. They have become radicalised because they believe that they must find new ways to get around the parties and express their demands. Campus protests today, as in the 1960s, are a form of extra-political opposition. The students want to side-line Republicans and force Democrats to move far left. The arguments for 'divestment' are efforts to reduce the power of banks and financial interests in the Democratic Party and restore influence to ordinary citizens. The demands for abandoning support to Israel are part of an agenda to shift US foreign policy away from traditional allies and *Realpolitik*.

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Tragically, the radical impulse frequently manifests itself as anti-Semitism, which is reprehensible. In their naivete, many of the campus protesters see American Jews as a central element of the mainstream Democratic Party and, therefore, a source of the party's resistance to their more progressive impulses. Biden's long ties to Israel appear to corroborate this mistaken point of view. Jews appear to be the powerful people in Washington and Jerusalem, and, therefore, they are to blame, according to protesters, for blockage on change that young people so desperately want. Students often articulate this judgement with language that is personal, offensive and threatening to all Jews.

Liberal and conservative Jews are revolted by what they see from campus anti-Semitism. Republicans take advantage of protester anti-Semitism to condemn, yet again, students and universities as a whole. They pressure campus leaders to deploy force against the protesters, and they extol the bravery of police officers who break-up student encampments. The crackdowns lead to further student alienation and radicalisation, and the cycle of protest and reaction continues to spiral toward more anger, anti-

Semitism and violence.

For historians, this is all very familiar. The cycles of protest and reaction are common in moments, like our own, when the basic conditions for the rising and educated members of society do not match established institutions of power and influence. Young people feel locked out, unrepresented and trapped. They feel they can only make change by challenging institutions. And that is what they are doing. The older, established figures in society might sympathise at times, but they still hold tight to existing institutions, they resist major reforms, and they ultimately call in the police.

The cycle only breaks when a new generation gains power and pursues real reforms, as happened in numerous societies after the 1960s — with the end of the Vietnam War and the rise of *détente* and *Ostpolitik*. We need comparable reforms in policy and power today. We cannot turn back the clock to before Covid-19 or October 7.



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