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## What Happened to the Republican Party? The Right-Wing Media Ecosystem and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism

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**What Happened to the Republican Party?**

**The Right-Wing Media Ecosystem and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism**

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

by Hannah Eisendrath

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## Introduction

When Donald Trump was elected, I thought the world was ending. I was sixteen at the time, so existential dread was not a new theme, but this feeling was something worse. I felt like my political system had failed me, that the nation had failed me. I could not understand how millions of people could elect a reality TV star—not to mention a notorious bigot and abuser—to run the most powerful country in the world. In many ways, the confusion and fury I felt on that historic November day drove me to major in political studies. I needed answers. How did Donald Trump build his army of supporters in 2016? How did he convince them to storm the United States Capitol just over four years later? In the midst of all this chaos—pandemic, war, climate change— why was our country splitting further apart? Why had we abandoned facts and basic human decency? There had to be some person or system responsible for all this insanity. So began this senior project.

I spent the past six years feeling a lot of anger. But something I always tried to do was indict the system, not the people. So what systems or institutions brought us to our current political situation? How did the Republican Party transform from the Party of Lincoln, to the Party of Reagan, to the Party of insurrection? One major innovation during this transition stood out: the internet. In my lifetime alone, the digital realm completely transformed. Digital media is now a core element of our daily lives, including our politics. The rise of the digital realm in the last two decades created an entirely new environment for sharing information, opinions, and ideologies. Unsurprisingly, as this new ecosystem emerged, powerful institutions rushed to reap the benefits. Political parties and major news networks adapted their strategies to assert dominance in the new digital world. This begs the question: How has the rise of mass media influenced the ideology of the Republican Party? This project attempts to answer this question.



To investigate the relationship between mass media development and Republican ideology, I explore two evolutions: the ideological shifts of the Republican Party from the early 19th Century to now and the rise of digital news media and the right-wing media ecosystem. I show how these two developments are connected and what that may tell us about the Republican Party going forward.

In Chapter 1, I define ideology and explore six dominant theories of ideological change within political parties. I group these into three categories defined by their understanding of which political factors are responsible for driving ideological change: the political environment, party elites, or constituents. Drawing upon these approaches, I suggest that it is not one of these single factors which drives ideological change, but the interaction between multiple actors within the same network.

In Chapter 2, I introduce the right-wing media ecosystem as the contemporary driver of Republican ideological change. Using the work of Robert Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and Dan Cassino, I explore how the right-wing media ecosystem is uniquely situated to create a bias-confirming and self-reinforcing ideological network. I argue that the model of a propaganda feedback loop provides significant explanatory power here, and use it to illustrate the mutually beneficial relationship between right-wing media sources like Fox News and Republican politicians.

In Chapter 3, I dive into how Fox News and the Republican Party work together to manufacture a new ideological reality using the propaganda feedback loop model. Using Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model, I chronicle how the Republican Party and the right-wing media developed a working relationship. I trace the development of the propaganda

feedback loop over time, noting its intensification and, using January 6, 2021 as an example, explore how this dynamic has pushed the right to an ideological extreme.

In Chapter 4, I describe the new Republican ideological era: Right-Wing Populism. Returning to my initial definitions of ideology and John Gerring's work on ideological periods, I define right-wing populism and trace its emergence from the 21st century right-wing media network. I then explore how this new ideological epoch has manifested itself in Republican pronouncements and legislation.

I conclude that neither the media ecosystem, party constituents, or party elites drive ideological change in isolation. Instead, it is a self-reinforcing loop between these actors that has created an atmosphere of extremism. With this in mind, I then examine what the future holds. Has the evolution of the media market and the emergence of partisan news sources changed politics forever? How will this new ideological period affect the future of the Republican Party? And finally, what does this mean for the nation's democracy in the coming months and years?

## **Chapter 1: Ideology Explained**

Before we can draw any conclusions about the driving forces behind the Republican Party's ideological change in recent years, we have to prove two things: first, that the Republican Party has a distinguishable ideology and second, that this ideology is susceptible to change over time. In this chapter, I define party ideology for the purposes of this project and then detail some of the dominant theories of change in Republican ideology over time. In doing so, I create a historical chronology of Republican ideology as well as suggest what might be missing in the current theoretical analysis on ideological change.

In examining the literature associated with ideological change, I have identified three dominant approaches based on the type of mechanism or actor seen to be driving ideological change. The three mechanisms are: political environment, party elites, or constituents. In each of the texts examined below, one of these three actors is argued to be the main driver behind ideological change. In studying these authors and their theories, I lay a contextual groundwork for my theoretical study and identify what may be missing from the conversation. None of the authors point to the media as a principal driver of ideological change—Where does the media environment fit into all of this? In studying their work, I suggest that the media is the actor that ties all their theories together.

### **Defining Ideology**

Before we dive into the theories, we need to have a working definition of party ideology. So, what is a party ideology? In his book, *Party Ideologies in America: 1828-1996*, John Gerring provides a framework for defining and determining a party's ideology while also providing a brief history of dominant party ideologies leading up to 1996. Gerring defines party ideology as

the combination of values, beliefs, and issue positions stated in public by elite members of a political party. He uses presidential election rhetoric to “trace the values, beliefs, and issue positions that have defined party life” and finds “articulated views that were (and are) coherent, differentiated, and stable” (Gerring, 6). Though he identifies party ideology in the statements of a party’s elite, he does not say that ideology is created by the elite. Instead, he describes a complex relationship between ideology and the interests of party members. As Gerring puts it, “self-interests [are] converted into ideologies, and rational voters into partisans. Ideology, in other words, [is] constitutive of interest and vice versa” (Gerring, 28).

Party ideology and party interests, which quickly become proposed legislation, all stem from a need to create a cohesive and marketable position for the public. In an election-based democracy, party power relies on constituent support. The relationship between promise and performance is central to maintaining this support. Hence political scientist Jeff Fishel finds that the five presidents between 1960 and 1980 “submitted legislation or signed executive orders that [were] broadly consistent with about two-thirds of their campaign pledges” (Fishel quoted by Gerring, 44). It is a self-reinforcing loop. Members of a party form interest groups based on shared ideologies, which then become defining party ideologies that are then funded, voted for, and turned into policy proposals. Further, the national ambition and the interest-based component of party ideology means that ideological identifiers create an active party coalition that unites around similar self-interests. These interest groups, both on the constituent level and the party elite level, then define their shared party ideology over time as they interact. That shared ideology developed through interaction is expressed in terms of a party platform and public position.

Gerring suggests that party ideology gets developed as one party defines itself in opposition to the other. The two-party system, he argues, “fosters a different style of presentation, one more directly rooted in party history” (Gerring, 8). He further notes that “because of the fragmented constitutional structure of American politics, politicians have been forced to campaign as leaders of the nation rather than as party leaders” (Gerring, 7). This creates incentives for parties to define national issues through their own narratives. Historically, America's two dominant parties structured their ideology in opposition to each other. These dichotomous stances serve as “a single organizing principle within which a panoply of values, beliefs, attitudes, and issue-positions made sense to partisans” (Gerring, 18).

Adapting Gerring's definition, I define party ideology as a set of values, beliefs, and issue positions stated publicly by a party's elite and repeated and reinforced by party members, interest groups, and the public. In the remainder of this chapter, I use this definition and place it in some context by reviewing the Republican ideology overtime. Specifically, I survey different approaches to explaining ideological change over time. The texts examined below represent a broad and traditional framework of ideological change, focusing on political environment, party elites, and constituents.

### **Political Environment**

One way to approach ideological change is to view it as reactive to its political environment. This approach tends to place an emphasis on a periodization of ideological regimes, often depicting political actors and parties as highly constrained by their moment in history. Ideology under this approach emerges from the material or institutional conditions and operates as a force against which individual and collective political actors must position

themselves in the hopes of successful navigation of its pressures. Two key examples of this approach are provided by the political scientists John Gerring and Stephen Skowronek.

John Gerring proposes a theory of ideological change based on major changes in the national political environment. Gerring breaks up the Republican Party's ideological history into two long and distinct periods, which he calls epochs. Gerring titles the first major period of Republican ideology "The National Epoch" (Gerring, 57). The National Epoch consists of the first hundred years of the Whig and Early Republican Parties, spanning from 1828 to 1924. This epoch emphasized nationalism, mercantilism, moral reform, free labor, statism, and a central dichotomy of order versus anarchy (Gerring, 57). This ideological epoch was also greatly influenced in its earlier years by the rising debates around slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War. Because of its origins in the mid-Antebellum period, this epoch involved Whig-Republicans adopting the rhetoric of government control and economic security to combat growing national tensions and calls for civil war.

During these tumultuous times, Whig-Republicans took directly opposing stances to Democratic policies: "Democrats looked with suspicion on the industrial revolution; Whig-Republicans were its champions. Democrats criticized the tyrannies of the marketplace, while Whig-Republicans criticized the tyrannies of slave labor. Whig-Republicans regarded freedom of the individual laborer as the basis of community prosperity; Democrats were less optimistic" (Gerring, 11). These contrasting ideologies reached their peak during the Civil War when the Democratic South seceded from the Union and the Whig-Republican North took on the abolitionist mantle. Championing opposing positions on the future of slave labor served as the major party differentiator for white voters of the period: "Lincoln [went] through some lengths to emphasize the vast gulf between his position and his opponents', framing the issue of slavery in

dichotomous terms that were calculated to move voters” (Gerring, 10). This rhetoric of preserving the Union without the dominance of Southern slave power helped solidify this period’s national ideology. Notably, however, neither the Whig-Republicans nor the Democrats wanted equality for black people in the United States.

When it came to economic and labor policies, Whig-Republican ideals manifested in the protection of the equal, but distinct, classes of laborers and business capitalists and the promotion of federal economic intervention. To counter the Democrat’s demands for social equality for all white men, the Republicans maintained the narrative that “labor was the grand equalizer” and all producer groups, whether it be those that supplied labor or those that supplied capital, were all treated equally by their government (Gerring, 60). This economic philosophy, that of putting the nation’s economic future above the individual’s economic future, is called neo-mercantilism. Gerring defines neo-mercantilism as “a general economic philosophy mandating the subordination of economic activity to the interests of the state and the nation” (Gerring, 65). This system was implemented through high tariffs, export subsidies, mass infrastructure development, the maintenance of a strong national currency, domestic supplies of raw materials, and the chartering of joint-stock companies with monopoly rights (Gerring, 65). Through these policies, Republicans sought to build and maintain a strong national economy, which in turn would lead to social prosperity: “The neo-mercantilist idea also implied that the government bore responsibility for promoting economic growth, and the apparent success of the National Republican policies in doing so was, not surprisingly, a constant feature of campaign rhetoric. National Republicans were the Party of prosperity” (Gerring, 76). These early Republicans believed that it was the federal government’s responsibility to grow and maintain the nation’s economic affairs.

The most dominant characteristic of the National Epoch is its emphasis on statism. Statism emphasizes federal power, the supremacy of law, established authorities, and a strong and active central government (Gerring, 84). Statism was key to the early Republican's economic policy and their protection of the Union during the war. They advertised themselves as the Party that would shoulder the burden of economic development and uphold the federal government's right to regulate and spend. Statism was also directly tied to the Party's rigorous antipopulist and anti-anarchist message. Republicans during this period use statism to limit the power of the masses. They used all possible constitutional and institutional measures to restrict the power of the majority and maintain elite dominance in political affairs. This rhetoric of government control and security is visible in the "warnings of anarchy and social disorder, as well as endorsements of the necessity of restraints on individual freedom, [that] were persistent from 1828 to 1932" (Gerring, 93). Statism, which promoted social order and economic control, was an effective message for the Republicans to promote during the volatile periods of national expansion, war, and industrialization.

As the nation continued to expand and evolve, the Republican ideology evolved with it. Gerring titles the second epoch of Republican ideology "The Neoliberal Epoch" (Gerring, 125). This ideological epoch solidified in the early 1920s and continues through the remainder of Gerring's analysis, which ends in 1996. This epoch can be summarized through its emphasis on antistatism, free-market capitalism, anticommunism, individualism, and a central dichotomy of the state versus the individual. Neoliberal Republicans took almost entirely opposite stances from their National predecessors: "Neoliberalism valorized small business (rather than labor), equal opportunity (rather than the social harmony of different classes), and individual freedom



(rather than social order)” (Gerring, 126). This period marks the first and most drastic ideological shift in the Republican Party’s history, at least until recently.

The causes of this ideological shift are varied. Some major driving changes included the massive migration of black Americans out of the South, a decline in tariff power, a post-Reconstruction turn away from the reliance on black voters, the growth of the middle class, a new threat of socialism, a growing and more established federal government, and the major demographic shifts that came during and after each World War. In addition, the ideological changes reflected the natural opposition to changing Democrat positions.

Republican ideology in the Neoliberal Period appealed to a growing rural, white constituency. At the end of the first World War, the United States entered an economic boom. The 1920s featured new exciting technological advances and a rush to urban life. Freedom and opportunity had new meanings in this environment and the Republicans were quick to find new ways to appeal to the everyday working man: “Beginning in the 1920s, the threat to liberty was reconceptualized; the danger was no longer anarchy, but rather the *state*. The federal government, for a century the Party’s ally, was now identified as a public enemy. The Party’s social policy shifted rhetorical ground as well. Where previously Whig-Republicans represented themselves as the Party of laborers, modern Republicans championed the undifferentiated unity of society and equal opportunity of all individuals” (Gerring, 125). This new neoliberal ideology presented America as the land of opportunity and liberty.

In contrast to the National Epoch, the Neoliberal Epoch of Republican ideology focused on protecting the individual *from* government intervention. Economically, this meant the abandonment of neomercantilism and the adoption of laissez faire economics. Labor policy shifted to focus on special interests like agriculture and the middle class as well as protecting

families and small businesses. This transition was marked by the introduction of new rhetoric that emphasized the virtues of private enterprise and independent entrepreneurship as opposed to government monopolies. Unlike the previous period, which defined labor as the grand equalizer, “now its purpose was to emancipate the individual” and provide the opportunity for upward mobility (Gerring, 130). Republicans defined this new idea of individual freedom through economic mobility and freedom from government coercion. As Gerring puts it, Neoliberal Republicans were quick to blame the ills of society almost exclusively on the interference of government (Gerring, 138). As Democrats were passing New Deal programs in the 1930s, Republicans argued that this government intervention would constrict individual liberty. In a sharp departure from the statist and antipopulist rhetoric of the past, this new ideological epoch named the state and its elite members enemy number one. As this strand of thought evolved, it came to encompass the notion of a white and rural constituency left behind by powerful elites. As Gerring notes, “The classic and most memorable form of this rhetoric was reached during the divisive 1968 campaign, in which Nixon regularly admonished his audience to listen to ‘another voice, .... A great voice in the tumult of the shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators’” (Gerring, 144). Nixon’s introduction of the Silent Majority, a group of primarily white and rural citizens that were being shut out of the political process, was central to the 2016 Trump campaign and remains important today.<sup>1</sup>

Gerring’s historical analysis provides a framework for how to define an ideology and shows that ideologies change. He does not, however, give a clear answer to what drives this

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<sup>1</sup> Gerring’s investigation of the Neoliberal Epoch does not extend past 1996. However, the populism introduced during the Neoliberal Epoch has grown stronger in Republican ideology today. Although the Neoliberal Epoch continues to influence modern-day Republican ideologies, I do not believe that this epoch accurately encompasses the Republican ideology of today. Instead, the neoliberal ideologies of the past evolved into something new, as I will explore in later chapters.

change. He provides multiple possibilities, but concludes his book by saying that “there is, in short, no general factor at work that might explain the development of American party ideologies” (Gerring, 274). We can, instead, notice some of the patterns that Gerring presents us: ideological changes coincide with major changes in economy, demographics, and technology. Ideological changes also do not occur overnight, they are usually adopted by various interest groups and then reinforced and amplified until they become a party norm. The Republican Party’s ideology today cannot be the same as it was in the 1930s, ‘60s, or even ‘80s. By turning to other authors, I can break down Gerring’s Neoliberal Epoch into smaller ideological periods where the causes of change can be isolated.

In *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*, political scientist Stephen Skowronek provides another explanation for ideological change based on a sequence of political time and environment. Skowronek uses the consecutive presidencies of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton as case studies to propose a four-cell typology of the political structure of presidential leadership that explains an interactive sequence of political and ideological change at the end of the twentieth century. He argues that new presidents must make political choices based on the regime of their predecessors and decide whether they want to oppose or accept previous norms.

Skowronek’s model can only be understood in sequence. His theory is based around the idea of political time, which he defines as the political context created by “the substantive character of the political contest that propelled [the] sequence of leadership efforts and the framing of each effort in reaction to those that precede it” (Skowronek, 82). In Skowronek’s view, presidents drive ideological change. As the selected leaders of political coalitions, presidents “shape and drive the observed patterns of political reconstruction and political decay”

(Skowronek, 84). And they must do so in the context of presidential sequence, which means they must legitimize their choices as they relate to the choices of the previous administration.

Skowronek defines this struggle for presidential authority as “the legitimization problem that lies at the heart of presidential action” (Skowronek, 84). Since the beginning of a presidency is the interjection of a new actor into an extant political order, each new president must respond to an existing status quo. To legitimize themselves in this context, each new president must decide how they will continue, or deviate from, the extant ideological regime: “Each incumbent must speak in a timely fashion to the state of the federal government’s basic commitments of ideology and interest and suggest how proposed actions will bear on them” (Skowronek, 83). With this in mind, it is possible to predict the direction in which an incumbent president will drive ideological and political change.

Skowronek uses two basic contextual considerations to make his four-cell model: the dominant ideological and programmatic commitments of the previous regime and whether these ideological and programmatic commitments are still politically resilient (Skowronek, 85). For the first consideration, Skowronek argues that “affiliated leadership is going to be harder to sustain than oppositional leadership” because new administrations need to find new and exciting ways to differentiate themselves from previous presidents. In the second case, Skowronek argues that “affiliated leaders will be more authoritative in political action to the extent that received commitments are resilient, and oppositional leaders will be more authoritative in political action to the extent that received commitments are vulnerable” (Skowronek, 85). These two contextual considerations create four possible relationships to the political system and leadership postures that are defined in the chart below (Skowronek, 85):

		<b>Incumbent's Political Identity</b>	
		<i>Affiliated</i>	<i>Opposed</i>
<b>Regime Commitments</b>	<i>Vulnerable</i>	Politics of disjunction	Politics of reconstruction
	<i>Resilient</i>	Politics of articulation	Politics of preemption

Skowronek details how Presidents Carter, Reagan, H.W. Bush, and Clinton moved in sequence through the four cells of this typology. He concludes that “each [president] came to power in a different relationship to the political system and with a distinctly configured leadership posture” (Skowronek, 86). Accordingly, each put forth a “different claim to leadership authority, set up a different sort of political contest, and had a qualitatively different political effect” and together “drove an interactive sequence of political change” (Skowronek, 86). So, according to Skowronek, political and ideological change is driven by the sequential changeover between presidents and the need to legitimize a transition of regimes.

Skowronek’s discussion of the Reagan presidency is particularly helpful to my work as it provides a strong example of Republican ideological change. Skowronek defines Reagan as a reconstructive president, meaning he came into power opposed to the previous presidential regime and when the previous regime was vulnerable. According to Skowronek, this position generates “America’s most effective political leaders” (Skowronek, 93). As the leader of an insurgent regime, Reagan was positioned to directly target the Carter administration and “root out the entrenched remnants of the discredited past and recapture some essential American values [that were] lost or squandered in the indulgences of the old order” (Skowronek, 94). In the battle for public approval, this is the ideal rhetorical position for any new political leader. As

Skowronek puts it, “the American presidency has proven most effective politically as the battering ram, as a negative instrument for displacing entrenched government elites, destroying the institutional arrangements that support them, and clearing the ground for something new” (Skowronek, 97). A reconstructive president is new and exciting, they get to demonize the past regime and promise something new to the public.

Reconstructive presidents do not, however, automatically lead to an effective reconstruction of party policy. In fact, “it is more difficult for a reconstructive leader to mobilize the requisite number of supporters behind a systemic political transformation” (Skowronek, 98). Reagan, for example, struggled to obtain congressional support for many of his proposed bills and amendments. Instead, Reagan’s impact was more “rhetorical than institutional” (Skowronek, 98). These changes, though mainly conceptual, still played a vital role in shaping a new Republican ideology. Skowronek’s emphasis on political time and presidential sequence helps us understand the circumstances in which major ideological changes take place, it also helps us to understand why the Trump presidency, which would also be considered a reconstructive presidency, may have had a similar impact.

### **Party Elites**

Another explanation of ideological change lies in the guiding choices of party elites. While the larger political environment may change, it is not necessarily the case that party elites can only respond to such shifts—often a party elite will seek to establish new ideologies as the political norm, utilizing their own agency to alter the ideological environment they face. A common example of this theory of ideological change centralizes race and elite politicians' use of race politics as a driving change-maker. The ideological shift known as the “Big Switch” is a

prime example of this. The “Big Switch” is a phrase used to describe the drastic change in Republican and Democratic ideologies, specifically on the topic of race, in the early-to mid-twentieth century. Two pairs of political scientists, Heersink and Jenkins and Carmines and Stimson, have sought to explain this “switch” through attention to the actions of party elites in seeking to reconstruct the ideological framework of their parties in order to position themselves effectively on the political landscape. While Heersink and Jenkins look to the early-Twentieth century roots of the “switch,” Carmines and Stimson pay greater attention to the role played by Republican elites in the mid-Twentieth century. Nonetheless, both approaches offer an understanding of party ideological change as rooted in the choices of party elites.

The article “Whiteness and the Emergence of the Republican Party in the Early Twentieth-Century South” by Boris Heersink and Jeffery Jenkins offers one account of how the major political parties can switch their positions on race in order to solidify and expand their voting blocs. Following Reconstruction, as the nation’s demographics were changing, the political parties had the opportunity to change in response. Heersink and Jenkins argue that in this moment, instead of depoliticizing race, the white political elite associated with the Southern wing of the Republican Party decided to weaponize it.

The Southern Republican Party had almost no national political influence by the end of Reconstruction. The Party did, however, retain some influence within the Party itself through the “Republican National Convention, with Southern delegates maintaining their seats and voting rights [as well as] their ability to choose the Republican’s presidential candidate” (Heersink and Jenkins, 2). During this period, control of the Party was split between two factions. The mixed-race Black-and-Tans, “fought to keep the legacy of Reconstruction alive, by stressing the need to preserve the rights of Blacks” (Heersink and Jenkins, 3). The Lily-Whites, in contrast,

“sought to restrict [Republican] Party membership to whites only, while distancing themselves from Reconstruction-era efforts to ensure and protect civil and voting rights for Blacks” (Heersink and Jenkins, 3). As more black citizens migrated to the North, black political influence in the South weakened. The data that Heersink and Jenkins provide shows Lily-Whiteism taking over the South. When a black man was elected as Chair of the Texas Republican Party in 1886 the response was swift. Within a few years, the Lily-Whites took over in Texas, eventually dominating Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana, Florida, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, and finally South Carolina, and Georgia. Mississippi’s transition was slower, but Lily-Whiteism did eventually dominate the entire Southern Republican Party.

Prior to the turn to Lily-Whiteism, the Democratic Party dominated the post-Reconstruction South. Understandably, the Party of Lincoln was not popular amongst southern white voters after the Civil War. In many Southern states, the white electorate feared the Republican Party to be “the Party of ‘Negro Domination’” and nothing else (Heersink and Jenkins, 16). The growth of the Southern Republican Party required not only appealing to white voters but also disenfranchising black voters. The strategy was self-reinforcing. By appealing to white voters and by suppressing black voters the Lily-White faction led the Republican resurgence in the South. Its dominance, however, did not solidify until a new threat emerged from the North.

As the Northern Democratic Party, supported by black migrants, shifted leftward on the issue of civil rights in the latter 1950s, the new and racially conservative Republican Party gained even more support throughout the South. This phenomenon is referred to by political historians as the Big Switch. The Democrats in the North shifted their agenda to one of civil rights to appeal to a diversifying voting bloc, while the Republicans in the South, like the



Lily-Whites, gained power by disenfranchising black voters and gaining the support of the white majority. Just as the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans had used racial politics to differentiate their Party agendas decades before, the Republicans and Democrats adopted new race politics to strengthen their support blocs in the years following Reconstruction. While this pattern of using race to build constituencies was an old one, for the first time, at least some of the politicization of race on the Democratic side aimed to increase black voter participation. In the years that followed, the Republican and Democratic parties continued to take polarizing ideological stances on race to appeal to the growing conservative and progressive divide. So, according to Heersink and Jenkins, these major ideological changes surrounding race politics were a result of party elites needing to form stronger voting coalitions in response to changing voter demographics.

In a similar vein, Edward Carmines and James Stimson present a theory of ideological change based on the evolution of race as an elite political issue-area. Their book, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, uses Charles Darwin's studies of evolution and natural selection to explore the life cycle of political issues, the most dominant issue being race in the United States. As stated in the book's preface: "this book is a half-century portrait of an issue evolution in progress. The issue is race. The issue, more specifically, is the yet unsettled matter of the role of the black man in a white society" (Carmines and Stimson, xiii). By studying the issue-area of race through the lens of biological evolution, Carmines and Stimson can explore "where issues come from, why some thrive in the competition for limited public attention and others? do not, and how the origin and development of new issues is capable of transforming the organic system in which that development occurs" (Carmines and Stimson, 5). While this book is not *only* a study of ideological change, it includes an explanation of

ideological changes. As the authors state, they study race as “leverage in the struggle for power, as justification for governance, as stimulant to an often lethargic mass electorate, as transforming element in political ideologies, as sustenance of a new issue alignment—as politics” (Carmines and Stimson, xv). Carmines and Stimson recognize that race and the evolution of elite racial politics transform party ideologies as political actors work to maintain power and appeal to their electorate.

To explore the process of political change, Carmines and Stimson turn to the biological theory of natural selection. They describe how political issues emerge, grow, change, and die just like new species. First, as with evolution, there is a potential for infinite issues: “the interaction of a complex environment and change processes as the source of more numerous raw material in issue innovations than can ever develop” (Carmines and Stimson, 5). Then, social and governmental institutions determine which issues will be given space to grow: “just as natural variation in the gene pools is filtered by chance processes to produce a plentitude of variations in species, so a complex governmental environment superimposed upon a disparate social order can be counted upon to raise new issues in abundance” (Carmines and Stimson, 5). Next, issues—like species—compete with each other for attention and resources. The authors detail four different mechanisms through which issues will work with political actors to command our attention: “the promotion of particular issues by strategic politicians as effective leverage in the struggle for power, issues moved to the center of public discourse when highlighted by external disruptions to the established order, new issue species that are old issues transformed by isolation and specialization in a new context to something quite different than their origins, and cybernetic issues selected for their importance because internal contradictions and imbalances in the political system generate corrective needs” (Carmines and Stimson, 6). Of these four

mechanisms for issue attention, Carmines and Stimson believe the first to be the most important. Political elites “instinctively understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not,” which gives them the opportunity to shape the political narrative around issues that serve their cause (Carmines and Stimson, 6). This means that issues, like species, die off when they are no longer given the resources and attention of political elites.

Carmines and Stimson make clear that not all issues are capable of a complete lifespan; instead they define the issues capable of such evolutions as “those issues capable of altering the political environment within which they originated and evolved” (Carmines and Stimson, 11). Issues that remain in the political arena are those that create fundamental changes within the party system. These issues are distinctly partisan: “they emerge from the old environment, but having once emerged they introduce fundamental tensions into the party systems,” which allows them to “capture the public’s attention for more than a short period of time” and have both short and long term effects” (Carmines and Stimson, 11). In this way, these issues —selected and bred by party elites— and their evolutions drive ideological change, “replacing one dominant alignment with another and transforming the character of the parties themselves” (Carmines and Stimson, 11). Race, or the issue of desegregation as the authors sometimes call it, in the United States is one of the best examples of an elite issue-area with the potential to reshape entire political structures over time.

Carmines and Stimson conduct a deep dive into the history of race as a political issue used by elites and how it follows the evolutionary patterns mapped out in their natural selection theory. Their study traces the issue and its partisan evolutions through the policy initiatives and rhetoric of presidential candidates, using party platforms as the primary documents of their study. Not only do Carmines and Stimson pull direct quotes from the platforms that indicate evolutions

of racial positions, but they also look at the placement and quantity of the issue subject. Their findings suggest a fundamental transformation in each party's position on race in the mid-1960s. In keeping with general perceptions, "the progressive racial tradition in the Republican Party gave way to racial conservatism, and the Democratic Party firmly embraces racial liberalism" (Carmines and Stimson, 58). As the authors note, however, this is only a big-picture look at the issue's evolution: "issue evolution is much more routine business, involving daily behaviors of a host of political leaders, most more or less unknown, and the multitudes that constitute the mass electorate" (Carmines and Stimson, 58). To fill in the detail of their picture, Carmines and Stimson track how the issue of race evolved in Congress, the language of political activists, and the general public, using election data, opinion polls, and interview data as primary sources.

In doing so, it becomes clear that race as a political issue-area follows the same evolutionary pattern in every arena of politics. "Over the span of the desegregation issue, as should generally be the case, we can see an evolution from a time when the party system was wholly unrepresentative—offering no coherent positions, no citizen choice—the current patterns of issue-polarized parties, for better or for worse highly representative of their constituencies in the electorate" (Carmines and Stimson, 180). In following the organic framework of issue change as natural selection and evolution, we can see how the issue of race worked its way into the political spotlight and slowly shaped the political parties as we know them today. This evolutionary model is especially important when looking at ideological change. As Carmines and Stimson note, in its evolution as an issue, race became a prominent "connotation of the ideological labels, liberal and conservative" (Carmines and Stimson, 133). So, as issues evolve, elites use party ideology as a means of defining them in the political discourse. This, going back to the natural selection model, is all about finding the best means of staying in the spotlight.

## Constituents

Just as party elites can drive ideological change, so can constituents. In the article “American Party Platforms and Public Opinion,” theorist and research methodologist Alan Monroe provides a theory of ideological change based on public opinion. Monroe’s study matches “promises in Republican and Democratic platforms from 1960 through 1980 with public opinion data from national surveys” to track the relationship between party stances and public opinions (Monroe, 27). He then applies his findings to the dominant existing theories on party decision making and public opinion to determine which theory is best supported by his data. Although Monroe does not directly study ideological change, his work is still applicable to my work. Monroe’s work tracks changes in party platforms as they relate to public opinion and, since we are using John Gerring’s definition of party ideology, changes in party platforms are a direct indicator of changes in party ideology.

Monroe centers his study around three common theories of party decision making: the Party Responsibility model, the Downsian model, and the Cleavage model. The Party Responsibility model “holds that each party should formulate its policy proposals on the basis of ideology, thereby offering a clear and distinct choice of alternative policies to the voter” (Monroe, 27). According to this model, a party would not necessarily advocate a platform favored by the majority because they would be focusing on creating a distinct ideological alternative instead. In contrast, the other two models consider majority opinions as a key factor. The Downsian model argues that “parties seeking to maximize votes will adopt those stands on the issues that will tend to accomplish that goal,” meaning that “parties will seek to station themselves at the midpoint of the distribution of the voters and, consequently, will take almost

identical stands” (Monroe, 28). The third model, the Cleavage model, complicates the ideas presented by the Downsian model and blends it with the Party Responsibility model by suggesting that “parties tend to agree with public opinion in those instances in which it approaches unanimity. But as substantial conflict develops in the public, one or even both parties may take contrary stands” (Monroe, 33). Here, appealing to the majority opinion is helpful until it conflicts with a core distinguishing factor of party identity. In these cases, parties will forego the majority opinion to appeal to a distinct coalition of party voters.

Monroe’s data was highly supportive of this Cleavage model. By tracking the tendencies of each party’s platforms to match public survey preferences, Monroe found that “both Republican and Democratic platforms tend to agree with the majority view at the extreme ends of the distribution, while taking contrary positions on a sizable number of issues on which majorities are more marginal” (Monroe, 33). Monroe also marks notable distinctions in party decision making that mesh well with the standard assumption of party identities. He notes that “there is a slight tendency for Republican platforms to agree more with majorities favoring the status quo, while Democrats tend to be a little more in line with those favoring change” (Monroe, 33). On top of this, he finds that “Democratic platforms demonstrate a much higher degree of consistency with public opinion on welfare and economic policy issues than do Republican pledges” and “the Democratic alliance, which has developed in the last 20 years, with ethnic minorities and liberals generally on social issues appears to have resulted in adoption of less popular positions on some occasions. Republicans, on the other hand, can limit their civil rights stands to those positions favored by the public as a whole” (Monroe, 35-36).

Monroe concludes that “while parties generally seek positions that will be popular with the electorate, the dynamics of the nominating process and convention decision making mean

that minority positions favored by relevant interest groups and party activists may sometimes be adopted” (Monroe, 38). When it comes to actual policy decisions based on these positions, “party platforms were found to be related to policy decisions both when public majorities favored those proposals and when majorities opposed them. Thus, there is stronger support for the inference of a causal link between party stands on the issues and their eventual disposition by government” (Monroe, 39). It is important to note, however, that the study is mainly focused on policy positions as opposed to their actual application. Monroe’s study provides us with a window into the importance of public opinion on party positions, thereby highlighting how constituents help shape party platforms and party ideologies.

Like Monroe, Tasha Philpot highlights a reflexive development of party ideology, in which the trajectory of ideological evolution is shaped by the willingness of a party’s constituency to recognize and accept elite efforts to reposition the party. In her book, *Race, Republicans, and the Return of the Party of Lincoln*, Philpot provides a theory of party change centered on the evolution of party image in response to constituent interpretation. Philpot defines party image as “the totality of the political symbols one associates with a political party” (Philpot, 11). Although “image” is not directly the same as party ideology, many of the components intersect. Like party ideology, party image symbols are shaped by “party policies, candidates, and constituencies” (Philpot, 11). Philpot argues that each individual creates their own party image by interpreting the symbols presented to them. These interpretations then “shape how individuals perceive political parties and can affect not only how people vote but also whether they choose to engage in the political process at all” (Philpot, 13). Therefore, it is in a party’s best interest to craft a set of symbols that will lead to a winning party image. This requires change over time.

Philpot describes three reasons why a political party may need to encourage change in its party image to seek electoral success: “First, the nature of political competition changes from election to election. Second, the electorate experiences demographic changes. Finally, issues rise and fall in importance” (Philpot, 13). To adapt to these environmental changes, political parties will attempt to reshape their party image. This, however, leaves party elites with a dilemma: how can they reshape their image to attract new voters while also maintaining the image that created their current support base? Philpot suggests that the solution lies in a “cosmetic” reshaping of party image: “as political parties seek additional votes at the margins, they make small, superficial changes to their images” (Philpot, 30). If party elites can reframe their image by adopting new rhetoric and shifting what they emphasize, then they can change their party image without making any substantive changes to their platform or policy.

As Philpot notes, “the underlying assumption behind [her] theory of party image change is that altering party images should lead to electoral gain” (Philpot, 25). But do cosmetic party changes actually work? According to Philpot’s physiological research, altering party image is a two-step process: “First, the party must project an image of itself that is inconsistent with its existing image. Second, the change must be large enough to meet an individual’s threshold for what constitutes real change” (Philpot, 17). To do this, a party must overcome any information that contradicts their new image. This includes other party members that are not following the change, voter’s predispositions to the change, the media’s perception of the party image, and the legacy of the party’s old image.<sup>2</sup>

Philpot puts her theory into practice by examining responses to the 2000 Republican National Convention and George W. Bush’s attempt to reshape the Party’s image into one of

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting here that Philpot points to the media as an important factor in ideological change - an observation that will be developed in later sections.



“compassionate conservatism” (Philpot, 1). Here she focuses on party image as it relates to racial symbolism, which she defines as “the frame individuals use to give meaning to a party’s race-related activities” (Philpot, 23). Philpot suggests that race is, and has always been, a dominant factor in party image. In 2000, the Republican Party attempted a sharp rebrand in their racial symbolism by reaching out to the NAACP for the first time in years, having more black delegates than ever before, and rhetorically “presenting itself as a more diverse Party that welcomes African Americans and other minority groups into its tent” (Philpot, 1). To determine if this change in rhetoric made any difference to the Party image, Philpot examines media coverage of the convention and tracks which aspects of the Party’s image were reported and by who, in what context, and for what duration. She then pulls survey data from the post-convention poll conducted by the Gallup organization and uses it to determine how voters responded to attempts to reshape Party image during the convention. She discovered that 40 percent of the convention coverage by major news outlets focused on attendees, highlighting the new diversity in delegates and speakers, rising from 25 percent coverage in 1996. In contrast, the coverage of the Party’s platform and issue-positions decreased from 22 percent in 1996 to 10 percent in 2000 (Philpot, 96). So, in general, the Party succeeded in shifting the focus away from their policies and on to their new and more diverse rhetoric.

As mentioned earlier, however, these cosmetic changes were not enough to convince everyone that the Party had changed. Philpot’s research documented a significant difference in how the so-called “new” Republican Party was perceived by black and white voters. She found that for black voters, the new rhetoric “was not enough to change the Republican Party’s image with respect to race because the Party had not altered the policy positions that directly affected blacks” (Philpot, 122). In contrast, white voters “of both parties modified (to varying degrees)

their Republican Party images with respect to race when exposed to the diversity featured at the 2000 Republican National Convention” (Philpot, 115). These findings suggest that, while cosmetic modifications can reshape party image, “elite strategies that seek to alter party images will work only to the extent that they do not contradict themselves” (Philpot, 169). In the case of the 2000 election, the Republican Party failed to rebrand as the racially diverse party because their new rhetoric contradicted their lack of progressive racial policies and their mistreatment of black voters at the ballot box.

So how does Philpot’s study apply to my work on ideological change? Party image and party ideology are closely related; both are public projections of a party’s values and issue-positions and both are shaped by the relationship between voters and political elites. The difference lies in their effect on party platforms and policies and their rate of change. Party image is most concrete when supported by policy, but it can also exist without the support of policy, though it will be less effective, and it can change quickly in response to new social and political developments. Party ideology forms over time and becomes a visible norm that can be found on both the cosmetic and policy levels. Party image, if it proves to be electorally successful, will likely be incorporated into a longstanding party ideology. In both cases, party’s alter their images and ideologies to assemble winning coalitions. As Philpot puts it, “as the demographic makeup of the United States shifts and incorporates more and different voters into the electorate, parties will have to adapt to the changing political landscape” (Philpot, 170).

These six theoretical texts summarized above provide a base for my study of ideological change. Each piece provides a different perspective on what drives ideological change and which political actors steer that change. Gerring’s historical analysis argues that ideological change is a slow process driven by major national changes in economy, demographics, and technology.

Skowronek argues that ideological change happens with each new presidential election as new presidents assert themselves within the sequence of political regimes. Both Gerring and Skowronek argue that the political environment is key to understanding ideological change. Moving the focus inward to party elites, Heersink and Jenkins turn the conversation to race, arguing that ideological change occurs when party elites change their positions on race to appeal to new voting blocs. Carmines and Stimson expand on this claim, using the theory of natural selection to argue that ideological change is driven by the evolution of political issues, specifically that of race, and how political elites highlight certain issues to maintain our attention. It is important to note here that race is not the only issue-area that party elites use to assert dominance and drive ideological change, but it is one of the most historically effective. Shifting the focus from party elites to the voters they try to persuade, Monroe zooms in on the general electorate, arguing that public opinion is the driving factor behind ideological change. Finally, Philpot qualifies this public opinion model by bringing in the idea of party image, arguing that parties will reshape their image, which will also redefine their ideology, to appeal to a larger group of voters.

Each of these six theories offers something distinct with regard to ideological change. By grouping them into three categories based on their focus, it becomes clear that political actors and their ever-evolving relationships with each other are central to understanding ideological change. But which type of political actor has the most sway? As the disagreements between the theories summarized here suggest, this is far from a settled question. In this chapter, I presented six sound theoretical arguments, each championing a different political factor as the driver of ideological change. But at the same time, each theory depicts agents moving within a rich and

complex political environment, with reaction as important as action in determining the development of party ideology.

In the following chapters, I draw upon this observation to argue that the media ecosystem has become the dominant actor behind ideological change. Although, as the theorists above explain, the political environment, party elites, and constituents all play important roles in defining and changing political ideologies, it is clear that none of these actors work alone. Instead, it is the *interaction* between these three categories that create driving and lasting change. This is where the mass media ecosystem becomes central to our study. Media is the thread that ties all these political actors together. As Philpot begins to explore in her study of party image, and I will continue to examine in the following chapters, media is not only foundational to the interaction between political actors, constituents, and other interest groups, but it also mediates these interactions and thereby has the power to influence their outcomes. As the role of media in politics has grown with the digital age, media companies, algorithms, and their political partners have joined forces in an echo chamber that allows them to craft an ideological narrative that best suits their interests.

## **Chapter Two: The Right-Wing Media Ecosystem**

In Chapter One, I explored dominant theories of ideological change. The theories proposed three categories of political actors as possible drivers of ideological change: political environment, party elites, and constituents. Although each of these actors contributed to the development of Republican ideology over time, no single category of actors alone accounts for the changes seen in the Party over the past two decades. Instead, it is the interaction of all of these actors within the media ecosystem that creates a spiral of ideological change. In the following chapter, I illustrate this claim through an examination of the U.S. right-wing media ecosystem and the structural models it uses to interact with Republican ideology for power and profit. In what follows, I show that the model is particularly useful in understanding the ideological developments seen within the contemporary Republican Party due to its association with a highly specific and insulated media ecosystem.

### **Not the Same on the Right & the Left**

The relationship between the Republican Party and news media is unique. Despite our best impulses to assume equivalencies on both sides of the political divide, the same relationship does not exist between media and politics on the right and the left. In fact, the media/party relationship on the right is so unique that it has an entirely separate world of operations. In their 2018 book, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts use survey data, digital usage statistics, and ideological theory to map this distinct working relationship between the Republican Party and right-wing news media, calling it the “right-wing media ecosystem” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 13). Through their analysis, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts

demonstrate that this isolated and self-reinforcing ecosystem contributes to the ideological development and radicalization of the Republican Party. According to Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, this right-wing media ecosystem has pushed the Republican Party into a new ideological period, which they label the “post-truth era,” by creating an unchallenged echo chamber for right-wing ideology (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 23). I will return to this new ideological period later.

Four main qualities define the right-wing media ecosystem: isolation from the larger media network, lack of a left-wing equivalent, use of a bias-confirming model, and the use of a propaganda feedback loop. The right-wing media ecosystem is highly insulated from the rest of the media world, which allows it to depart from norms of journalistic objectivity and truth-seeking. This makes it impossible to assume any symmetry in the media landscapes of the right and the left or center. According to survey data, the most trusted media sources on the right are Fox News, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and Glenn Beck (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 15). These are all highly skewed right-leaning media sources. In contrast, the most trusted sources on the left are NPR, PBS, the BBC, and the New York Times, which all fall closer to the center of the political spectrum (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 15). The severity of this imbalance on the right and the left becomes even clearer when graphed. Benkler et al. use the online platform Media Cloud, a data project run by the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University and the MIT Center for Civic Media to graph the right and left media landscapes (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 48-55).

The three bar graphs below show the top sites visited for news during the 2016 election in media inlinks such as Facebook shares and Twitter shares. The graphs are color coded according to the partisan-bias of the news source, with blue indicating left, green indicating central, and red

indicating right. The graphs display an “asymmetric bimodal distribution, meaning that there are two peaks, and the left peak is closer to the center than the right peak” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 55). This means that during the time leading up to the 2016 election, people on the right focused on and shared almost solely right-oriented media while people on the left focused on and shared more center-leaning outlets like The New York Times, Washington Post, or CNN.

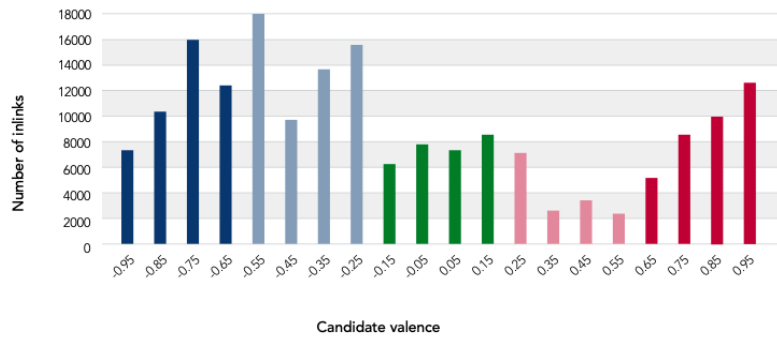


Figure 4: Partisan distribution of top 250 most-linked-to media sources by total inlinks\*  
 \*\*Inlinks\* refers to the incoming cross-media hyperlinks to stories and media sources.

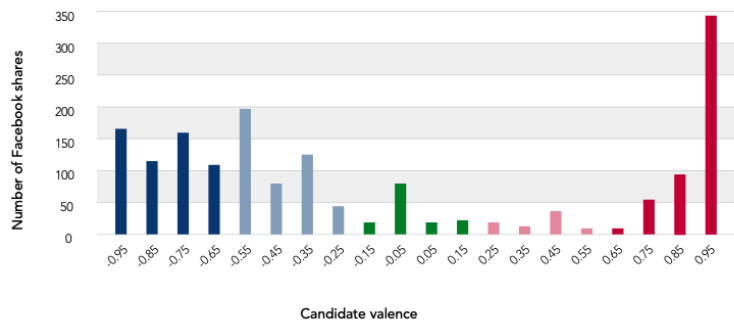


Figure 6: Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Facebook shares

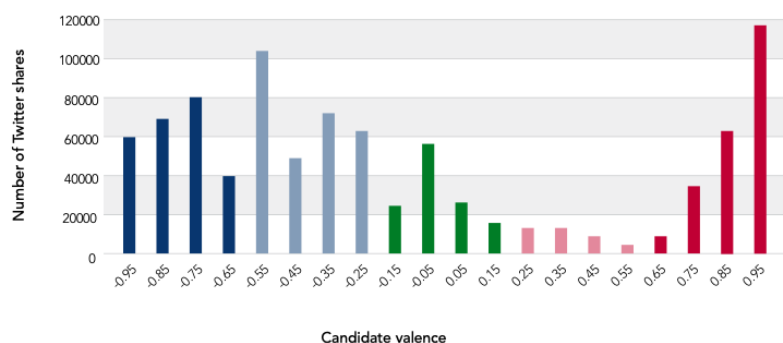
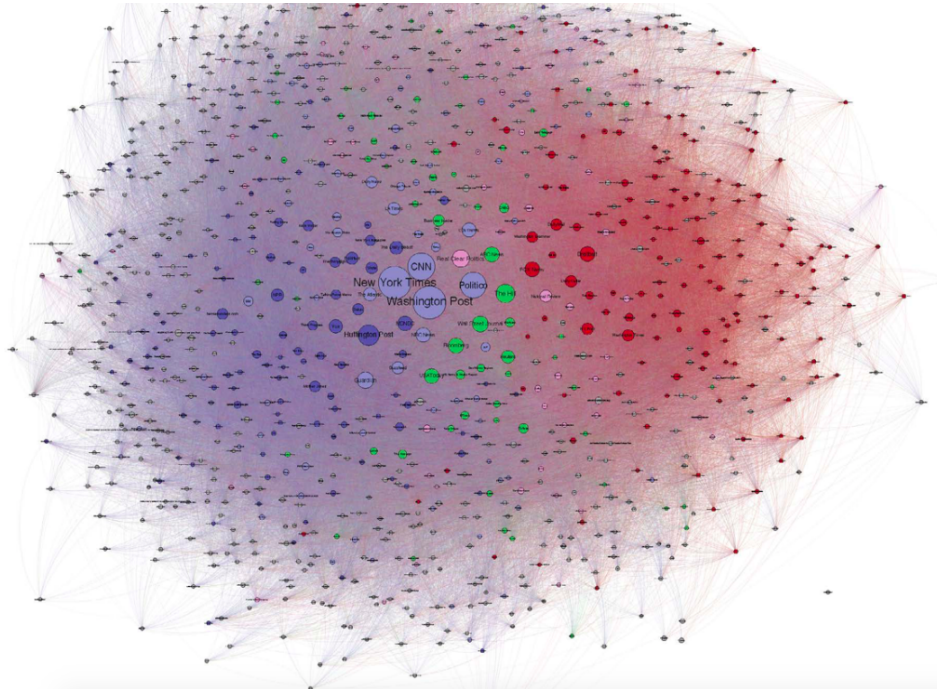


Figure 5: Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Twitter shares

Benkler, Faris, and Roberts then expand these graphs into detailed clouds, which provide an even clearer look at the imbalance between the left/center and right-wing media ecosystems. The two cloud graphs below map network usage in the months prior to the 2016 election. Both graphs use circles to indicate news sources, colors to indicate source partisanship (red=right, pink=center-right, green=center, light blue=center-left, dark blue=left), and space between circles to indicate how many hyperlinks or shares exist from one source to the other. So, the closer two circles are to each other, the more links were shared between those two news sources. The first cloud graph provides a large-scale network map based on open web media from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016. The second graph looks at the same network through Twitter shares in September of 2016. Together, the graphs clearly depict the isolation of the right-wing ecosystem via partisan sources like Fox News and Breitbart, and the centrality of professional media outlets with long institutional histories on the center and left.





Network map based on open web media from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016

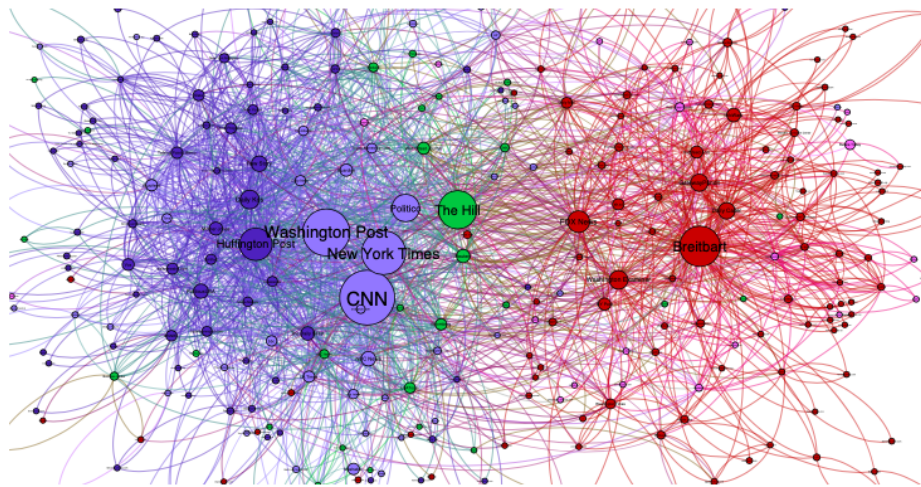


Figure 46: Network map based on Twitter media sharing, September 2016 ([explore this map in higher resolution](#); warning, file is large)

So why should we care about this isolated right-wing media ecosystem? Isolation from the rest of the media landscape allows right-wing media outlets to depart from journalistic norms, adopt the use of a bias-confirming model, and create a propaganda feedback loop with Party members. Benkler et al. define this bias-confirming news model as a media ecosystem in which “politicians are more or less immune to fact checking because their core audiences treat

the professional fact-checking process itself as partisan, and media outlets, audiences, and elites all discipline each other to remain true to faith and confirm party beliefs and ideology on pain of exclusion and demotion” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 98). This media model is the opposite of the truth-seeking model of the left and center, which Benkler et al. define as “the center and left dynamics combine networked media and major media outlets, with the latter playing a moderating effect on partisan bullshit and on politicians who still have to worry about fact-checking sites...and the former checking the more traditional media from becoming too complacent and comfortable with conventional wisdom” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 98). The interaction between these diversified media sources “creates resistance to the spread of falsehoods” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 98). As the right-wing media ecosystem becomes continuously more isolated, it is easier for its members to justify a bias-confirming model. The use of a bias-confirming model inside an isolated media ecosystem then allows for the mass export of right-wing propaganda.

Benkler et al. define propaganda as “communication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with political goals of the propagandist” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 29). Propaganda induces misperceptions, creates distractions, and pedals misinformation directly affecting political discourse. Propaganda can be found in most media today, from movies and television to social media and video games. Although not all propaganda is dangerous, it can be detrimental on a large scale. Benkler et al. define large scale propaganda as network propaganda: “The effects [that] contribute to population-scale changes in attitudes and beliefs, come not from a single story or source but from the fact that a wide range of outlets, some controlled by the propagandist, most not, repeat various versions of the propagandist’s communications, adding

credibility and improving recall” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 33). The right-wing media ecosystem built a network of propaganda that directly affects national politics.

Sustained propaganda requires multiple sources to repeat messages within the network to provide credibility and create an illusion of wide-spread credibility and truth. Benkler et al. define this echo-chamber of propaganda throughout a network as a propaganda feedback loop: “A network dynamic in which media outlets, political elites, activists, and publics form and break connections based on the content of statements, and that progressively lowers the costs of telling lies that are consistent with a shared political narrative and increases the costs of resisting that shared narrative in the name of truth” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 33). In a propaganda feedback loop, media outlets emphasize partisan-confirming news and compete on identity confirmation while also policing deviance from their set identity norms. Politicians then seek out these outlets to push their ideological position and must conform to the set norms to get media attention. This creates a system where partisan-confirming news is trusted and any external news is immediately distrusted. On all ends, members are constrained within a system that “disciplines those who try and step off it with lower attention or votes, and gradually over time increases the costs to everyone of introducing news that is not identity confirming, or challenges the partisan narratives and frames” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 79). This makes the propaganda feedback loop a self-reinforcing system where media outlets, political elites, and the public all participate in promoting the same narrative.

### **The Model Works**

The right-wing media ecosystem is extremely powerful because of its departure from journalistic norms and its bias-confirming propaganda model. To explore this more fully, the

following section takes a closer look at Fox News, a central node of the right-wing media ecosystem. I chose to focus on Fox News as opposed to other partisan sources like Breitbart because, even though Breitbart was a significant player in the 2016 discourse, Fox News has sustained its viewership the longest. Members of the Republican Party rely heavily on Fox News. In 2020, “Around two-thirds of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (65%) say they trust Fox News for political and election news” (Gramlich). This is despite the fact that, according to PolitiFact, the “proportion of Fox News statements that are mostly false or worse is almost 50% higher than for MSNBC and more than twice that of CNN” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 84). The majority of these false statements come from paid conservative hosts and pundits (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 84). Clearly, Fox News and its propaganda feedback loop created a loyal audience of Republican viewers with the power to impact elections, social politics, and the political groundwork of the United States.

In his book, *Fox News and American Politics: How One Channel Shapes American Politics and Society*, Dan Cassino uses content analysis software and public opinion data to prove that Fox News directly affects American politics. The book, published in 2016, documents the “transformative change” in the relationship between American politics and media over the last two decades (Cassino, 8). As Cassino puts it, “The clearest example of the change in how news is presented and consumed in America comes from Fox News, a channel which has found enormous ratings success while presenting a consistent ideological viewpoint” (Cassino, 8). Cassino splits his research into five areas, demonstrating how what is said on Fox News directly impacts the results of presidential elections, Republican presidential primaries, campaign contributions, the political knowledge of the American public, and the social views and

behaviors of Americans. In doing so, he demonstrates just how powerful the right-wing media ecosystem can be when its propaganda feedback loop functions in full force.

Before we get into Cassino's data, let's take a quick look at how Fox News came to power. Back before mass-media and high-speed internet, news was limited to the few major channels and newspapers with a monopoly on the market. In that environment of limited media choice, news networks needed to "stay above the partisan fray" in order to "capture the widest possible audience" (Cassino, 9). This all changed in the 1980s, when technological advancements and booming markets created an explosion of networks and media. As Cassino notes, "the number of channels available to the average American had risen from 41.1 in 1995 to 189.1 in 2013. And nearly every cable package now includes at least three 24-hour cable news channels – CNN, Fox News and MSNBC" (Cassino, 9). In this new world, consumers could find news networks catered to their preexisting beliefs. So networks shifted their news media into the ideological realm to maintain audience attention.

Fox News, just one wing of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, started broadcasting in 1996 and cornered the ideological market in 2000: "Fox's political tone was fairly evident from the beginning, but wasn't available in most of the country until after the 2000 Presidential election, when cable providers noted the ratings it had achieved during the coverage of the election and its aftermath" (Cassino, 10). After the success of its 2000 election coverage, Fox News became a major player in the Republican Party. Starting in 2014, Fox coverage became notably more biased than other news sources. Bias in this context is defined as the ratio of positive statements about the Republican Party to negative statements about the Democratic Party (Cassino, 15). "Fox was about 4 percent more negative than NBC in 2011, 2012 and 2013, and about 7 percent more negative than CBS. This all changed in 2014, though: in the first half

of the year, coverage on Fox was 51 percent negative, compared to 25 percent negative on NBC and 8 percent negative on CBS. Suddenly, Fox's coverage went from being broadly in line with the other networks to more than twice as negative" (Cassino, 16). Fox News quickly learned that the more biased their news, the more successful their business. In adopting the right-wing mantel, Fox became a leading player in views, ratings, and overall influence.

For Fox, the bias-confirming model is the perfect business model. To quote Murdoch himself, "newspapers were meant to entertain not educate" (Broe, 99). Murdoch started by buying newspapers in Australia and Britain, becoming the leading press publisher in Britain by 1990. He then expanded into the U.S. by buying 20th Century Fox and "founding Fox News, Fox Sports, and FX, which deliver a Murdoch slant in news, sports, and dramatic cable programming" (Broe, 99). Fox News found major success in their openly-biased sensationalism, allowing Murdoch to buy Direct TV in 2003 for 6.6 billion dollars and expand viewership further (Broe, 99). In an environment of dozens of news networks, Fox's model separated them from the rest. By leaning into ideology and entertainment, Murdoch created a global media conglomerate with one main goal: market domination.

Dan Cassino's data demonstrates the far-reaching influence of Fox News' global media conglomerate. He uses content analysis software from the Swiss-based media analysis company Media Tenor where "coders read through newspapers line by line, and watch television news programs, coding each individual statement as to the actor in the statement, the source of the statement and the tone of the statement, with separate measures for the explicit tone of the statement and the implicit tone of the statement" (Cassino, 22). Cassino takes this analysis data and combines it with information from public opinion polls from the United States to find matching content and determine what effects statements made by Fox have on public opinion.

“By combining these features —frequent measurement of public opinion and detailed, sentence-by-sentence coding of media content—it becomes possible to determine what effects statements made in the media are having on public opinion” (Cassino, 22). Using this data, Cassino provides proof of a direct correlation between Fox News and presidential approval ratings, primary results, general election results, public political knowledge, and conservative social views and behaviors.

Cassino’s data connects Fox News coverage throughout the Obama administration to subsequent increases and decreases in Obama’s public approval ratings. The data shows a clear correlation between Fox coverage and approval ratings: “Positive statements about Obama in the news increase his approval, and negative stories decrease his approval, with statements on Fox having a larger effect than statements made on [other] network broadcasts” (Cassino, 51). Obama’s popularity also affected how impactful Fox’s statements were, with positive statements mattering more when approval ratings were low, and negative statements mattering more when approval ratings were high. Republican opinions of Obama were especially subject to Fox’s influence. Cassino’s data shows that “Republicans respond to coverage of Obama on Fox, but not on the [other] networks, and Fox coverage even influences approval among conservative Republicans” (Cassino, 51). The connection between Fox coverage and presidential approval rating is equally influential during Republican administrations. According to Cassino, “as early as 2003, Fox coverage was a strong predictor of changes in President Bush’s approval rating” (Cassino, 51). In both cases, Fox coverage had a larger impact on presidential approval ratings than political events like the passing of legislation or meetings with foreign leaders. Only major events that were highly reported, like 9/11 or the killing of Bin Laden, carried a similar weight to daily Fox reporting.

Fox News also plays a big role in both Republican primary elections and general elections. Cassino's data looks at the 2012 election cycle and shows a direct correlation between Fox coverage, campaign donations, and the decisions of undecided voters. As Cassino puts it, "Fox's role in the 2012 Republican primary seems to be the arbiter of taste for rank-and-file members of the Party" (Cassino, 75). Although Fox coverage did not impact big donors already backing Romney in 2012, Fox was responsible for putting other candidates in the spotlight. "For a minor candidate, merely being mentioned on Fox was enough to set off a surge of small contributions, likely because of the way that coverage framed the race in the eyes of viewers. When one of these candidates jumped in the polls, Fox coverage increased the size of that jump, and pushed more small donors towards him. When that candidate began to flounder, as they all did, Fox accelerated the decline, and quickly substituted a new alternative to be built up and taken down" (Cassino, 75). Although Fox coverage did not single-handedly earn Romney the nomination, Fox was responsible for curating the competitive environment of the primary and shaping the election narrative.

When it came time for the general election, these trends continued. The election itself was not unpredictable; Obama held a lead the entire time and the outcomes were expected. But we can look at how his margin of lead changed and why. For example,

Fox also matters a great deal more early on in the general election, when fewer people are paying attention, with coverage on the networks mattering more as the election draws nearer. While it turns out that very few events during the campaign actually have a significant effect on the standing of the candidates in the polls, coverage of those events does seem to matter a great deal. For instance, the first Presidential campaign didn't have an impact on Obama's standing in the polls, but after the first debate, coverage of Obama turned strongly negative, and this shift in coverage did have an effect on the polls (Cassino, 92).



The 2012 election was not unique: the majority of voters stayed true to their party affiliations and were not swayed by media reporting. The 2012 election did demonstrate, however, that media outlets can sway smaller groups of undecided voters. As Cassino puts it, “the direct effects of the media are all about persuading a small segment of the population that’s not tied too closely to either candidate” (Cassino, 92). As Cassino’s research shows, Fox News caters both to the hard-right Republicans who already support the Republican candidate and also appeals to undecided voters in an attempt to swing them right.

Cassino’s data goes further, demonstrating how Fox News coverage not only affects approval ratings and elections, but also influences the political knowledge and social behaviors of viewers. When tested on awareness of general topics of political interest, Fox News viewers score lower than people who are otherwise similar to them but consume other media. As Cassino puts it, “the best explanation for these effects is that Fox viewers concentrate so much on topics that aren’t discussed in other media outlets that they simply don’t pay attention to the sorts of general, neutral questions asked in political knowledge scales” (Cassino, 92). Political knowledge surveys conducted by various university data research programs such as the PublicMind Program and the American National Election Studies Collaboration yielded the same results: “Fox News viewers seem to know less about general topics of political interest than they otherwise would, partly because they’re not paying attention to the sorts of topics included in the political knowledge scales, partly because they’re motivated to ignore some topics that might be disconcerting to them” (Cassino, 110). This data demonstrates that Fox News shapes an isolated political narrative for its viewers.

Fox News’ unique narrative affects the social beliefs and behaviors of its viewers. The endorsement of conspiracy theories and other false statements has become a mainstay of Fox

News and its consumers. According to Cassino's research, "individuals who report watching Fox News are more likely to say that global warming is a hoax cooked up by scientists, that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, and that Barack Obama is not actually an American citizen" (Cassino, 111). Fox presents these topics as issues of politics, while other networks may not engage them at all. Cassino's results "show that Fox News content and viewership have the general effect of politicizing issues that might otherwise be outside the realm of partisan politics, like belief in global warming, support for the Common Core curriculum, and perceived conflict between religion and politics. It seems merely the fact that the issues are discussed in a setting which presents so many subjects as issues of partisan conflict leads anything under discussion to be perceived in these terms" (Cassino, 145). Fox News plays by its own rules. As the leader of an isolated media-ecosystem, Fox has the freedom to peddle its own narrative of truth and politics that is entirely partisan and bias-confirming.

Fox News has served as the leader of the right-wing media ecosystem since its rise to power during the Bush administration. Fox monopolized conservative Republican ideology for views and power, adopting a bias-confirming model that utilizes a propaganda feed-back loop. In doing so, Fox obtained the ability to influence elections, influence approval ratings, direct funding, and construct the socio-political belief systems of its Republican audience. Broadcasting Republican ideology gave Fox the loyal viewers it has today. Now, as the dominant voice of the isolated right wing media-ecosystem, Republican ideology relies on Fox.

### **Chapter 3: Manufacturing a New Ideological Reality**

In Chapter Two, I introduced the isolated right-wing media ecosystem and the propaganda feedback loop model. I presented a combination of usage data and opinion polling to prove that Fox News is a leader in the right-wing news ecosystem, making it a leader in Republican ideology. In this chapter, I explore how Fox News works *together* with Republican Party leaders to create and promote an ideological narrative using a propaganda feedback loop. To reiterate: In a propaganda feedback loop, media outlets emphasize partisan-confirming news and compete on identity confirmation while also policing deviance from their set identity norms. Politicians then seek out these outlets to push their ideological position and must conform to the set norms to get media attention. This creates a system where partisan-confirming news is trusted and any external news is immediately distrusted. In this chapter, I explore the development of the Republican propaganda feedback loop, how it functions in today's media landscape, and the power it has to incite radical ideological action.

#### **The Propaganda Model - What Makes A Successful Feedback Loop?**

To understand what makes the propaganda feedback loop so powerful, we need to dissect why it works. In their book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky explore the actors and interest-groups involved in a successful propaganda model. *Manufacturing Consent* was written in an attempt to explore how the emerging mass media technologies communicated messages and symbols to the general public. Their work “traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public” (Herman and Chomsky, 61). Although this model was

originally designed to explain how the media help manufacture consent for the larger public, which would be through the production and support of moderate and centrist thinking, it can also be applied on a sub-level to the right-wing media ecosystem. As Herman and Chomsky state, they believe that “the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them” (Herman and Chomsky, 12). The right-wing media system follows Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model within its own network of actors and supporters.

Herman and Chomsky describe five key factors, which they call filters, through which news must pass through before it is presented to the public. Herman and Chomsky’s filters fall under the following headings: 1. Size, Concentrated Ownership, Owner Wealth, and Profit Orientation of the Dominant Mass-Media Firms; 2. The Advertising License to Do Business; 3. Sourcing Mass-Media News; 4. Flak; and 5. Ideology (in the case of the 1988 book, anticommunism) (Herman and Chomsky, 62). The first filter demonstrates how the few actors who have monopolized the news market can filter the news narrative in their favor based on their size, ownership, and profit orientation. As Herman and Chomsky describe, the dominant “twenty-four [news] companies are large, profit-seeking corporations, owned and controlled by quite wealthy people” whose main goal is profit (Herman and Chomsky, 66). To be successful, media companies must work the market:

Many of the large media companies are fully integrated into the market, and for the others, too, the pressures of stockholders, directors, and bankers to focus on the bottom line are powerful. These pressures intensified in recent years as media stocks have become market favorites, and actual or prospective owners of newspapers and television properties found it possible to capitalize increased audience size and advertising revenues into multiplied values of the media franchises and great wealth. This trend toward greater integration of the media into the market system has been accelerated by the loosening of rules limiting

media concentration, cross-ownership, and control by non-media companies (Herman and Chomsky, 66).

News outlets that play to this model have become the most influential and wide-spread voices in the market.

The second filter, “The Advertising License to Do Business,” describes how advertisers influence the news narrative. News outlets need funding. Advertising is a primary source of money for every news corporation. To compete for their patronage, media companies have to prove to advertisers that “their programs serve advertisers’ needs” (Herman and Chomsky, 76). Media companies will broadcast advertiser-friendly news to maintain their funding and stay ahead of the competition.

The third filter, “Sourcing Mass-Media News,” is also about economic sustainability. As Herman and Chomsky put it, “the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest” (Herman and Chomsky, 78). To run a successful news business, media outlets need a steady and reliable flow of information. Primary sources like the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department, are central nodes of such news activity at the national level. On a local level, city and state departments, business corporations, and trade groups are also regular and credible news sources. Not only do these sources provide regular and cost-effective news, they are also deemed credible by the public because of their “official” nature. Similarly to the first two filters, news sources will broadcast information crafted and approved by these sources to protect profit. National offices and city bureaucracies make great news sources because “taking information from sources that may be presumed credible reduces investigative expense, whereas material from sources that are not prima facie credible, or that will elicit criticism and threats, requires careful

checking and costly research” (Herman and Chomsky 79). This information and reporting relationship serves both the sources and the outlets that report their information.

The fourth filter, “Flak,” refers to negative responses to a media statement or program that can cost views, credibility, and patrons. Herman and Chomsky describe flak in many forms: “letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action. It may be organized centrally or locally, or it may consist of the entirely independent actions of individuals” (Herman and Chomsky, 86). The more power an actor has, the more dangerous and costly flak they can create. Media companies can face some serious flak in the form of “phone calls from the White House to Dan Rather or William Paley, or from the FCC to the television networks asking for documents used in putting together a program, or from irate officials of ad agencies or corporate sponsors to media officials asking for reply time or threatening retaliation” (Herman and Chomsky, 87). News outlets rely on the trust of their viewers, so serious public flak can be deadly. To avoid this problem, media outlets will seek narratives, sources, and stories that will cause the least amount of negative stir among their supporters and patrons.

The fifth and final filter is “Ideology”. Herman and Chomsky rightfully assert that media outlets must conform to the ideology of those in power. If not, outlets would not only face flak, but they would be subject to all the other filters as well. Outlets broadcast the same ideology as their owners, advertisers, sources, and any other major market patrons. Herman and Chomsky’s model highlights a key aspect of why the propaganda feedback loop works: “The model contends that the media comprise an economic institution and their performance is shaped primarily by the market system in which they exist. The U.S. media system is seen as an integral part of the capitalist political economy” (summarized by Jackson and Stanfield, 476). In their 1988 book,

Herman and Chomsky identify the dominant media ideology as the ideology of anticommunism. While the political ideology of the time is no longer the anticommunism of the 1980s, we can see ideology is still central to the economic success of media outlets today as they compete for partisan viewers, patrons, sources, and credibility.

Herman and Chomsky's news filters have been successfully used by Fox and the Republican Party elites to manufacture their own network of consent. News must make it through the filters to be seen:

The five filters narrow the range of news that passes through the gates, and even more sharply limit what can become "big news," subject to sustained news campaigns. By definition, news from primary establishment sources meets one major filter requirement and is readily accommodated by the mass media. Messages from and about dissidents and weak, unorganized individuals and groups, domestic and foreign, are at an initial disadvantage in sourcing costs and credibility, and they often do not comport with the ideology or interests of the gatekeepers and other powerful parties that influence the filtering process (Herman and Chomsky, 92).

Fox and their political counterparts filter the news to present the messages that best suit their interests economically and politically, creating the ultimate propaganda feedback loop. Working together with right-wing owners, shareholders, advertisers, and sources to promote Republican ideology for Republican viewers is a successful business model for Fox and creates the propaganda feedback loop of consent that benefits everyone involved.

### **What Happened in the 2000s?**

Herman and Chomsky's book was first published in 1988, but it only became more applicable as the media market grew in the past two decades. In the introduction to their 2002 edition, Herman and Chomsky write that "the changes in politics and communication over the past dozen years have tended on balance to enhance the applicability of the propaganda model.

The increase in corporate power and global reach, the mergers and further centralization of the media, and the decline of public broadcasting” only made the 1988 model stronger (Herman and Chomsky, 18). Fox News came into power during the Iraq War in the early 2000s. In this moment, Fox News and elite members of the Republican Party became the dominant actors of the propaganda feedback loop and began to manufacture consent for their own isolated media network. Two things made this possible: the deregulation of the media market by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the possibility for a mutually-beneficial partnership with the Republican administration.

In 2002, the FCC—then led by Republican Michael Powell—voted to lighten the regulation on media ownership “which led to the scrapping of long-standing rules to prevent the growth of media monopolies” (Williams, 200). Behind this vote were millions of dollars in corporate lobbying: “An analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics shows that media companies spent more than \$82 million on federal lobbying efforts between 1999 and 2002, and another \$26 million on political contributions. Some of the biggest media groups were the biggest spenders” (Williams, 200). By deregulating the media market, the FCC allowed for media power to concentrate in the hungriest corporate hands.

For Fox, this deregulation combined with the opportunity to cover the Iraq War created the perfect opportunity to dominate the conservative news market. For the Bush administration, Fox’s support of the war became critical. Thus, a symbiotic relationship, the propaganda feedback loop as we know it, was born. “The US media, with rare exceptions, uncritically relayed government propaganda, but it was very unlikely that they would adopt adversarial or critical stances towards Bush’s drive to war – they wanted political favors, and had been lobbying hard for them. If the media damaged the Bush administration politically, it in turn could



damage the media commercially, and this wasn't something they were prepared to risk" (Williams, 200). In return, the Bush administration relied on Fox to promote pro-war propaganda and "promote this new symbiosis between global markets and global warfare, or, more accurately, to promote the opening of once-resistant global markets through global warfare" (Broe, 100). Together, Fox and the Bush administration used the propaganda feedback loop to further their interests. Fox's war coverage was so popular and controversial that it ousted CNN from the number one cable news network spot. In turn, "Fox successfully sidelined any real public debate about the war" garnering a strong network of support for Bush's war effort (Jackson and Stanfield, 478). This collaboration between Fox and the Bush administration marked a new, and mutually-beneficial, relationship: Fox and Republican politicians would now work together to promote their ideological message.

### **How Does it Work Today?**

Fox News and the Republican propaganda feedback loop have grown exponentially more extreme since their rise in the 2000s. As the data in Chapter Two demonstrates, Fox News and its friends have become continuously more isolated and biased as time and technology developed. Since 2000, news media has become a digital business. For example, during the 2016 election "taking the entire adult population together, 78% used television during one week for learning about the election, 65% used digital information sources (48% news websites; 44% social networks), 44% used the radio, while 36% read print newspapers" (Fuchs, 73). As the media ecosystem moved online, it got easier for leading corporations to create targeted and concentrated propaganda content. By applying Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model to today's media ecosystem, the success and scale of today's propaganda feedback loop is clear. In

the following section, I will draw on the work of theorist Christian Fuchs to describe how the strength of Herman and Chomskys' filters increased in the years since 2000.

The first filter, ownership, has become exponentially more concentrated since the FCC deregulations and rise of mass internet and social media usage. Since 2000, media platforms have obtained ownership of a lot more data and are owned by fewer people:

The dominant social media platforms have concentrated ownership. Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin own 42.4% and 41.3% respectively of Alphabet's class B common stock. Page controls 26.6% of the voting power; Brin 25.9%.<sup>11</sup> Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg controls 85.3% of the company's class B common stock and 60.1% of the voting power. Social media is also a highly concentrated market: Google controls 71% of the world's searches, and Facebook and its subsidiary WhatsApp account for 48% of users worldwide of the top 10 social media platforms (Fuchs, 73).

These owners are even more powerful than before: they can filter news media through traditional forms of flak and through their ever-evolving private algorithms and mountains of collected user data. The rise of these platforms has only further isolated the right-wing media ecosystem as algorithms use a bias-confirming strategy for profit, furthering the ideologies presented on more traditional platforms like Fox.

The second filter, advertising, has also grown since 2000. The use of digital media platforms has created a whole new market for advertising and data sales. User data and algorithms allow for targeted ads, content, and clickbait. As Fuchs puts it, "The online advertising-user-spiral increases social media's power in advertising and as news media and advances monopoly tendencies in the online economy; On social media, users' digital labor produces a data commodity and is exploited by the platforms in order to sell targeted ad spaces" (Fuchs, 86). This has made it not only easier to advertise, but easier for advertisers to create and support networks that promote their interests.

The third filter, sourcing, has also evolved to become more powerful. When it comes to credible sourcing, traditional media groups have an advantage: “the traditional media themselves have occupied the internet and are dominant news providers there; [...] they have the resources and pre-existing audiences to give them a huge advantage over alternative media potential rivals” (Fuchs, 78). As the internet opened up the possibility of mass information exchange, however, it became harder to distinguish credible versus non-credible sources. The influx in information makes it easier for networks to pick the news that best suits their narrative. Not to mention there are also codes, algorithms, and bots that influence the tide of digital information.

Finally, the fourth and fifth filters, flak and ideology, joined together at the core of the self-reinforcing and exponentially heightening Republican ideological period we see today. Fox News, Republicans, and the internet have created the ultimate ideological feedback loop. As Fuchs describes, ideology develops quickly in the digital realm: “User-generated ideology is the phenomenon that ideology production is no longer confined to professional dialogues, but has become possible on the level of everyday life. Ideologies are sensational, populist, simplistic, emotional, and speak directly to particular subjects. Because of these features, online ideology tends to attract a lot of attention. Algorithms reward those who gain significant levels of attention by helping to further amplifying them. Therefore, there is a tendency of algorithmic amplification of online ideologies” (Fuchs, 84). The internet has invited more opinions and flak into the public political discourse. In turn, it amplified the voices of the leading actors who garner the most views. The Republican propaganda feedback loop is extremely powerful and its political implications should not be taken for granted.

### **January 6th: The Power of the Propaganda Feedback Loop**

The right-wing propaganda feedback loop effectively incites political action. The January 6th Capitol Riot is a prime example. Leading Republican politicians and Fox News worked together to incite a riot at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. Thousands of U.S. citizens stormed the United States capitol building in an attempt to stop the bipartisan act of confirming the results of the 2020 election because they believed that Donald Trump was still president. This moment represented an extreme manifestation of populist propaganda; these citizens truly believed that their government was lying to them and attempting to install a president that did not win against the people's will. The emergence of this extremism can be traced back to the right-wing media ecosystem, its filters, and its use of the propaganda feedback loop.

Donald Trump began to push the narrative of the Big Lie, the idea that the election was rigged and Joe Biden did not win, in the summer before the 2020 election. On July 30, 2020, he suggested that the election should be delayed because of possible voter fraud (Kight). Trump continued to push the voter fraud narrative up through the election in November, claiming that the election was going to be “corrupt” and “rigged” (C-SPAN 2021). After Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 election, Trump came down even harder on the Big Lie. At countless rallies across the country Trump declared that the election was invalid: “I have no doubt that we won, and we won big,” Trump said. “The headlines claiming that Biden won are fake news — and a very big lie” (C-SPAN 2021). At a rally in Iowa he insisted that “We didn't lose,” to a crowd that rewarded him with chants of “Trump won!” (C-SPAN 2021). And, not only did Trump consistently push the Big Lie, but he directly invited supporters to the Capitol on January 6th. On December 19th Trump tweeted “Big Protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” (Bump). Shortly after this tweet went viral, a new website appeared that guided supporters

directly to the Capitol. This website was called “WildProtest.com” and provided in depth information on how to get to the Capitol, what to bring, and what to expect (Bump). The Big Lie and the sparks of the Capitol insurrection were fanned even further by Fox News.

According to a report by the liberal watchdog Media Matters, in the two weeks after Fox called the election for Biden, the network was recorded casting doubt on the election results or pushing Big Lie conspiracy theories nearly 800 times (Power). Fox anchors Sean Hannity, along with his primetime colleagues Laura Ingraham and Tucker Carlson, were among the biggest offenders in pushing these lies. For example, two days after Fox News called the presidency for Biden, Hannity began embracing the particularly insidious Dominion and Smartmatic conspiracy theory, which contends that the voting machine companies purposely switched Trump votes to Biden in swing states to ensure a Democratic victory (Baragona). On November 9th, Tucker Carlson exclaimed that “we need to find out exactly what happened in this election” (Carlson quoted by Media Matters).

In the weeks leading up to the January 6 attack, Fox doubled down on their effort to undermine the election results and push the Big Lie conspiracy. On December 8th 2020, Sean Hannity falsely claimed that “less than a thousand people ” tuned in to Biden’s Thanksgiving Day message. He suggested that given the message’s allegedly low viewership, people should be skeptical about Biden winning the 2020 presidential election (Hannity quoted by Gertz). On December 9th, while speaking about elections on his Fox radio show, Sean Hannity said, “If we don't fix it, it's over. You're never going to have an honest election” (Hannity quoted by Media Matters). A few days later, Hannity asked his prime-time audience, “How does anybody trust the election results?” (Hannity quoted by Media Matters). Soon after, Fox & Friends co-host Brian Kilmeade said Biden is president-elect “according to some” and co-host Ainsley Earhardt said

Biden is “what they're calling the President-elect Biden” (Kilmeade and Earhardt quoted by Media Matters). On January 5th, the day before the Capitol riot, Fox News contributor Newt Gingrich likened Biden’s election to the worst assault on America, “maybe since the previous Civil War” (Gingrich quoted by Media Matters). There is no doubt that this constant stream of election fraud propaganda is directly related to the attack on January 6th.

The January 6th attack is a painful example of how the right-wing media ecosystem and its propaganda feedback loop can generate extreme ideological violence. Together, Trump and the leading voices of Fox News crafted and employed a successful propaganda campaign against Biden’s election. From November 3, 2020 to October 28, 2021, Media Matters published scores of articles exposing right-wing media’s numerous allegations of illegal election activity. These articles included everything from lies about Dominion voting systems and fake election “audits,” to more disturbing language likening Joe Biden’s election to an act of civil war (Feuer and Graham). All of this was made possible by the right-wing propaganda feedback loop, which amplified Trump’s message across the media network and created an isolated environment in which conspiracy theories could grow into plans of attack.

When Herman and Chomsky first wrote about manufactured consent through media filters in 1988, they could have never predicted how far it could go. The right-wing media ecosystem has proven that media filters can effectively manufacture a new political reality for a selected group of consumers. Using a propaganda feedback loop, Donald Trump worked together with Fox News and other leading Republicans to wrongly convince thousands of people that the election of Joe Biden was a lie. Together, these actors effectively manufactured a new ideological era.

#### **Chapter 4: A New Ideological Epoch**

The Republican Party has transitioned into a new ideological period over the past two decades as a result of the isolated right-wing media ecosystem. The Neoliberal Epoch that John Gerring describes has evolved into something significantly more radical. The conditions of the right-wing media ecosystem and its creation of a bias-confirming propaganda feedback loop have given way to a new ideological period: Right-Wing Populism. In this chapter, I use Gerring's model of ideological periods to define the era of right-wing populism, its development, and its connection to the right-wing media ecosystem and propaganda feedback loop.

Right-wing populism has lurked under the surface of the Republican Party for years. As defined in Chapter One, party ideology is a set of values, beliefs, and issue positions stated publicly by a party's elite and repeated and reinforced by party members, interest groups, and the public. Republican politicians have stood publicly against big government and regulation of state affairs since the early days of neoliberalism and free-market capitalism. Ever since the Party shifted away from statism in the early 1900s and began to rely on the white working class as their primary voting bloc, the message has been the same: The Republican Party was the Party of people versus government intervention; a Republican administration would protect voters from taxes, progressive legislation, and urban dominance, thereby safeguarding traditional white American life. As the rest of the nation became more socially integrated and access to political power was diversified, however, these core Republican values were called into question. The Republican network had to respond. Suddenly, neoliberalism was not enough. Republican rhetoric shifted; it was no longer economical freedom that was being targeted by the government, but social values. The rise of profitable mass-media and politically biased new sources in the last two decades created the opportunity for Republican elites, constituents, and corporations to

cosmetically and systematically display a new set of ideological beliefs for their network, creating the new era of right-wing populism.

In his book, *Digital Media and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism*, Ralph Schroeder uses the Trumpist period to describe the rise of right-wing populism. Schroeder defines populism as “a belief that juxtaposes a virtuous populace with a corrupt elite and views the former as the sole legitimate source of political power” (Schroeder, 61). The Republican Party has historically positioned itself as the protector of the people from big-government. This is evident in the early anti-statist policies and campaigns to protect families, local businesses, and agricultural interests from government intervention. These previous neoliberal policies are clearly related to populism, but were missing an explicit element. Populism is all about *exclusion*: it is the “people” being excluded by the “elite”. The right-wing populism of today has a clear definition of each. The new Republican ideology is all about protecting “real” America—the white, Christian, working class—from “others” that want to erase it from the political and social narrative. This “other” consists of progressives, Democratic elites, and non-white political participants.

American right-wing populism is an ideology based in racism, Messianic evangelical Christianity, and fear: all of which make great propaganda tools. It also relies on misinformation, which is why Benkler, Faris, and Roberts call this current ideological period the “post-truth” era. The right-wing media ecosystem feeds off of this ideological period and so do extremist politicians because it encourages isolationist and sensationalist rhetoric. The Trump presidency is a shining example of this. Donald Trump worked with the right-wing media ecosystem and its propaganda feedback loop to get elected in 2016. When he lost to Joe Biden in 2020, he used the same tactics to contest the results and spur a full-fledged insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021. As shown in the last chapter, Trump and other Republican elites worked



together with Fox News to manufacture the rise of right-wing populist extremism and solidify a new ideological epoch based in fear and distrust.

### **Adopting Defining Values and Issue Positions**

How do we know that the Republican Party has entered a new ideological epoch? We can talk about Trump all we want, but a single political actor does not create an ideological epoch. As I laid out in the previous chapters, ideological change is driven by the interaction between political environment, party elites, constituents, and partisan media companies like Fox News. An ideological period, or epoch, is created when these interactions solidify into a self-reinforcing set of norms that are publicly shared in values, issue positions, and political action such as proposed legislation, party platforms, or voting patterns. To prove that the Republican Party has entered the ideological epoch of right-wing populism, I will summarize how each set of political actors—party elites, constituents, and Fox—adopted the values and issue positions of right-wing populism and embedded this ideology into their political action.

Right-wing populism is defined by its protection of “the people” from “elite” progressive intervention. What differentiates this ideology from the previous Neoliberal period is the clear definition of “the people” as white conservative Americans and the “elite” as secular and racially mixed progressives. In the previous period, Neoliberal Republicans were focused on shrinking the federal government and protecting economic freedoms. In this context, the federal government’s regulation of corporate enterprise was the dominant concern. In contrast, the new era of right-wing populism emphasizes that *individual* freedoms are being attacked by a secular central government. Right-wing populism is all about protecting a way of “American life” that is based in white, Christian dominance, making it no longer the all-around norm in the secular,

diverse, and technologically advanced democracy of today. Republican Party elites began to embed this ideological narrative into campaigns starting in 2012. Examples include the promotion of the “birther” narrative that questioned President Obama’s citizenship status, the rise of “pro-life” arguments in response to expanded healthcare, Donald Trump’s promise to build a wall on the border to Mexico, and the ever famous campaign slogan “Make America Great Again”.

Republican constituents have quickly adopted right wing populism into their daily practice as well. A great example comes from Starbucks Coffee. Republicans were historically the Party of free enterprise, promoting the removal of politics from corporate decision making. Now, corporations like Starbucks face regular boycotts and mass internet smear campaigns at the hands of Republicans. In 2017, Starbucks announced a plan to hire 10,000 refugees to work worldwide (Taylor). In response, the company was met with a wave of digital attacks from Republican constituents claiming that the brand was discriminating against “real” American citizens and promoting the liberal agenda: “You are very wrong and stepped over my American line and beliefs,” reads one such post of dozens on Starbucks’ Facebook page, “American First and forever” (Taylor). The company was faced with similar backlash and calls for boycotts when they swapped out their red Christmas cups for green cups in 2016. Republicans nationwide claimed that the green cups were a form of “political brainwashing,” “forced secularization,” and a public attempt by the company to sway the 2016 election for Hillary Clinton (Taylor). The viral attacks against Starbucks are just another example of right-wing populism, fueled by the right wing media ecosystem and feedback loop, in action.

As the Christmas cup scandal demonstrates, the protection of Christian religious freedom from secular attack is a central pillar of right-wing populism today. Party elites, constituents, and

Fox anchors alike name “forced secularization” as a primary tactic of liberal government oppression. Republican rhetoric uses Christian religious freedom and general individual freedom interchangeably in their Party platforms and in their media network. When President Obama passed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, Republican politicians were quick to claim that their religious freedoms were under attack. This was a notable shift in tactics, fitting for a new ideological period. Prior to the rise of right-wing populism, Republicans did not use religious rhetoric in their fight against abortion. When the abortion debate began in the early 1960s, Republicans argued that “legal abortion would psychologically scar women and put disabled individuals at risk” while also violating the “constitutional right[s] of the unborn child” (Ziegler, 11). When *Roe vs. Wade* sparked a new wave of anti-abortion protest in the 1970s, organizations like Americans United for Life (AUL), the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), and the American Medical Association (AMA) argued that abortion was bad for the country socially and financially (Ziegler, 13). It was not until after Obama’s election and the subsequent increase in progressive healthcare legislation that Republican’s brought religion to the forefront of the pro-life battle. When the ACA mandated coverage of certain contraceptives, the “AUL and NRLC spoke out against what they described as an attack on religious freedom” for the first time in their anti-abortion history (Ziegler, 195). This major tactical shift is directly related to the rise of right-wing populism. As Ziegler states, the rise in religious rhetoric was becoming a Republican mainstay because it “appealed to Americans who believed that the government, the scientific establishment, and the media concealed the truth from ordinary people” (Ziegler, 202).

The Republican Party embedded these ideological arguments into their platforms. The 2012 Party platform assured the right to religious freedom, arguing “that assurance has never been more needed than it is today, as liberal elites try to drive religious beliefs—and religious

believers—out of the public square” (Republican Party Platform 2012). The platform went further, describing the Obama administration’s policy as a war on religion: “The most offensive instance of this war on religion has been the current Administration's attempt to compel faith-related institutions, as well as believing individuals, to contravene their deeply held religious, moral, or ethical beliefs regarding health services, traditional marriage, or abortion” (Republican Party Platform 2012). The platform then directly tied religious freedom and individual freedom together, stating “We pledge to respect the religious beliefs and rights of conscience of all Americans and to safeguard the independence of their institutions from government” (Republican Party Platform 2012).

Since 2012, Christian religious freedom has continued to serve in tandem with individual freedom in Republican right-wing populist rhetoric. The pro-life campaign continues to serve as a primary example. Fox News rakes in millions of views with their shocking pro-life content. In 2015, for example, they released a video titled “SHOCK VIDEO: Planned Parenthood sells dead baby body parts!” (Starnes). The video, captioned “Planned Parenthood executive sipping a glass of wine in a Los Angeles restaurant while casually explaining how they sell body parts from aborted babies,” uses out of context footage for shock value and directly connects the fight against abortion as a fight for religious freedom (Starnes). The article below the video, which quotes numerous Republican politicians calling for the destruction of Planned Parenthood, ends by saying “God bless America? Perhaps we should be asking for His mercy, instead” (Starnes).

The 2016 Party platform continues this narrative stating, “We oppose the use of public funds to perform or promote abortion or to fund organizations, like Planned Parenthood, so long as they provide or refer for elective abortions or sell fetal body parts rather than provide healthcare. We urge all states and Congress to make it a crime to acquire, transfer, or sell fetal

tissues from elective abortions for research, and we call on Congress to enact a ban on any sale of fetal body parts” (Republican Party Platform 2016). It is vital to note here that only 3% of the healthcare services that Planned Parenthood provides are related to abortion (Planned Parenthood Federation of America). A fact that the Republican Party and the right-wing media ecosystem have chosen to ignore. Instead, access to abortions is painted as a direct attack on Christian religious values and therefore an attack on individual rights.

Right-wing populism argues that the government is anti-individual and anti-religion. Fox’s Tucker Carlson summarized these ideas when he said that liberals “seek absolute sameness, total uniformity. They want to make you drink Starbucks every day from now until forever. No matter how it tastes. That’s the future they promise. Everyone doing the same thing” (Carlson quoted by Owen). Carlson is arguing that the Democratic Party wants to erase individual choice in the name of progress, starting with the choice to be a conservative. This fear, fear of change, fear of a loss of power, fear of oppression, is the core of right-wing populism. According to Pew survey data, the majority of Republicans believe the nation is unfairly biased against them: “About six-in-ten Republicans and Republican-leaning independents in the United States (63%) think that “Democrats in this country are *very* comfortable to freely and openly express their political views,” but only about two-in-ten (19%) think Republicans around the nation experience that same level of comfort” (Jones). These numbers rise with conservative Republicans: “72% think Democrats are very comfortable to freely express their views, while just 15% say the same about Republicans, a 57 percentage point gap” (Jones). As described in previous chapters, partisan news sources like Fox News profit off of this narrative and use the isolating aspects of right-wing populism to foster a faithful viewer base and pedal sensationalist narratives for views and likes. Party elites, like Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, made entire

political careers using right-wing populism as a dominant campaign tool. Together, party elites, constituents, and Fox News created a network in which right-wing populism is legitimized and reinforced.

### **Acting on Values and Issue Positions**

An ideological epoch requires concrete political action. Over the past few years, populist ideology has solidified into the Republican Party through presidential platforms and proposed legislation that has garnered massive support from constituents and Fox news alike. Starting in 2012, the Republican Party presidential platform made a significant shift towards right-wing populism by adding a new set of sections promoting the “Rebirth of Constitutional Government” and the “Reforming the Government to Serve the People” (Republican Party Platform 2012). Both sections promote heavy conservative populist ideals stating, “The Republican Party, born in opposition to the denial of liberty, stands for the rights of individuals, families, faith communities, institutions—and of the States which are their instruments of self government. In fidelity to that principle, we condemn the current Administration's continued assaults on State governments in matters ranging from voter ID laws to immigration, from healthcare programs to land use decisions” (Republican Party Platform 2012). These sections were followed by a restating of the Bill of Rights, which discussed in detail how the Republican Party intended to protect its people from an overreaching Democratic government and counteract forced secularization and attacks on traditional values. As the platform states, the Party welcomes “all our fellow citizens who are determined to reclaim the rights of the people that have been ignored or violated by the government” (Republican Party Platform 2012). These populist themes were solidified in the 2016 Platform, beginning with a section titled “Restoring the American Dream”.

In this section, the Republican Party states that the Democrats have used the government to destroy American prosperity and that a Republican government would create a nation in which “citizens and their families can maintain their independence from government, raise their children by their own values, practice their faith, and build communities of cooperation and mutual respect” (Republican Party Platform 2016).

Here, the Republican Party is promising freedom from progressive government. It is clear in the platform, however, that this freedom is designed for a select group of Americans. The platform, while preaching freedom and prosperity, also contains sections promising to protect the *traditional* American family, continue the war on crime and drugs, and protect religious freedom. Notably, each of these sections contain language limiting the rights of LGBTQ+ families, bodies with uteruses, and people of color. It is clear that the freedoms promised in the platforms are not for everyone. Instead, the platforms promise to preserve the legacy and relevance of the white, conservative, “American dream”. The Party was so sure of this stance and its political effectiveness, they did not even write a new platform for the 2020 election.

Republican congressmen have been proposing legislation that fits this ideological narrative ever since it became the Party norm and received enthusiastic support from constituents nationwide. Anti-abortion legislation has flown through Republican-led states in 2022. In early April, for example, both Kentucky and Florida banned abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy (Kitchener). Right-wing populism is even targeting the voting box. Similar to the response of the Lily-White factions to the success of black politicians in the South in the late 1800s, the success of progressive black politicians in historically Republican states and the election of a Democratic president in 2020 created an influx in conservative voting legislation. In the past year alone, 19 Republican-led states passed 33 different laws limiting ballot access in response to the 2020

election loss and more than 245 similar bills have been put forward for debate in 2022 (Corasaniti). All of these bills have the same goal: to limit voting access to non-white, non-Republicans thereby maintain conservative power and electoral success. Texas, for example, recently passed S.B.1. This legislation constrains election workers' ability to stop poll-site harassment and limits safe and accessible methods of voting by restricting the use of language assistance, ballot drop boxes, early voting, and absentee ballots. Notably, the forms of accessible voting that were limited by this bill were also the most commonly used methods of voting by Democrats of color in 2020 ("Voting Laws Roundup: October 2021"). Both this legislation and the recent Party platforms are steeped in populist language, arguing that the federal government is working against the isolated white conservative populace. All of which resulted in significant air-time on Fox News for the participating congressmen, which will undoubtedly assist in future re-elections.

The ideology of right-wing populism has grown into the heart of the contemporary Republican Party. Conservative values of anti-statism and deregulation have radicalized in the face of technological advancement, social diversification, and the rise of progressive secular and non-white political powers. To protect political and social influence, the far-right created its own self-reinforcing bubble of support using the right-wing media ecosystem as an echochamber. With the help of market-driven media companies like Fox News, Republicans created an insulated network of conservative populist ideology to maintain political power.



## **Conclusion**

I am not a psychology major, nor is this a senior project in psychology. I do not have the tools to understand why people choose to believe what they believe or why we find comfort in group identities or aggressive moral pronouncements. I can, however, investigate the institutional systems that influence these individual choices. The rise of mass media and the creation of the right-wing media ecosystem and the ideological evolution of the Republican Party are undeniably linked. These institutions—right-wing media and the Republican Party—exist in tandem for their mutual benefit.

It would be easy to get stuck in a question of cause and effect, but this would not be useful. As I demonstrated, neither the media ecosystem nor the Party drives ideological change in isolation. Instead, the self-reinforcing loop between the actors creates a force of its own that pushes everyone involved to new extremes. It is like a tornado: once you get sucked in, you have no choice but to get pulled to new heights.

I began this work by exploring previous theories behind ideological change. Although these theories all had insights into the roles of political environment, party elites, and constituents in ideological change, the larger container was missing. My research into the right-wing media ecosystem provided this container: a self-reinforcing network in which ideological compliance is rewarded and opposition is forcibly removed. Fox News played an enormous role in this discovery. Nowhere else on the political spectrum exists a media company quite like it. In the past two decades alone, Fox News has become an essential asset to the Republican Party. Fox has gone where no major news network has gone before: completely departing from journalistic norms of truth-telling, taking a public partisan stance, relying on sensationalism, and building an unwavering base of loyal supporters in the process.

In Fox, I discovered the propaganda feedback loop model at work. This model, defined by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts in their book *Network Propaganda*, is the core of the relationship between Fox and Republican ideology. Fox News needs partisan propaganda to garner views and maintain power in the media market. Republican politicians need partisan propaganda to win elections. Fox needs politicians to make statements they can broadcast and politicians need their statements to get attention. In turn, Fox will encourage politicians to craft the most media-friendly statements and politicians will encourage Fox to keep supporting them for financial gain. Thus, a propaganda feedback loop is born.

The power of the right-wing propaganda feedback loop can not be taken lightly. The propaganda feedback loop has won elections, passed legislation, and even incited an insurrection. Most importantly, it has driven the Republican Party into a new ideological epoch. The previous Republican ideological epochs, as defined by John Gerring and summarized in Chapter One, each lasted around one hundred years and required major global events like the Industrial Revolution or World Wars One and Two to solidify themselves. This new ideological era, the era of right-wing populism, took just two decades to emerge and only around ten years to solidify into a Party norm. There is no doubt that the coinciding rise of digital mass media and the formation of a propaganda feedback loop between party elites, constituents, and partisan media has accelerated the formation of right-wing populism into an ideological epoch.

Right-wing populism has embedded itself into the Republican Party in speeches, legislation, presidential platforms, and social media feeds. Party elites, constituents, and partisan media alike are relying on the narrative of an overreaching secular progressive elite to hold together their political relevance. As the data I collected demonstrated, this has resulted in the creation of an isolated political and social network and an increasing lack of trust in those that

disagree. Looking ahead, I question what this increasing isolation will mean for the future of bipartisan action and reasonable political discourse. A two-party system relies on the participation of both parties to function. So what happens when one party decides that the system is rigged against them? If the response to the 2020 election is any indication, productive discourse may not be an option. The future is still unclear.

There is a difference between systematically silencing a group and questioning where their beliefs fit in a secular and racially diverse body politic. The ideology of right-wing populism is determined to define conservative Republicans as a victim of the former; the “silent majority”. In reality, white conservative interests still hold a massive amount of power despite the rise of progressive opposition. What Republicans are likely responding to when they claim they are being silenced despite their massive media presence is the growing demand for liberal change as the American population diversifies.

My work set out to examine the mirroring evolutions between Republican ideology and the rise of digital news media and its creation of the right-wing media ecosystem. In doing so, I discovered the mutually beneficial and self-reinforcing network that holds the two systems together and drives them forward. The explosion of media sources and information sharing technology over the past two decades has undeniably changed the political landscape. In the case of the Republican Party, the evolving media environment has allowed for the creation of a new and isolated ideology network that preserves and amplifies the white conservative voice in contemporary political discourse. In many ways, the right-wing media ecosystem and the populist ideology it has empowered mirror each other: both rely on a system of self-reinforcement and both breed immense distrust for the external political and social environment. In the years ahead, the Republican Party has a choice: either it will follow the

spiral of the media network and the extremes of right-wing populism out of the realm of viable democratic participation or it will return to a less-radical position as its most extreme members lose their political credibility and electoral sway. I'll check Twitter to find out.

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