

Money and misinformation: how Turning Point USA became a formidable pro-Trump force

The rightwing group outgrew its origins on campuses to hobnob with Republican operatives and donors – despite some discomfort in the party

[Peter Stone](#) in Washington

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The powerful conservative youth group Turning Point USA, which has forged strong ties to [Donald Trump](#) and his son Don Trump Jr, has raised tens of millions of dollars from super rich donors and secret backers while pushing disinformation about Joe Biden's win in 2020, Covid-19 vaccines and other extremist and rightwing issues.

The group is campaigning on college campuses across the US, as well as expanding into rightist media and faith activities and – through its campaign arm – is getting directly involved with elections, where it often supports pro-Trump and conservative candidates.

The emerging strength and roles of TPUSA in the conservative ecosystem- and the rising visibility of its ambitious and hard driving Charlie Kirk – has sparked withering criticism from medical experts and ethics watchdogs, as well as some Republican party operatives.

Founded in 2012 by then-18-year-old Kirk and headquartered in Arizona – where it has built a robust base now backing Trump-endorsed candidates like a former Fox news star running for governor – TPUSA's revenues have soared from \$4.3m in 2016 to almost \$39.8m in 2020, according to public tax filings.

TPUSA boasts it has allies on more than 2,500 high school and college campuses and is the “largest and fastest growing youth organization in America”. The group, which has non-profit charity status that bars political work, also has a political arm called Turning Point Action that can do election work.

The two groups' fealty to Trump has generated mounting criticism and alarm. Kirk and his outfits have been vocal exponents of baseless claims of election fraud,

promoting the 6 January rally that featured Trump's call to "fight like hell" before the Capitol attack, and running Facebook ads with blatant falsehoods about Covid-19 vaccinations.

Several of the right's top financial donors have poured millions of dollars into TPUSA coffers, including Foster Friess, the late multimillionaire whom Kirk has credited with helping to launch his operations, and the powerful Bradley Foundation. Donors Trust, a major dark money operation used by big donors to keep their names secret, plowed \$906,000 into TPUSA in 2019, according to public records.

The stunning growth of TPUSA owes a big debt to several fundraising events and meetings with Trump connections, say some Republican consultants. TPUSA held a lavish fundraising gala at Mar-a-Lago in December 2019 that drew [Donald Trump Jr](#) and Republican political bigwigs, and Kirk's cachet was palpable at the 2020 Republican convention, where he gushed that Trump was "the bodyguard of western civilization".

"Kirk and TPUSA owe their success largely to Don Jr and Kimberly Guilfoyle," his girlfriend and leading Republican fundraiser, said a veteran party operative. "I would often see Kirk and Don Jr hanging out at the Trump hotel restaurant" in DC, he added, where big donors and lobbyists were ubiquitous during Trump's presidency.

TPUSA and Kirk have capitalized on their Maga ties to expand way beyond their campus roots where they initially carved out a niche on the right by attacking left-leaning faculty, who they placed on a "watchlist", and used campus events to push rightwing agendas.

But Kirk and TPUSA have found other avenues to grow. Salem Radio Network, a Christian right operation, now features the Charlie Kirk show daily, and TPUSA this year launched Turning Point Faith to promote a culture war agenda and gain more supporters in conservative religious circles.



Charlie Kirk and Candace Owens spoke at the University of Colorado Boulder campus in 2018. Photograph: MediaNews Group/Boulder Daily Camera via Getty Images/MediaNews Group via Getty Images

Kirk is now a member of the influential and secretive Council for National Policy, where conservative political and religious leaders can mingle with and hit up big donors at quarterly meetings.

The group's close ties to Trump generated more criticism in the run-up to the 2020 election and afterwards, when Kirk promoted false claims that Trump's loss was due to fraud.

Turning Point Action worked with about a dozen other groups to support Trump's 6 January "March to Save America" by bringing busloads of Trump allies to DC for the rally that preceded the Capitol attack.

Before the rally, Kirk boasted in a tweet that Turning Point Action – and an allied group, Trump Students, that Kirk also chaired – would bring "80 + busloads of patriots to DC to fight for the president". Kirk predicted the event "would likely be one of the largest and most consequential in American history". Kirk's tweet was quickly removed after the assault on the Capitol.

Further, Kirk served before 6 January as an Arizona point person for the Stop the Steal, the group led by Ali Alexander which has been subpoenaed for documents

and testimony by the House Select Committee investigating the Capitol insurrection and Trump's efforts to overturn the election results.

On 6 November, Kirk helped lead a Stop the Steal rally in Phoenix that was one of numerous such events hosted by Trump allies that day protesting Biden's win and spreading falsehoods about fraud, as the Center for Media and Democracy first reported.

On another disinformation front, Kirk's groups have been busy this year promoting falsehoods on campuses and in social media about vaccine mandates, efforts that the groups have used to raise funds and which have sparked criticism from health experts.

Kirk wrote false text messages charging that Biden has sent "goons DOOR-TO-DOOR to make you take a covid-19 vaccine", as the Washington Post first reported.

Further, a Kirk non-profit ran alarmist and erroneous Facebook ads, which were seen millions of times, stating that the government has "NO RIGHT to force you to inject yourself with an experimental vaccine," and warning that in response to advice about shots "LOCK YOUR DOORS, KIDS!!"

Doctors warn, however, that Kirk's fearmongering about vaccines could jeopardize efforts to encourage more young people to get vaccinated, a message that some Republican leaders – including Trump – have, to varying degrees, also endorsed.

In July on the Tucker Carlson show on Fox News, Kirk dismissed such Republican efforts to spur more vaccinations as "virtue signaling".

A Kirk spokesperson has portrayed the group's actions as "pro-freedom" and "not anti-vax".

He probably knows better, but actively chooses to misinform
Irwin Redlener

But medical experts say that's a dangerous dodge.

"Despite Kirk's patently misleading assertions that he is simply an honest broker of personal freedom, he is also an unabashed promulgator of egregiously false information about the dangers of vaccinations. He probably knows better, but actively chooses to misinform," said Irwin Redlener, who leads Columbia

University's pandemic esource and recovery initiative, in an interview with the Guardian

In Arizona, Kirk's groups have recently been busy flexing their muscles to help Trump-backed candidates for governor and secretary of state, both of whom have been promoters of Trump's oft disproven claims that he lost the state due to fraud, according to Arizona GOP sources and reports.



Admirers look on as Donald Trump takes the stage at a 'rally to protect our elections' in July 2021 hosted by Turning Point in Phoenix, Arizona. Photograph: Brandon Bell/Getty Images

A July rally in Phoenix sponsored by TPUSA drew Trump and a handful of gubernatorial candidates, including a local former Fox News celebrity, Kari Lake, whom Trump endorsed in September and TPUSA and its political arm are backing.

"I think the Trump team is utilizing Turning Point Action to fulfill a critical grassroots part of their strategy in Arizona and probably nationally," said Wes Gullett, a longtime Republican political consultant in Arizona in an interview with the Guardian.

Similarly, Chuck Coughlin, a veteran Republican operative in Arizona, said in an interview that Kirk's groups have taken on roles that historically the party played. TPUSA's influence in the state is underscored by its chief operating officer, Tyler

Bowyer, who was elected in 2020 to be the Republican state committeeman, he noted.

“Turning Point is supplanting the traditional role that the Republican party used to fill [by] recruiting new members to join Turning Point, and then directing them to become Republican precinct committee members in districts around the state,” Coughlin said.

“It’s like a scene out of the early Alien movies, where the mother alien takes over the entire ship,” Coughlin added, predicting that “it’s just a matter of time before the GOP in Arizona will be a pseudonym for Turning Point.”

Nationally, Turning Point Action in 2020 made independent expenditures totaling \$1.4m between 20 August and 31 December in failed efforts to help Trump defeat Biden and to help defeat two Georgia Democrats who won Senate seats.

According to a complaint filed in March with the Federal Election Commission by the watchdog group Crew, **Turning Point Action failed to identify donors, as the law requires, for its expenditures, which included online ads and other political operations.**

After Crew’s complaint, the group amended two of their FEC reports and later responded to FEC letters raising similar concerns. The group so far has disclosed donors for just under \$34,000 of their \$1.4m in 2020 independent expenditures. It’s unclear if the FEC has taken any further action, a Crew press secretary said.

Some GOP fundraising consultants have other worries about TPUSA’s operations and tax status given Kirk’s cheerleading for Trump.

“Some GOP donors worry that Kirk’s ostensible goals have been corrupted by spending so much time in and around Trump world,” the consultant said. “Further, people are concerned about the impact of Kirk’s prominent support for Trump on his group’s tax status.”

Despite the rising complaints Kirk’s operations are facing, TPUSA keeps expanding. In December it is planning to host a four-day “Americafest” in Phoenix that will feature conservative stars such as Tucker Carlson, Senator Ted Cruz and Representative Jim Jordan. But the biggest draw could well be Donald Trump Jr, who is slated to attend.