

## **Charlie Kirk exploits racial divide to reach Gen Z**

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Charlie Kirk stood 80 miles from where George Floyd was murdered, faced an overwhelmingly white audience, and declared he was going to say things "no one dares say out loud."

What followed was an avalanche of aspersions and debunked claims about Floyd, the Black man whose death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer set off a global reckoning over racial injustice and broad calls for change. But the white conservative agitator had a counter view: Floyd was a "scumbag," he said, unworthy of the attention.

The insult lodged at Floyd, a 46-year-old father suspected of passing off a counterfeit \$20 bill, was intended to be shocking. But anyone familiar with Kirk shouldn't be surprised. For years, the conservative provocateur and his group, Turning Point USA, have built a following inflaming racial divides and stoking outrage. Kirk thrived during President Donald Trump's tenure. He landed speaking spots at the Republican National Convention in 2016 and 2020 and occasionally counseled Trump on campaign messaging and tactics.

Now the 28-year-old is expanding his reach, trying to rally a next generation of aggrieved white conservatives. On a tour of college towns, he blasts schools and local governments for teaching about racism, with a confrontational style some call dangerous. Yet Kirk is drawing large crowds of millennials and Gen Zers, millions of online followers and donor cash, often with little media attention.

Kirk is stoking fear among a group that is coming of age in a time of social restlessness, said Nekima Levy Armstrong, a Minneapolis civil rights lawyer and activist.

"He's taking the discontent that some people may be experiencing and combining it with racial animus, which is a dangerous recipe in a country that is still in the midst of racial turmoil," she said.

Like many leading Republicans, including Virginia Gov.-elect Glenn Youngkin and Trump, Kirk seizes on opposition to critical race theory. The once obscure academic framework has been transformed by conservatives into a catchall term for education about inclusion, diversity and systemic racism in the U.S.

Kirk's answer is a free K-12 alternative curriculum described as the key to a "reliable, honest and quality America-first education," and is aimed primarily at homeschooling parents.

It's just one offering in Kirk's buzzing conservative content portal designed to meet young people where they live online. There's also an array of podcasts hosted by Kirk and other conservative figures, and a "Professor Watchlist" to label instructors "who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda."

"Turning Point Live" is a three-hour streaming talk show aimed at Gen Z and featuring 20-something host John Root. Recent guests include Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee and Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, both Republicans.

And there's plenty of swag: "Buy merch. Save America," the site suggests.

Turning Point USA's online audience is large and growing. It averaged 83,000 monthly unique visitors over the past three years, but it grew to a monthly average of 111,000 in the past year, according to the digital intelligence firm Similarweb. That's more than three times the traffic for conservative radio host Laura Ingraham's website over the past year.

That traffic is driven in part by at least a dozen social media accounts across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram that, combined, have more than 10 million followers online.

Money into Kirk's nonprofit network has followed the traffic.

Turning Point USA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, meaning contributions are tax-deductible and its donors are not disclosed. But in 2019, the most recent year for which tax records are public, Turning Point USA raised more than \$28 million, according to Internal Revenue Service filings. That's almost twice what it raised in 2014, its first year as a tax-exempt charity.

Though Turning Point USA doesn't have to disclose its donors, some are foundations established by wealthy conservatives, which report their donations to the IRS in annual tax filings. A partial list reads like a roster of conservative megadonors, including foundations affiliated with the late megadonor Foster Friess and the Uihlein and Bradley families, who also help finance leading conservative policy groups such as American Legislative Exchange Council, the Cato Institute and the Federalist Society.

Kirk also leads a fundraising group aimed specifically at political advocacy. That group, Turning Point Action, has endorsed several congressional candidates for 2022. The list includes Washington's Joe Kent, Illinois' Catalina Lauf, Florida's Anna Paulina Luna and Ohio's Max Miller, all candidates who ran to oppose GOP House members who voted for Trump's second impeachment.

Kirk has shown a knack for anticipating the outrage of the moment.

He was quick to assail shutdown orders at the dawn of the pandemic, and then claimed falsely that Trump won the 2020 election. He has attacked Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, blamed spiking violent crime on efforts to defund police departments, and months before Youngkin was seizing on parental outrage in Virginia, Kirk had turned to critical race theory.

"He works within the framework of the Trump movement. He is a good barometer of what the Republican right wing feels it can get away with," said Michael Hayden, a spokesman for the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit group that tracks far-right figures and organizations.

Turning Point USA was listed among the 11 groups involved in the "March to Save America" rally that preceded the deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Days before the rally, Kirk boasted on Twitter about sending buses "full of patriots to DC to fight for this president." He later deleted the tweet.

Online contributions to Turning Point's website spiked immediately after the riot, according to Similarweb, which can track frequency of online payments but not amounts.

Kirk is not among the more than a dozen rally organizers subpoenaed by the House select committee investigating the Capitol siege. A committee spokesperson would not comment on whether Kirk has been interviewed or approached by the committee.

Lately Kirk, who did not respond to interview requests, has stayed out of the headlines. However, an event in Idaho drew attention last month when a man shouted from a crowd, "How many elections are they going to steal before we kill these people?"

Kirk answered by denouncing the comment, but blamed the left: "They are trying to make you do something that will be violent, that will justify a takeover of your freedoms and liberties."

Raised in the upper-income Chicago suburb of Arlington Heights, Kirk became politically involved young, volunteering in middle school and high school on political campaigns. His quick rise began shortly after high school when he quit attending Harper College, a Chicago-area community college, to pursue political activism and co-founded Turning Point USA with Chicago-area tea party activist and mentor Bill Montgomery.

Kirk's "Exposing Critical Racism Theory" tour has promoted recent stops in Alabama, Idaho, Michigan, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas and Vermont. Last month, he packed a convention center ballroom in Mankato, Minnesota, with roughly 600 people — mostly teenagers and college students — on a Tuesday evening.

Once a prairie farming hub south of Minneapolis, Mankato has swelled into a diversifying mini-metro. Minnesota State University, food production plants and the Mayo Clinic's satellite campus all have drawn African and Latin American immigrants, while the Black population has grown steadily.

For 90 minutes, Kirk spoke directly to the virtually all-white crowd and told them radical leftists want them to feel ashamed.

"Just because you're a white person does not mean you have to begin apologizing simply for how God made you," he said.

He repeated widely debunked claims about Floyd's criminal record and suggested that the cause of Floyd's death was a drug overdose, rather than homicide, as the medical examiner found.

Rep. Jim Hagedorn, the local Republican congressman, was in the audience and later said in a Facebook post that he "enjoyed attending" and hearing Kirk "discuss the need to stand up and defend America and our founding principles."

Riley Carlson, the campus coordinator for Turning Point USA at Minnesota State, said she didn't know much about critical race theory before the event.

"We're just excited Charlie is here to explain it," said the senior from St. Michael, a Minneapolis suburb. "There's so many different ways you can look at it. And I'm looking for where I stand on it."

Kirk's message is a hard sell to most young people. Roughly 60% of voters younger than 30 said they think racism is a very serious problem in the United States, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 110,000 voters in the 2020 election. It's the largest percentage of any age group surveyed.

Meanwhile, Trump lost younger voters by 30 percentage points last year, VoteCast shows.

"It's a wedge issue to fire up a shrinking base," said John Della Volpe, director of polling at the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics and an expert on young voters.

But it demonstrates Kirk's finger is on the pulse of conservative anger, said Peter Montgomery, a senior fellow with the liberal People for the American Way.

"Fearmongering about critical race theory has really seemed to rise to the top of the messaging of the groups I watch," he said. "There's been a pivot toward that and Kirk has been wise to the fundraising power it promises."