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Protests on Campus: The Political Economy of Universities and Social Movements

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Abstract
In the 2023–24 academic year, protests swept across US university campuses, then campuses in Britain and elsewhere, demanding a ceasefire in the Israeli–Hamas conflict and specific university administrative responses to the conflict. This paper puts this recent wave of protests into historical perspective. It first argues that the university must be understood not only as an economic institution that produces human capital, but also as a political institution that produces a society's elites. As such, a fundamental institutional role is to endow entering cohorts of elites with an "ideological bundle", which is also, at times, contested in the university environment. We present new patterns of such contestation, collecting information from multiple sources on protests involving university students across time and space. We argue that the current wave of ceasefire protests is best understood as a demand by young elites to modify the elite ideological bundle. Historical evidence suggests that such modifications have regularly been made following campus protests.

Keywords Protests · Universities · Elites · Ideology

JEL Classification D74 · I2 · N00 · P00

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Introduction

Universities became active sites of political action in the 2023–24 academic year, experiencing mass protests, occupations of buildings, and occasionally violent conflict.[1] Protesters demanded a ceasefire in the Israeli–Hamas conflict and specific university administrative responses to the conflict, such as the divestment of university endowment funds from companies linked to Israel.

These protests, like others before them, aimed to provoke as well as to persuade. By occupying buildings and disrupting day-to-day campus life, protesters attracted attention to their cause, and also the scrutiny of administrators, public safety officials, and even politicians. The conflicts arising from the ceasefire protests placed great pressure on university communities and attracted widespread public attention—with debates over the protests reaching the highest levels of government in the United States. Several elite university presidents resigned at least partially as a result of the protests—most notably, Claudine Gay, formerly president of Harvard, and Minouche Shafik, president of Columbia.[2]

How should we view these campus protests? Should we be surprised by them? Should we view them as events that are the product of our specific moment—one in which progressive ideology has made substantial gains, especially among the educated elite? Or can we understand them as the product of more general forces?

In this paper, we argue that understanding the recent wave of protests benefits from a historical perspective on the university as an institution: the university must be understood not only as an economic institution that produces human capital, but also as a political institution that produces a society's elites. As such, a fundamental institutional role has long been to endow cohorts entering the elite with an "ideological bundle", which is also, at times, contested in the university environment. The physical and social environment of the university supports coordinated contestation—protest—at moments when young cohorts of new elites demand a change to the existing "ideological bundle".

We present new data on such contestation, collecting information from multiple sources on protests involving university students across time and space. These data reveal several striking patterns: (i) since 1950, a substantial share of social movements in the US have involved university students; (ii) the share of movements involving university students is similar across a range of issues—from domestic

[1] The Wikipedia page, "2024 pro-Palestinian protests on university campuses", describes: "Pro-Palestinian protests on university campuses started in 2023 and escalated in April 2024, spreading in the United States and other countries, as part of wider Israel–Hamas war protests. The escalation began after mass arrests at the Columbia University campus occupation, led by anti-Zionist groups, in which protesters demanded the university's disinvestment from Israel over its alleged genocide of Palestinians". See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_pro-Palestinian_protests_on_university_campuses#:~:text=The%20protests%20began%20on%20April,the%20university%20divest%20from%20Israel (last accessed 7 November 2024).

[2] See, for example, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-67868280 and https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/aug/14/columbia-university-minouche-shafik-resigns (last accessed 7 November 2024).

issues, to geopolitics, to the environment; (iii) student mobilisation has occurred sequentially across issues in waves; (iv) student mobilisation has been particularly concentrated in elite universities—highly selective private and flagship public universities; and (v) outside the US, university students participate in a smaller, but non-negligible, share of protests.

Our conceptual framework and empirical evidence suggest that the current protest wave is *both* a reflection of a specific contemporary ideology among the young *and* a much more general set of forces that tend to mobilise the young to protest on campus. Naturally, the entering cohorts of elites will differ from incumbents—particularly as preferences shift more rapidly across generations and the composition of the elite changes more quickly. Progressive ideology has both accelerated the gap in preferences across cohorts and broadened the elite, making radical contestation of elite ideology on university campuses more common. Events like the tragic war in Israel and Gaza act as precipitating sparks for ideological contestation and political mobilisation particularly within the university context.

Our work contributes to two distinct literatures in economics and, in so doing, links them. First is the literature on the socioeconomic impact of universities. The economic effects of universities, via human capital production, have received an enormous amount of attention. These effects include consequences for labour market outcomes, income levels, and growth[3]; innovation[4]; and social mobility[5]. Universities as *political institutions* have received less attention. Urquiola (2020) provides a comprehensive analysis of policy tradeoffs arising from universities' institutional design.[6] These tradeoffs imply a political economy of universities: who should fund research and how should funding be distributed across institutions? How should admissions be structured—"meritocratically" or "inclusively" (Chen et al. 2015)? These decisions reflect the deeply held values of a society and affect very high-stakes outcomes—and as such are often contentious. Our work builds on a literature studying universities as political institutions, *per se*, in the content taught, and the elite political and leadership careers of university graduates (Cantoni and Yuchtman 2013, 2014; Cantoni et al. 2017, 2018). To that literature we add the important notion that universities transmit an *elite ideological bundle*, which can be *contested*. A second literature is on the causes of protests (see Cantoni et al. 2019, 2022, 2024; Bursztyn et al. 2021). We contribute historical and political economy perspectives on the role of universities as sites of protests and social movement mobilisation.

In addition to its academic contributions, one aim of this article is to contribute to ongoing debates within academic communities. Our analysis suggests that intense political debates within university campuses cannot be easily separated from the

[3] Work on the effect of universities on labour market outcomes includes Deming et al. (2016). On the effects of universitiies on income levels, see Card (1999) and Moretti (2004). Work on education and growth includes Easterlin (1981), Mankiw et al. (1992), Benhabib and Spiegel (1994), and Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018). Review articles by Krueger and Lindahl (2001) and Hanushek and Woessmann (2008) summarize the existing evidence on the effects of education on growth rates.

[4] Kantor and Whalley (2014, 2019).

[5] Chetty et al. (2017), Zhou (2019).

[6] A historical perspective is provided by Goldin and Katz (1998, 1999).

broader political purpose of a university education: to train an elite. This implies that contestation will occur, and university administrators and faculty must manage and engage with campus protest, rather than react hastily and severely against it. At the same time, protesters must recognise that their actions are possible precisely because of the university's political role as an intellectual crucible for elite ideas. Violence, intimidation, and extremism undermine the institutional foundations of the university and thus the possibility of criticism on which protesters rely.

A final aim is to inform outside commentary on campus protests and university politics. Recent years have seen much discussion of progressive (so-called "woke") politics on campus, with protests being ascribed to the rise of such politics—whether driven by students, faculty, or administrators.[7] We argue that the recent wave of protests can be understood as resulting from stable institutional fundamentals, as much as by recent political change. The university has always been a locus of elite creation. In the last three-quarters of a century, as the elite and its universities became more progressive, universities were regularly the site of contestation of the elite's ideological bundle—this is nothing new. Campus protests—regarding racial discrimination, the war in Vietnam, the apartheid regime in South Africa, the reliance on sweatshop labour, fossil fuels—took much the same form over the last 75 years, often in the very same places, as the current wave of protests. Each wave of protests was met with accusations of extremism, and yet each, eventually, made its mark on the ideological bundle of the elite. We suggest that contemporary protests and protesters be evaluated in the light of historical protests' important role in what is now recognised to be social progress.

In what follows, we present our conceptual approach in Sect. "Conceptual Approach: Universities as Political Institutions" and historical cases illustrating the political economy of university selection and education in Sect. "Comparative Cases: High-Stakes Elite Selection and Education". We then, in Sect. "New Evidence on Students and Social Movements", present new evidence on university students' role in social movements over time. Finally, in Sect. "Concluding Thoughts", we offer concluding thoughts.

Conceptual approach: universities as political institutions

The importance of education as a *political tool*—producing elites in addition to producing productive human capital—is an idea going back as far as Plato's *Republic*. In Book 2, Socrates first describes the *selection* of the elite (i.e. the "Guardians") of the ideal city. He then asks about its *education*:

> *Then we have found the desired natures; and now that we have found them, how are they to be reared and educated? Is not this an enquiry which may be*

[7] See https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/02/magazine/wendy-brown-interview.html (last accessed 7 November 2024).

expected to throw light on the greater enquiry which is our final end—How do justice and injustice grow up in States?

That is, in addition to selecting the elite (their "desired natures"), Socrates recognises "rearing and education" to be the next fundamental question about a society's elites.

In many societies today, universities play a central role in the education of elites. More than half of Britain's prime ministers were educated at Oxford. In the United States, Harvard and Yale disproportionately educate members of the political elite. Yet, it is not just at the very top of politics that one sees a link between educational institutions and the construction of a "leadership class". Oxford trains lawyers, judges, corporate leaders, civil servants, and leaders in civil society in addition to its training of PM's and MP's. This is true of Harvard and Yale as well. Indeed, ever since the Middle Ages, the university has been a *locus of elite creation*.

As suggested in Plato's *Republic*, the creation of a leadership class in universities involves both selection and treatment (i.e. educational content). Both of these are seen by elites and society at large as being enormously consequential—in determining elite status and more generally reflecting the values of society. Consider that selection might be aristocratic (favouring those according to circumstances of birth—legacy preference is a form of this in the US), meritocratic (favouring those with achievements on an exam), or inclusive (favouring those facing socioeconomic disadvantages). All of these coexist today in elite universities. The weight we put on each of these elements will determine the composition of university cohorts, and eventually society's leadership class.

Education has long involved both direct *transmission* of content and disputation. Academic disputes among faculty, among students, and between students and faculty have been a form of contestation of the elite ideological bundle students possess upon graduation. This contestation again reflects deep societal values: elite education can be more or less religious, more or less humanistic, more or less abstract. Debates over the nature of university education, as we will illustrate below, are of intense interest to political elites, yet ultimately are often situated within universities. As such, universities have long been a site for contestation of the elite ideological bundle—by both faculty and students. Each generation of students brings with it the potential for mobilisation against an element of the ideological bundle that chafes against its values.

This potential for mobilisation is reinforced by specific characteristics of universities and university students. At the individual level, university students are simply less constrained: university is a time in life when one is less monitored than at other times: as a youth, one is monitored by parents; post-graduation, one is monitored by an employer. University is a time of (relative) freedom. Students also simply have a lower opportunity cost of time devoted to protest activity, as they typically are not employed full-time. Ideology and deep preferences are important as well (Cantoni et al. 2022), and universities are places where ideas taken very seriously. Social processes are also crucial to movement mobilisation (McAdam 1986; Tufekci 2017; Bursztyn et al. 2021). Universities have a physical environment and an "organisational ecosystem"—student clubs, political organisations, service

organisations—conducive to movement mobilisation (Hirsch 1990; Zhao 1998). These characteristics of universities and their students make political mobilisation much more likely in the university context than elsewhere.

Importantly, universities and their role in society have changed over time. In the Middle Ages, the leadership class was recruited from a much narrower range of society than it is today. Furthermore, the ideological bundle transmitted was much "tighter" than it is today (with studies focused on the arts, law, and theology). The narrow elite and tight ideological bundle were sufficient for the production of a leadership class that was asked to lead in a limited range of organisations: the Church, the secular administration, and the courts. The tight ideological bundle and very traditional set of elites trained at university implied relatively little contestation.

The 19th century saw the emergence of the idea of the "The Humboldt University", a broadening of the university as an institution into research, and the training of leaders in a wider range of domains—shifting towards the sciences and practical applications.[8] There was also a broader pool of talent recruited for economic, political, and ideological reasons. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen the processes of broadening scope and increasing the range of incoming students continue. The modern elite university provides training that produces leaders in academia, business, science, industry, law, politics, civil society, finance, and entertainment. It increasingly draws students from across the income distribution and views representation as part of its mission. The broader range of students and the wider scope of the ideological bundle makes contestation much more likely today.

Comparative cases: high-stakes elite selection and education

Contestation of elite educational selection

Selection of elites is among the most controversial features of higher education in the US. Debates over legacy admissions are intense[9]; litigation over affirmative action has repeatedly divided the US Supreme Court.[10] At the heart of the controversy (in addition to principles regarding fairness) is competition over access to scarce elite university slots, and thus to status. Competition for university access and debates regarding the restriction of access is nothing new. Frank Dobbin's review of *The Chosen* (Karabel 2005; Dobbin 2006) describes:

> *By the late 1930s, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and their peers had arrived at a quite effective and yet subtle system for limiting the number of Jewish students. … Columbia created an office of admissions in 1910, introduced nonacademic criteria for admission ("character" and "leadership"), capped the number of*

[8] See Nybom (2003) for a discussion.

[9] See, for example, https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaeltnietzel/2024/02/29/colleges-face-mounting-pressure-to-end-legacy-admissions/ (last accessed 7 November 2024).

[10] Supreme Court cases on affirmative action's use in university admissions include Grutter v. Bollinger (2003) and Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (2023).

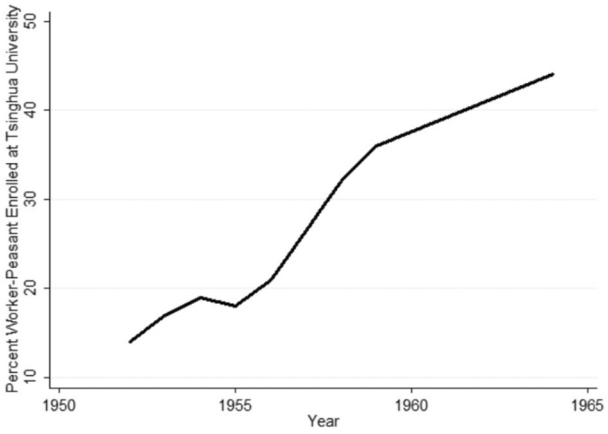

Fig. 1 Share of Tsinghua University students from worker or peasant backgrounds. Source: Andreas (2009)

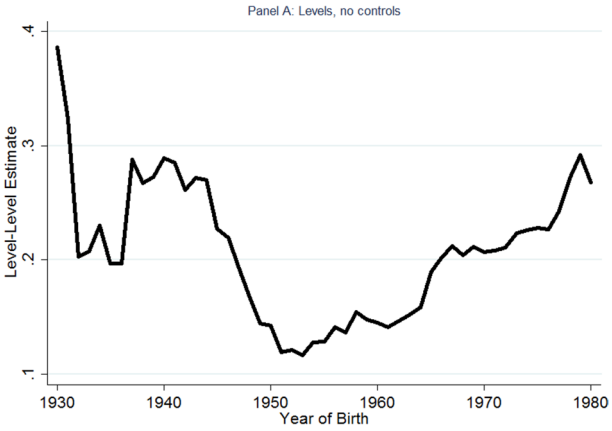

Fig. 2 Social status persistence (intergenerational correlation of educational attainment) among urban Chinese men, by year of birth cohort. Source: Chen et al. (2015)

students, and used an explicit quota. … Geographic diversity was an innovation that spread and stuck. So were quotas for the athletic teams. Early in the book, we see a group of college deans and presidents, self-consciously trying to solve the "Jewish problem."

Controversy regarding university selection mechanisms has not been limited to the US. Historically, a pivotal change in university admissions occurred in China following the Communists' victory in the Chinese Civil War. The Communists' ideological commitment to increase the representation of workers and peasants in the nation's elite led them to move away from meritocratic, exam-based admissions that have long been a hallmark of Chinese culture (Yuchtman 2017). Instead, they

prioritised background over exams, and in so doing dramatically increased the share of students at the elite Tsinghua University coming from the desired backgrounds (see Fig. 1).

Following the Cultural Revolution, training a new leadership class took precedence over the Communists' ideological commitment to workers and peasants, and the meritocratic Gaokao exam was reinstated in 1977. The result was, in part, the training of a highly competent elite; however, social status persistence increased for cohorts educated under the reinstated meritocratic system of higher education (see Fig. 2, reproduced from Chen et al. 2015).

Contestation of elite educational content

Elite educational content, too, has been the subject of political interest in different contexts across time and space. In Medieval Europe, Rashdall (1895, p. 236) writes of Popes' "policy of confining theological graduation to Paris", in an effort to monitor and preserve the orthodoxy of theological instruction. In late 19th century China, there was intense debate regarding the introduction of Western subjects in elite Chinese education. Traditional Chinese education was focused on the Confucian Classics, which arguably did not provide the type of human capital needed for China's modernisation. Hon (2002, p. 89) quotes Zhang Zhidong, a government official, laying out the terms of the debate:

> *[T]o strengthen China and preserve Chinese learning, [one] must study Western learning. Yet, if someone [studies Western learning] without first firmly being rooted in Chinese learning to cultivate his character, he may become a rebel leader if he has a strong body and a slave [to the West] if he is weak.*

Waldinger (2016) studies "The dismissal of Jewish and 'politically unreliable' scientists by the Nazi government"—the politics of instruction was prioritised over the quality of the instructor.

Educational debates: historical conflict, resolution, and consequences

Universities have long played a role in the expression and resolution of ideological debates. In the 14th century, when the Papal Schism divided European allegiances between rival "Popes", the University of Paris was the site of theological and political discussion aimed at a resolution. Eventually, the University issued a formal declaration in support of Clement VII in February 1383, reshaping higher education in Europe. As a result, elite education in Paris was closed to students from the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire, leading to the establishment of new "German" universities. Cantoni and Yuchtman (2014) show that this shift in university politics, by inducing the creation of new universities, contributed to the development of legal institutions and markets in the subsequent decades.

Universities were again sites of theological and political debate during the Protestant Reformation. Cantoni et al. (2018) show that in Protestant territories, university students' fields of study shifted after the Reformation towards secular subjects. This

shift contributed to the development of a secular public administration in Protestant territories.

Outside of Europe, Kung and Wang (2020) show that university study in Japan by Chinese students contributed to the development of revolutionary nationalist ideology that was at the heart of the Chinese Revolution of 1911.

These intense debates over elite education—selection and content—support the view of the university as a site of high-stakes political contestation. We next present novel evidence of students' role in that contestation across space and time.

New evidence on students and social movements

We present evidence from three distinct online databases: the Swarthmore Global Non-Violent Action Database (GNAD); the Mapping American Social Movements Project (MASMP); and the Mass Mobilization Data Project (MMDP).[11] Each of these sources is necessarily incomplete and potentially biased. Yet, in constructing a collage of evidence, we believe they are together quite informative. All of these sources provide a lens on high-stakes social movements and protest actions with important social, economic, and political implications. We describe them in turn.

Swarthmore Global Non-Violent Action Database

The Swarthmore GNAD database includes 1,129 cases from 18th century BCE up to the present, with greater coverage of social movements that occurred in the last century. Our focus is on the period 1950–2015 to allow for broad coverage of nonviolent social movement events. To be included in the database, there must be an identified nonviolent action campaign that has reached a point of completion. Each such event was coded by students at Swarthmore College for the Peace & Conflict Studies seminar taught by George Lakey. Students relied on scholarly work, newspaper accounts, first-person descriptions, as well as secondary sources. Because cases were collected by American students, there is naturally a bias towards English-language sources and American social movements. The student coding may also produce some bias towards social movements involving students, though we find that the database's coding of student leadership substantially *understates* the involvement of students in comparison with our own hand-coding of events.

Mapping American Social Movements Project

We study anti-war actions between 1963 and 1975 using the MASMP. These are more granular events than the campaigns coded from the GNAD database. Each

[11] The Swarthmore GNAD database is online at: https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu. MASMP is online at: https://depts.washington.edu/labhist/. MMDP is online at: https://massmobilization.github.io. All websites last accessed 7 November 2024.

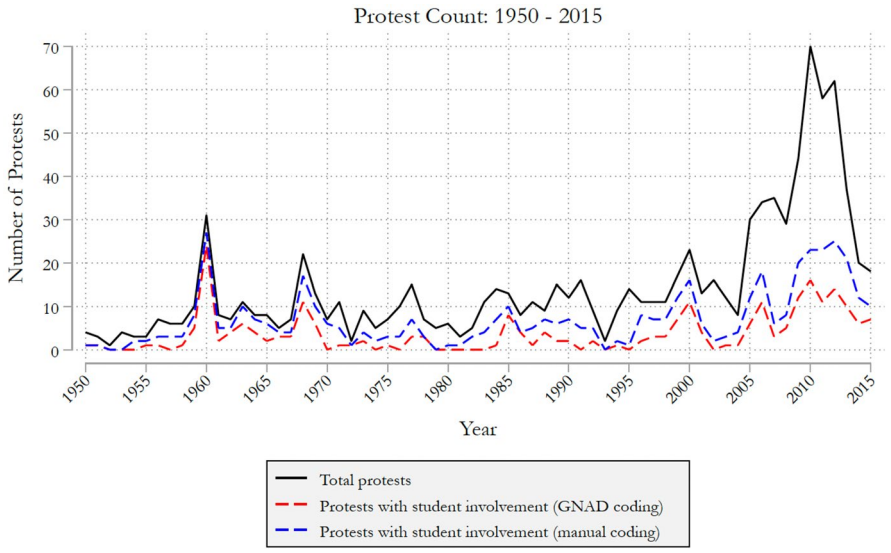

Fig. 3 All protests and protests with student participation, 1950–2015. Source: Swarthmore GNAD and authors' calculations

of these events is based on US newspapers articles digitised by ProQuest Historical Newspapers. To identify student involvement, we hand-code the descriptions of actions in the database.

Mass Mobilization Data Project

The MMDP covers 162 countries—importantly, it does not include the US, which complements the US-focus of our two other sources. Events in the database occur between 1990 and 2020. To be included, events must involve at least 50 people, and the event must be organised to target the state or state policy, thus this primarily covers home-grown protests against governments. The underlying source materials are LexisNexis news sources. We code student participation in events by manually searching the database for relevant keywords (i.e. student, school, university, college, undergraduate, etc.).

Student protests across time

The GNAD database allows us to examine the role of students in social movements over the period 1950–2015. This is an era when universities in the United States in particular became more open (reflecting the GI Bill, desegregation, the rise of coeducation, and the rise in the population share of university graduates).[12] The broader

[12] See Goldin (2001) for a historical overview of higher education in the US.

selection into universities suggests that student protests would be common in this era. Indeed, one can see in Fig. 3 that student protests occur throughout this period. There are several notable spikes, as well as a general increase in student protests over time, especially in the last decade. These patterns can be observed whether relying on the GNAD coding of student involvement or our own (more comprehensive, manual) coding. Overall, one can see that since 1950, a substantial share of social movements in the US have involved university students.

Contesting the elite ideological bundle: themes of protest

Our proposal that university students will contest elements of the elite ideological bundle with which they disagree suggests that there will be no single theme on which protests focus. This is at odds with models of protest that emphasise economic grievances across classes. In Fig. 4, we show the total protests over the 1950–2015 period in the GNAD database, split by themes. One can see that student protests are a substantial share across all themes, including important "ideological" themes that appear to go beyond mere economic self-interest—for example, protests for the environment, for human rights, or for peace.

Contesting the elite ideological bundle: waves of protest

Contestation of the elite ideological bundle should be a cohort-specific action taken by students, reflecting their preferences and the time-varying events (mobilisation "shocks") they experience while in university. To evaluate whether this can be seen

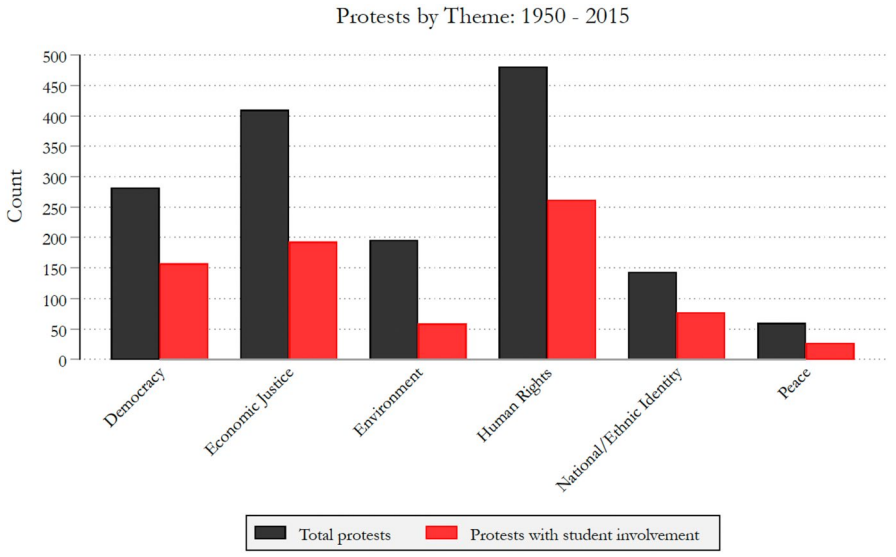

Fig. 4 Protests by theme and student participation. Source: Swarthmore GNAD and authors' calculations

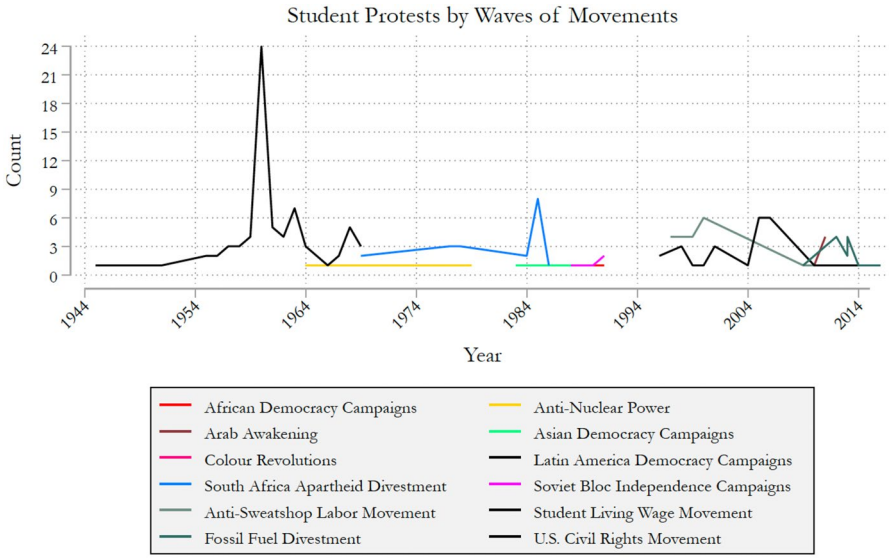

Fig. 5 Student protests by topic, over time. Source: Swarthmore GNAD and authors' calculations

in the GNAD database, we plot events in the database over time according to their political objective. One can see in Fig. 5 that, indeed, protests occur in waves that express political objectives specific to a generation of entering elites. The waves one can see begin with Civil Rights protests, then move to anti-Apartheid protests, anti-fossil fuel, anti-sweatshop, and the demand for a living wage. Each of these waves, it must be noted, contributed to meaningful change in the elite ideological bundle. Even if not immediately, and perhaps not entirely, university student movements have often, eventually, seen their preferred "edits" to the elite ideological bundle broadly adopted.[13]

The prominence of elite institutions in student protests

Our depiction of university student protests as efforts to contest the ideological bundle of the elite suggests that protests should frequently occur in the universities that produce the "leadership class". Note that this is not what one would expect from models of protest that emphasise grievance or conflict between elites and non-elites. We argue that university protests reflect an ideological conflict between *incumbent* elites and *entering* elites.

[13] For example, the desirability of equal rights for Black Americans is no longer contested, even if its implementation remains imperfect. The views of the anti-Apartheid movement were eventually widely adopted, with sanctions imposed against the Apartheid regime, leading to the end of a system that is generally viewed today as abhorrent. Steps were announced in the direction of fossil fuel divestment by Harvard University in 2021 (https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2021/9/10/divest-declares-victory/). Sweatshop sourcing for university athletics achieved notable successes as well (Bose 2008).

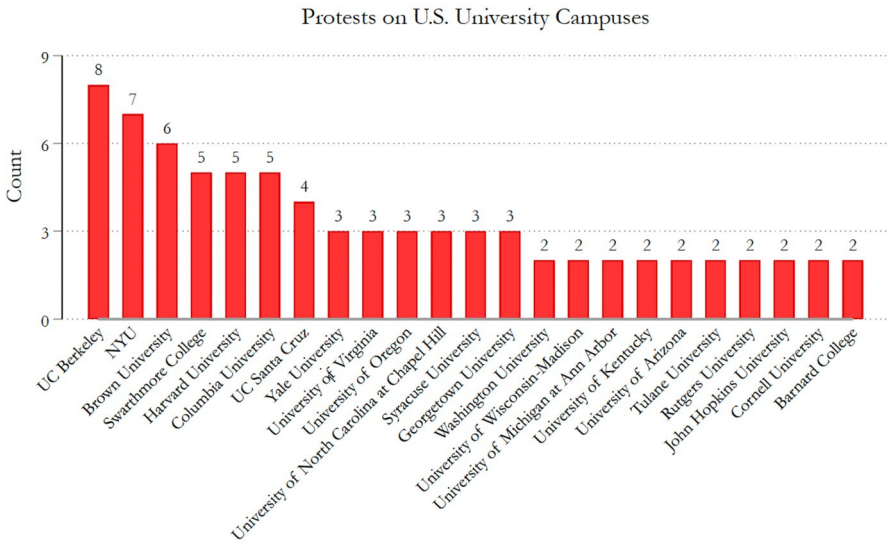

Fig. 6 Protests by university campus, 1950–2015. Source: GNAD and authors' calculations

To evaluate this component of our argument, we plot the frequency of university protests in the GNAD, by campus. One can see strong support for our argument in Fig. 6. Of the six universities with five or more events in the database, three are Ivy League universities that have long contributed to America's leadership class (Harvard, Brown, and Columbia); one is the flagship university of the state of California (UC-Berkeley); one is among the most elite of American liberal arts colleges (Swarthmore); and the last is an elite private university in America's great metropolis (NYU).[14]

These universities, indeed, have been focal points of protest waves, such as those documented in Fig. 5. Consider the prominence of Columbia in the anti-Vietnam War movement of the late 1960s; again in the anti-Apartheid movement in the 1980s; and, most recently in the protests demanding a ceasefire in the Israeli–Hamas conflict.[15] Or, Berkeley's central role in the anti-war movement of the 1960s, the anti-Apartheid movement; and, the anti-sweatshop movement of the 1990s and 2000s.[16] Finally, Harvard which was prominent in the anti-Apartheid protests of the

[14] Elite historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU's), such as Howard University, were also central to protest movements. See Hall (2023).

[15] See https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/a-columbia-68-revolutionary-takes-stock-of-todays-protests.html; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/03/columbia-pro-palestinian-protest-south-africa-divestment (last accessed 7 November 2024).

[16] See https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/06/the-battle-for-peoples-park-berkeley-1969-review-vietnam; https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/visit/bancroft/oral-history-center/projects/managing-protest; https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Students-protesting-UC-apparel-arrested-2537467.php (last accessed 7 November 2024).

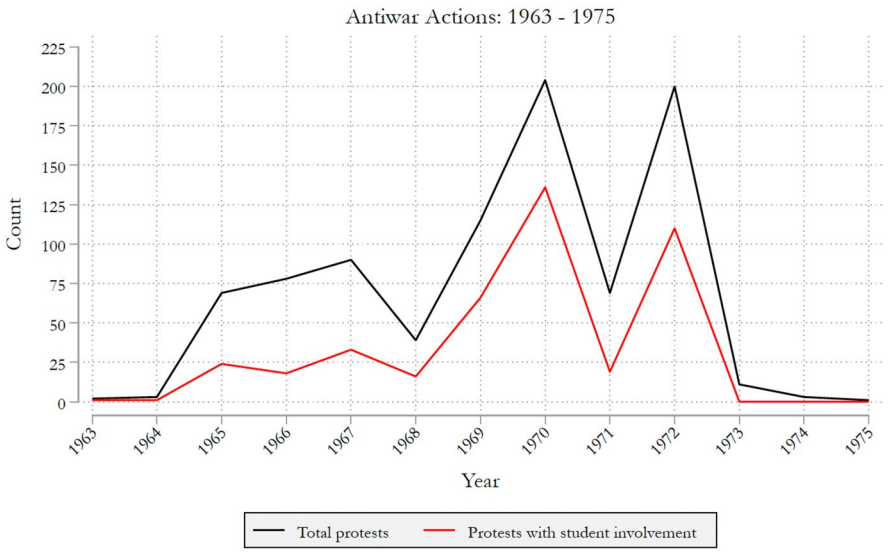

Fig. 7 Anti-war protests and student anti-war protests, 1963–1975. Source: MASMP database and authors' calculations

1980s, the push for fossil fuel divestment, the living wage movement, and again in the recent "ceasefire" protests.[17]

Granular protest data: student anti-war mobilization, 1963–1975

Among the most salient of American protest movements in the 20th century was the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Young people were particularly affected by the War, with young men exposed to the military draft, and those serving experiencing the traumas of a morally ambiguous war, from which the United States ultimately withdrew its armed forces.

Were university students disproportionately involved in the anti-war protests of this era? To examine this question systematically, we code student involvement from the event descriptions in the *Mapping American Social Movements Project* database. One can see the importance of student protests in Fig. 7: in many years, especially those years with protest spikes, student protests made up more than half of the anti-war protests in the database.

[17] See https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/harvard-university-community-campaigns-divestment-apartheid-south-africa-1977-1989; https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/harvard- fossil-fuel-divestment-won/; https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2001/07/wage-wrangling-html (last accessed 7 November 2024).

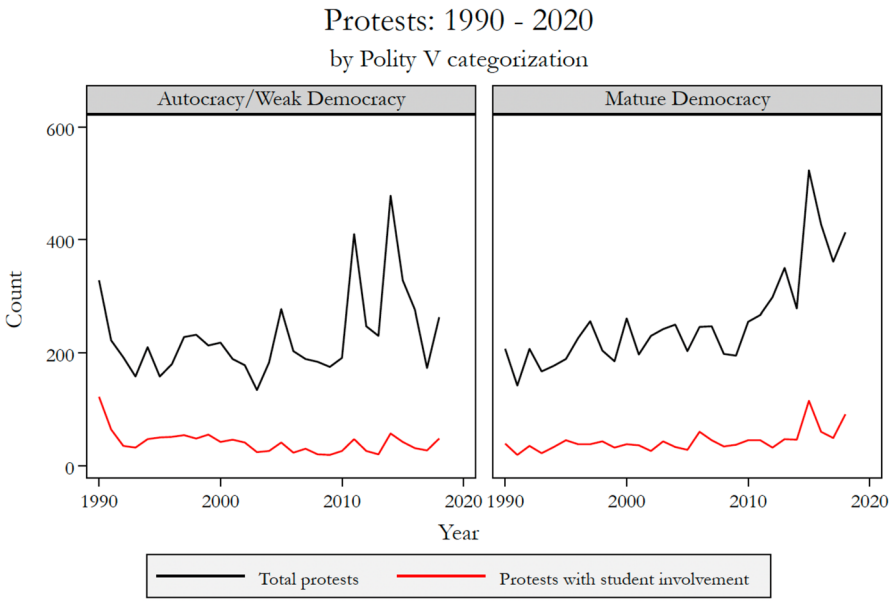

Fig. 8 Protests around the world (excluding the US) by regime type and participation of students. Source: MMDP database and authors' calculations

International student protests

Many of the 20th century's notable protest movements originated on university campuses. The White Rose Movement in Nazi Germany, the May 1968 protests in Paris and around the world, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989, and the Tiananmen Square protests in China, also in 1989, all were rooted in university communities and included university students among their leaders. More recently, the 18 Tir protests in Iran in 1999 and the Umbrella Revolution and broader democratic movement in Hong Kong in the 2010s also included students among their leaders.

In Fig. 8, we present more systematic evidence on international protest events, as well as the subset of these events with substantial student involvement (using data from MMDP and our own coding of student involvement). One can see in the figure that 10–25% of anti-government protests had a meaningful student presence. This is true in both mature democracies and in weak democracies and autocracies. While student protests are not the majority of anti-government protests, they are consistently a meaningful minority of events.

Concluding thoughts

University students play an active role in driving social and political change through social movements. We have presented evidence that this phenomenon is neither recent, nor confined to the United States, nor an outcome of "woke" ideology among students, faculty, or administration.

Rather, it is the natural outcome of each incoming generation of elites pushing back against the bundle of ideology it inherits. Larger ideological wedges between incumbent elites and those who will inherit their status generate more intense movements.

We have suggested that this is a natural outcome of the university fulfilling its institutional roles of: (i) transmitting an elite ideological bundle to the next generation; and (ii) providing a liberal space for intellectual debate and contestation. Thus, protests (and ideological contestation more generally) rely on the preservation of the university as a collegial, liberal institution. Severe reaction by administrators against campus protests risks this institutional legacy. Similarly, intimidation, violence, and intolerance among protesters also risk it.

It is up to society as a whole—albeit weighted towards incumbent elites—to decide on the leadership class we want, and the ideological bundle we would like to transmit to it. To the extent that we wish to broaden our pool of elites and allow them to shape their ideological bundle, we need to accept the ideological conflict that will inevitably arise. Elite selection, education, and ideological contestation are inextricably linked.

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