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The Prevalence of Right-Wing Extremism and the Internet's Effect on it

## Abstract

The internet and social media have allowed people to access large quantities of information easily. Instead of using it to look into different views, people have used it to filter opposing views and find information that reinforces their beliefs. The internet, new types of media like talk radio and social media have allowed for more extreme voices to be heard and make an impact on society, which means politicians are more likely to focus on what these extreme voices are saying.

This paper will focus on how right-wing extremism has become an increasingly dangerous threat with the rise of social media and the internet, the types of extremist figures and groups on social media, who is most likely to be radicalized, possible solutions to prevent extremism, the history of polarization as well as the history of right-wing extremism and its underestimated impact throughout U.S. history, which allowed social media and the internet to spread extremist content. There are certainly examples of left-wing extremism, but this paper will focus on right-wing extremism because of its breadth and its organization. The main research question of this paper is if social media has made right wing extremism worse or has it simply amplified voices and opinions that have long existed among the right-wing. Extremism is defined as “the fact of someone having beliefs that most people think are unreasonable and unacceptable” (Cambridge).

## **Introduction**

Most academics look back fondly on the post-World War II period as the least polarized era in U.S. history. Many academics often blame the rise of polarization and fringe figures gaining political power on the internet, social media and talk radio. While it is true that the internet has given voice to extreme figures and made them mainstream, what often gets overlooked is that when the U.S. was less polarized, it was often done at the expense of tolerating racism. What is not taken into consideration is that just because extreme voices have a platform, that does not mean

they did not exist before. Academia has overestimated the number of moderates on the right and underestimated the number of extreme voices. The internet has simply given these figures a platform and has allowed them to effectively organize.

### **Analysis**

When discussing extremism and social media, the theory of selective exposure is an important concept into understanding why people can be drawn into extremist content and refuse to change their views no matter what evidence they are given. Selective exposure is the theory that people will look for information that reinforces their views. Most people of a specific ideology will seek out information that supports their beliefs and will avoid anything that conflicts with their views. The rise of the internet has made it easier to seek out information that confirms a person's belief and ignore information that contradicts it. Research has shown that the more ability someone has to avoid information that goes against their beliefs, the more likely they are to do it (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Some studies have shown that people with more extreme views are more likely to engage in selective exposure (Almoqbel et al). The future of using technology for political information was successfully predicted by some in a 2001 article titled *Facilitating Communication Across Lines of Political Difference: The Role of Mass Media*. The article stated people were increasingly choosing news sources that confirmed their views. The article also discussed how people were increasingly choosing to spend time with people who they agreed with. Nearly every political scientist agrees that exposure to different political opinions is good for society and increases the quality of discourse. It allows people to have their views challenged and potentially gain access to information and other ways of thinking they may not have otherwise encountered. Academics have said that the media is good for relaying information,

but it is not good for public discourse and that face to face is the best option for discourse (Mutz & Martin). The conventional view used to be that the media did not affect one's political affiliation in part due to the lack of alternate options and the little research was done on the topic (Klapper).

Political commentator and centrist Nick Cohen believes that while extremism on the left is a problem, its worse on the right. He believes the fight against the radical right is a fight for liberal democracy. He argues that while American universities need to improve on free speech issues and that the mainstream media should not look down on anyone who is not a leftist, they did not have the power like Trump did to change the Constitution. He believed Trump showed no care for checks or balances. He argues that only a hand of full of Republicans like Mitt Romney were willing to fight back against Trump (Cohen).

Right wing extremism has been increasing around the world and many groups have used the internet to radicalize people. In theory, the internet should allow people to expose themselves to different viewpoints but often the opposite occurs. Increased online activity often results in the likelihood of attending a protest. The number of social media conversations have also been linked to arrests at protests that result in arson and vandalism. Talking with people who share your worldview online can often excuse criminal behavior and make it seem acceptable (Garrett).

This article identifies some ways to reduce hostility, mainly increasing group activities between those of different political beliefs. It also mentioned that in controlled environments, there have been instances where studies that have shown that online interaction can reduce political hostility towards the other side. Unfortunately, getting each side to engage in civilized debate as social media activity is often unrestrained and allows people to remain anonymous. Interactions are often quick and usually ends up reinforcing negative prejudices. A negative interaction online has been shown to increase that person's negative perception of that group. In this article,

extremism is defined “as a belief that ingroup survival is inseparable from a need for hostile action against an outgroup.” (Garrett). The article also mentions that in Western countries with large Muslim presence, there is usually a large anti-Muslim sentiment. Both right-wing and pro-Islamist State extremist groups often excuse their behavior by saying that they do it to fight the other extremist side. (Garrett)

Right-wing extremism was a problem even before the internet. The 1964 essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* discusses right wing extremists using language that is often seen today when discussing Trump and today’s GOP. The Barry Goldwater movement was mentioned as being able to stir the passions of a small minority. He mentions the conspiracy theories of those believing the government is attempting to poison the country through the water supply, which was a precursor to Alex Jones Infowars website and conspiracy theories. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s crusade against communism was mentioned and how McCarthy made accusations that the government had been infiltrated by communists. McCarthy’s accusations against then Secretary of State George C. Marshall that he was a communist in 1951 was based on McCarthy claiming that Marshall was betraying American interests after World War II with the Marshall Plan. Hofstadter points out that extremist movements are nothing new, as leaders of the Populist Party in 1895 said that a conspiracy was entered to between the gold gamblers of America and Europe; a Newspaper from Texas claimed the Monarchs and the Pope were trying to destroy America. The difference between movements in the 1800s and right-wing movements from the 1960’s on are that earlier movements had spokesmen that believed they were fighting threats to their way of life while the modern conservative movement has felt that America has been taken away from them, and that this is the fault of socialists, communists, cosmopolitans and intellectuals. The enemies of the right in the 1960’s and today are more “vivid”, such as President

Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower in the 1960's and the Clintons and Obama today. The right started to draw on World War II and the Korean War for their conspiracy theories. The three elements of right-wing conspiracy theories in the 1960's was that Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal was meant to undermine capitalism and the New Deal's goal was to have the government control the economy and then create a path to communism. The second element is that since Pearl Harbor, the government was infiltrated by communists and that American policy was purposely selling out American interests. The final element was that the country was infiltrated by communist agents, and that education, religion, the media, press were trying to brainwash Americans. These elements influence the far right today and it is easier than ever to spread these messages (Hofstadter).

Robert H. Welch Jr had a strong influence on right wing extremism in the 1960's with the founding of the John Birch Society. The John Birch Society was founded in 1958. Welch claimed communists forced the banks to close in 1933, helped the Soviet Union get recognized by the U.S., increased debate over segregation, won control over the media and schools, and had taken over the Supreme Court (Hofstadter). They were terrified of the Soviet Union and communism. Welch had called Eisenhower a member of the Communist Party. He said that there could be as many as 1 million secret communist spies in the U.S and that 50%-70% of the government was infiltrated by communists. They were highly supportive of Goldwater in 1964 and some members were delegates in the 1964 Republican National Convention. Goldwater was worried about denouncing Birch as he believed Birch made up a large portion of the GOP. The John Birch Society was very critical of the Civil Rights Movement and accused it of being created by communists. The society's views were seen as so extreme that even William F. Buckley, Jr., a traditional conservative and found of the conservative magazine the *National Review*, denounced Birch (Buckley).

A 1968 study gives further insight on the outlook of right-wing extremism at the time. The study mentions groups that were considered extremist at the time such as the John Birch Society. Like far-right groups today, the author mentions that these extremist groups believed that their enemies are engaged in a conspiracy to destroy them and that they have prominence in American society, similar to the QAnon conspiracy theories of today. They believe the federal government, political parties, schools and press are controlled by liberals and communists. However, the study concluded that this line thinking was not the mainline of thinking among conservatives. The author of the paper mentions the far-right goals of the time, such as the impeachment of Earl Warren. Most of those on the far right were rural, less educated, and had lower income. What makes this notable is that these groups did not have the means to spread their conspiracy theories or had representation in the traditional media, but can do so easily now through social media (Schoenberger).

Those who are deeply conservative or have fringe views usually belong to the Religious Right, whose power grew in the 1960's and 1970's. Before the Religious Right, those who were extremely conservative and religious did not align themselves with one party, but as Republicans became primarily conservative, they aligned themselves with Republicans. Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign is frequently discussed when talking about the rise of the modern conservative movement and right-wing extremism and he used Southern Blue-Collar Christians to garner support. This strategy continued with George Wallace's failed 1968 presidential bid, but Richard Nixon used that voting bloc to help him win re-election in 1972. Conservative, Southern, Christian White males make up the majority of the Religious Right. By the 1970's, Conservatism started to become religious and focus on issues like banning abortions, opposing gay rights, limiting sex education and supporting prayer in school. These types of conservatives supported Barry

Goldwater, and many were supporters of the John Birch Society. There were also adamantly against the separation of church and state. Despite these beliefs, they have been able to align themselves with libertarians in the Republican Party (Harp).

The Religious Right existed before the 1970's, but they did not have policy influence due to religious conservative figures being split between both parties and most were not involved in politics and unorganized before. Ronald Reagan appealed to them in order to get elected. The legalization of abortion through the Supreme Court decision in *Roe V. Wade* and the cultural changes of the 1960's such as women's liberation, gay rights, school prayer and the sexual revolution were factors that led those previously involved with the Democratic Party to leave the party and engage more actively in politics. Many Evangelical Christian were not registered to vote before 1980 and many who were registered voted for Carter in 1976 due to his religious and Southern roots but felt let down by his policies. They saw societal changes in America as a major decline in the morality of the country.

The Moral Majority led by Jerry Falwell responded to these changes. Many members were Evangelicals, and a large faction were fundamentalist Christians who believed the Bible was infallible. The Moral Majority started to expand into the media such as radio and television shows during the 1970's. They believed and still believe that there is a war on Christianity. Other Christian denominations who were not as conservative were still sympathetic to the Moral Majority, such as conservative Protestants or Catholics. They would often promote that they were protecting the family in order to appeal to the middle. They tied abortion and gays rights as an attack on the nuclear family. Phyllis Schlafly was a conservative woman who was part of the Moral Majority and campaigned against the Equal Rights Amendment, which evangelicals also ruled as an attack on the family. Homosexuals were portrayed as pedophiles. Many Moral Majority

members had previously expressed disapproval of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's. The Moral Majority was also against welfare spending and described themselves as patriotic. They were very enthusiastic about the 1980 Presidential election of Ronald Reagan and helped mobilize voters. However, Reagan ended disappointing many in the Moral Majority. While he spoke with many religious leaders and was publicly friendly with them, frequently invoking God, such as telling Jerry Falwell at the 1980 Republican National Convention "I know you can't endorse me," he was quoted as saying. "But . . . I want you to know that I endorse you.", Reagan's main concern was on the economy.

Racism by the Religious Right was accepted in some circles past the 1980's. Some religious colleges such as Bob Jones University, a school where many prominent conservative politicians had spoken at, had discriminated on the basis of race claiming the Bible instructed to do so, an example being the ban of interracial dating. The IRS worked to have their tax-exempt status removed which angered some on the Religious Right (Banwart). The fact that a religious school visited frequently by prominent Republicans engaged in blatant racism should show the tolerance of extremism that was on display by the Republican Party. 1980 was considered the year of the rise of the religious right and was a contribution in the twelve (12) states that switched from Carter to Reagan. Reagan did have strong conservative evangelicals serve in his administration. Evangelicals could not turn to Democrats if they were unsatisfied with Reagan, as Democrats campaigned against them. (Miller). The Religious Right still makes up a large faction of the Republican Party today. A majority of Republicans opposed *Lawrence v Texas* in 2003, which said states could not criminalize homosexuality, which enraged many Evangelicals. Despite Trump engaging in extramarital affairs and being openly profane, the Religious Right has embraced him and often had approval rating in the high 70s-low 80s from Evangelicals.

Richard Nixon used the Southern Strategy in his campaign and appealed to people's racial fears about crime and the 1960's. His strategy was very similar to how the right portrays left wing extremism today (Rosenberg). The media in the 1960's often overreported on violence by the Black Panthers and feminists, making all liberals seem like radicals which Nixon used to his advantage. Roger Ailes helped work with Nixon to make him look like he was one of the people and not an elitist. Nixon campaign ads used videos of crime and scary music. Nixon would often allow protestors into his rally and let them cause chaos in order to make them look insane. Nixon would have his staff write letters to the media disguised as people from middle America and lambast the media for criticizing him. After his nomination of former segregationist G. Harrold Carswell the Supreme Court failed, he blamed it on Southern bias (Surgue). It is not difficult to imagine that Richard Nixon's political career would have probably survived during Watergate if Fox News was around then. It took a year of investigations and a lot of evidence for his supporters and members of Congress to turn against him. Nixon still had his supporters after Watergate, which included a majority of Republicans. Powerful conservative activists were pressuring members of Congress to not vote to impeach Nixon. After Nixon was impeached, only 31% of Republicans agreed with it (DeVeaux). Nixon blamed the liberal media for Watergate and tried to spin it as a hit job, tactics Trump would later use. Nixon said liberals and the Eastern establishment were to blame. Pat Buchanan criticized what he referred to as the "Big Media" and said that the Media favored liberal causes such as the Civil Rights and the anti-war movements (New York Times 1974). Conservatives in 1974 saw the press as trying to overturn the election. Conservative radio personalities warned of the liberal media becoming out of control. They claimed liberals were worried about their hold on political power (Hemmer). Republicans thought what Nixon did was small and not worth the fuss. Nixon had told his staff that conservatives needed to create their own

establishment and own news. Nixon's attacks on the media and his portrayal of anyone against him as elitist were similar tactics other conservatives and Trump would use in order to create mistrust in the media (Schwarz).

Jesse Helms, a notorious southern Republican Senator and racist was a precursor to today's extremism and is the prime example of why Congress is not necessarily worse today. He was considered the most conservative and far right senator during his time as senator. Helms helped shape Southern Republican politics in the second half of the 20th century with views rooted in private enterprise and racially coded language. In his radio shows from the 1950's to the 1960's, Helms would use overt racist language and criticized interracial marriage and integration. He also invited KKK members onto his radio show. Helms believed the media was liberally biased and painted himself as an outsider to the liberal elite. Helms constantly criticized Martin Luther King and would later filibuster the legislation making his birthday a national holiday. Helms is often compared to other segregationists of his day like Strom Thurmond and George Wallace. Helms was a Democrat until 1970, although he had ultra conservative views before then (Gifford). A *Time Magazine* profile from 1981 on Helms describes how he rose from what was once considered a fringe figure to one of Ronald Reagan's closet allies. Some conservatives considered Helms too radical while there were many conservatives who considered him a hero for his uncompromising attitude. Robert Ajemian describes him "not so much a conservative as a right wing radical" (Ajemian). Helms was also noted as being uncharismatic, which differs from many extremists. Helms helped create the Congressional Club, which helped pay off Congressional debts. Helms and Richard Viguerie used political mail to speak directly to their constituents. Viguerie said "We're years ahead of the Democrats in the technology" (Ajemian). Helms racism was much

worse than Trump's statements he has made running for office and as President, and shows that right wing radicalism was a part of the Republican Party decades before Trump.

Trump's and the right-wing media's campaigning tactics and smear campaigns are nothing new. Lee Atwater was a Republican strategist notorious for his brutal campaign tactics. He worked with Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush during his 1988 campaign for President. Atwater said that Republicans used the "Southern Strategy" to get voters. Atwater was interviewed in 1981 and described the Southern Strategy. He said that politicians used to be able to be openly racist in the 1950's. By the 1960's, that was socially unacceptable, so they had to resort to using phrases such as busing and state rights. By the 1980's, this changed to economic issues. "You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger." Atwater's name was not used in the quote until the mid-1990's after he died. For years, it was thought of by some as an urban legend. Atwater denied he was racist and said the Southern Strategy would end racism in the South and most political issues will become economic. He was wrong, as one recent study showed that people who had conservative opinions on race were twice as likely to be Southern. He was named head of Republican National Committee in 1988 (Perlstein). He was best known for the "Willie Horton" ad during the 1988 Presidential Campaign while working for George H. W. Bush. The ad criticized Democratic Candidate Michael Dukakis for being soft on crime by showcasing his past approvals of weekend furlough, which led to first degree murder by Willie Horton, who was African

American committing armed robbery and rape. The ad was accused of being a racial dog whistle. Another famous ad was the “Revolving Door” ad was an ad of actors portrayed as prisoners going through a revolving door symbolizing Dukakis policy of releasing criminals early. Atwater helped create modern mudslinging campaign tactics. He had accused past Democratic candidates of having mental health issues, buying the black vote and fathering illegitimate children, all of which were lies. Atwater said these tactics were specifically useful in the South (Zurawik).

Right wing media has allowed for revisionist history on certain issues to occur, with Robert Bork being a prime example. The biggest misconception of the last 40 years from the right was that Robert Bork’s character was unfairly assassinated during his 1987 Supreme Court nomination. Republicans made this comparison during Brett Kavanaugh’s hearing and successfully made it look like Democrats had a history of smearing Republican Supreme Court candidates for political reasons. Bork became a folk hero to the right and was admired by figures like Rush Limbaugh. Borking is a term used to describe character assassination. The Right used Bork as an excuse for rushing Barrett’s confirmation, saying that Democrats started the process of politicized Supreme Court nominations. Nominations would often be nearly unanimously confirmed no matter the political party. However, Bork could be described as an extremist. He defended forced sterilization policies at companies, was in favor of the poll tax, argued homosexuality and birth control could be criminalized, was fine with forced school prayer, was against the 1964 Civil Rights Act and gender equality. Senator Ted Kennedy gave a famous speech where he said Bork’s nomination would lead to the rise of back-alley abortions and the return of segregation (Coaston)

Trump and the Right’s support for populist candidates had been clear since 1992, when Pat Buchanan challenged George H. W. Bush in the presidential primaries by running on social conservatism and being anti-establishment. George H. W. Bush presidential campaign was more

conservative as a result, and to energize “the base” and Buchanan was allowed to speak at the 1992 Republican National Convention, and gave his “” speech, where he spoke out against gay rights, secularism and abortion rights. Buchanan’s speech was considered by some to be one of the most polarizing speeches at a political convention. Buchanan was disliked by the Republican establishment and was later banned from speaking at other events (Nagourney). The internet and social media would have most likely increased Buchanan’s chances of winning even further, as Buchanan would have had an easier time spreading his message and gaining new supporters.

Figures more extreme than Trump have taken public office. David Duke, a former neo-Nazi and KKK member won a race in 1989 and ran for Louisiana governor in 1991. He was denounced by both Reagan and Bush. Duke lost the election but was still able to get 39% of the vote, including 55% of the white vote. Duke ran as a political outsider and on anti-globalism. Many of his supporters feared affirmative action programs. The media’ effort to mention his bigoted remarks backfired, as the bonds between Duke and his supporters grew (Maginis). Some Republican voters voted for Duke mainly because they believed the Democrat opponent was worse and that Duke would not actually be able to accomplish any of his harmful ideas, similar to why some conservatives who hated Trump still choose him over Biden and Clinton. A Neo Nazi and KKK member gaining such large support shows how big a factor extremism was even before the internet.

The current polarization and division in congress can be in part attributed to Newt Gingrich. Many of the smear tactics and other tactics used by the right during the 1990s were adopted by Gingrich. Gingrich is most famous for using these tactics to the 1994 Republican Revolution that gave Republican’s control of the House for the first time in decades.

Gingrich was known for telling younger Republicans that they had to be nasty. When Gingrich was elected to the House, he wanted to end the bipartisan coalitions. He also criticized the moderates in the Republican Party. Gingrich would call Democrats un-American and communists. He and twelve (12) other members of the House first gained notoriety for causing disruptions. His goal was to be in the news as often as possible. Gingrich wanted to paint Republicans as good and Democrats as radical and evil. Gingrich had Republican's block everything Bill Clinton put out, correctly believing Democrats would be blamed for this. Many Freshman Republican candidates were similar to Gingrich (Coppins). Gingrich hoped to get America so disgusted with Congress that they would think anything would be better than the current leadership. He wanted to get the Democratic majority to overreact which would enrage moderate Republicans. Gingrich focused on fundraising. Gingrich wanted to nationalize elections, which would make party trump individual characteristics. He helped centralize power and reduced the authority of committee chair's, committees and caucuses. Gingrich saw his biggest obstacles being Congressional staff members who were experts in certain fields. Gingrich did his best to fire as many of those people as possible by slashing the budgets and staff of House committees (Cottle).

Rush Limbaugh also deserves blame for the polarization in today's politics and conservative politicians listening to fringe voices. Limbaugh had large influence in the Republican Party and would pressure Republicans to take hardline conservative stances. Limbaugh insulted his opponents viciously. Limbaugh was extremely partisan and often hypocritical. Limbaugh would say things like White kids were in danger of being harmed in Obama's America. Rush Limbaugh was able to portray himself as a man of the people who were forgotten by the media and come across as funny and relatable. Limbaugh's show was one of the most listened too in America and had over 20 million listeners at its peak. Limbaugh at times would be purposely

provocative. Politicians often hoped Limbaugh would speak fondly of them (Friedersdorf). Obama staff members called him the driving force of the Republican Party. He called a Georgetown law student advocating for birth control a slut in 2012. Limbaugh's rise was in part due to Reagan removing the 1987 Fairness Doctrine which said TV and radio must present both sides of controversial issues, which allowed Limbaugh to say whatever he wanted. Limbaugh would downplay the 2017 "Unite the Right Rally" and 2021 "Capital Attacks." Limbaugh helped amplify the views of the party's base which the establishment discounted. Rush Limbaugh and conservative talk radio were able to give those outside the mainstream of conservatism a voice and give their opinion on policy, voice support for fringe candidates and help them spread their message and organize (Early and Mathias).

Fox News has changed politics for the worse and can also be blamed for fringe figures taking over the Republican Party. Roger Ailes and Rupert Murdoch founded Fox News in 1996. Fox averages more views a night than CNN and MSNBC combined. It was created in part to support the belief that the media was unbalanced and that conservatives were not heard. Conservatives now have a bigger platform to share their views. Fox News wanted their personalities to be well known and their shows to be entertainment. Republican politicians now need to go on Fox and gain support of their viewers if they want to have a shot at being elected. Ailes created Fox because he felt like there needed to be a counter to Nixon's impeachment in the 1970's which would have protected him if Fox News existed in the 1970's. Fox focuses on stories that cause outrage and fear mongering, such as the war on Christmas, Obama being born outside the U.S. or would refuse to cover the downsides of the war in Iraq. Some political scientists estimate that people and polices are 3 to 8 percent more conservative than they would otherwise

be with Fox and without Fox, Al Gore would have most likely won the 2000 Election without the existence of Fox News (Farhi and McCarthy).

Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson has been advertising the “Great Replacement Theory”, which extremist conservatives believe is the left attempt to replace the white population through nonwhite immigration. Carlson is Fox’s highest rated show. There is danger that people like Carlson and other figures mentioned throughout this paper are normalizing this type of hate. The anti-immigration website VDARE, which has posted material from White Nationalists, praised Carlson’s segment. The website was founded by Peter Brimelow, who was once a mainstream conservative and was famous for his hard right stance on immigration. He had previously described the increase of nonwhite immigrants as a threat to the culture of the U.S. In his bestseller in 1995, "Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster", he said the government is trying to prove they are not like Adolf Hitler which ended immigration quotas and allowed white people to be replaced. He argued immigration had to be restricted to preserve white culture (Hemmer).

The right has increasingly used internet memes to sway public opinion. During Trump’s rise, memes with racist connotations became popular such as the “Pepe the Frog” meme. The Reddit community The Donald, Gab, and 4chan were often used to spread extremist content (Zannettou). The internet has been used to reinforce opinions. People involved in online social networks are usually interacting with people who think similarly. People feel more comfortable reading news sources that reinforces their beliefs. People in online politics groups are less likely to be exposed to political information that goes against their beliefs than people in nonpolitical groups (Kitchens et al).

The book *"The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium,"* discusses how the public has been using social media to attack dominant institutions. The author says the public is not the people, as they are not represented by an opinion poll. He says the public are people who are interested enough in an issue to get involved, so the public are different people in each issue. He says social media has empowered the public and gotten rid of the mainstream media's influence. The Twitter mob and Facebook protestors have replaced people like Walter Cronkite. He says the public tries to tear things down instead of build things up. They want institutions, public figures, governments, parties and programs to be destroyed. He does place blame on the establishment for making big promises and being tone deaf. A critic of the book said that some people think today is worse due to the revolution of rising expectations which says that progress leads to expectations of continued progress. With the internet and more people having college degrees, the establishment seems less impressive and less distant (Smith).

The internet's impact on conservatism and fringe figures rising can be seen with the Tea Party. The "Tea Party" was a more recent movement that garnered attention. The Tea Party Movement rose after Obama bailed out investment banks with federal funds. The Tea Party Movement gained many seats in Congress in 2010. The Tea Party focused on economic issues rather than moral issues, although most members still have conservative Christian views. One notable aspect of the movement was that they used tactics similar to the ones of the radical right from the 1950's. They did not use nuance in their arguments and instead used anti-communist rhetoric. The protests were often carnival like in nature, with posters of Obama often having a Hitler mustache. The Tea Party does not try to fit in with the mainstream. Tea Party members were able to create websites and voice their opinions and messages loudly because of the internet (Harp). During this time, the Obama birther conspiracy theories emerged. These theories were constantly

promoted by Trump and conservative personalities like Limbaugh, Lou Dobbs, Sean Hannity and Michael Savage. The issue was one of the biggest sources of traffic on the internet for those on the right (Zurcher). Republican members of Congress were often bombarded with that issue at town halls. The Republican Establishment were hesitant to disown that part because they believed they made up a significant portion of their base. Neo-Nazis and white supremacists spread the Birther lie. Trump claimed that credible sources had told him Obama's birth certificate was fake (Crary). When Obama did release his birth certificate, conspiracy theorists said it was fake, and spread other theories like Obama being a Muslim. Around 33%-58% of Republicans believed Obama's birth certificate was fake, and around 20% of Americans believed Obama was not born in the U.S. (Thrush). Before the internet and rise of conservative media, this theory would not have gained mainstream attention, but because the internet allowed it to spread, the media was forced to report on it.

One of the most recent examples of right-wing violence was the 2017 Unite the Right Rally. The Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville 2017 gives important insight to extremism. The rally took place after the removal of confederate monuments were ordered and extremist groups like the KKK, neo-Nazis and other alt right groups attended to protest the removal. A counter protestor, Heather Hayes was killed at the protest. President Donald Trump said there were "very fine people on both sides at the rally" (Tien et al).

Right wing media has denied that Trump called people at the rally "very fine people" and have said that there were actually peaceful conservatives at the event. They argue his quote was taken out of context and that he condemned Neo Nazis. In reality, Trump had said the night before there were some good people protesting, but at the rally that night, there was the infamous tiki torch march with chants of "Jews will not replace us". Trump later said there were some people

simply protesting taking down of the Robert Lee statue, but the rally was advertised as a white supremacist rally beforehand. White supremacist Jason Kessler obtained the permit for the rally. Many Trump supporters rewrote the story about what Trump said and were in denial. They have gaslighted many other people into believing the lie through stories and articles on the internet from websites like Breitbart (Kleefeld).

Many members of the Alt-Right attended the Unite the Right Rally. The alt-right is a far-right belief that white culture and identity is being threatened by policies like social justice, political correctness and multi-culturalism. The Alt-Right is made up of people who advocate for ethnic separation and are very active on the internet. They claim they do not want violence. They have claimed that nonprivileged whites are victims of government policies such as affirmative action, sanctuary cities, and the erasing of their history. They believe their struggles with mental health issues, suicide and job security are not understood by progressives. Many of those who attended the rally were young white males. The factions of the Alt-Right that includes the KKK and neo-Nazis is minor. The major faction does not believe themselves to be white supremacists. Members of the Alt-Right like Richard Spencer believe they are preserving European culture. They claim to love the United States and are promoting free speech on college campuses and social media. Many members advocate open discussion of their ideas. They despise political correctness, “the white establishment” and the Democratic Party. Trump’s 2016 campaign excited many Alt Right groups and put members into the mainstream. The rally against political correctness has gained traction among young libertarians, many of whom would not typically be associated with the alt right. Milo Yiannopoulos, a member of the Alt Right who gained a large following is a gay man and he claims people join the alt right for a desire to break the rules and be rebellious. He says they are not particularly conservative. They view themselves as breaking social norms like

the hippies of the 1960's. It is common for them to post provocative memes with pop culture references to make themselves seem more relatable (Phillips and Yi)

Establishment Republicans and intellectuals proved during Trump's election that they did not have a grip on the ideology of their base and underestimated the base's willingness to follow a populist candidate. Most of the general population viewed Trump unfavorably. In 2016, some surveys had 45% of Republicans believing Obama was a Muslim and 28% saying he was foreign born, indicating a large percentage of the base had fringe conspiracy beliefs. Criticism from Trump by the media would often make his supporters more supportive of Trump, as they believed the media was out to get him. Many Trump supporters related to Trump with his constant bashing of Globalism. His supporters also felt that their way of life was being destroyed and felt abandoned by the corporate world, media and both political parties, and despised political correctness. They thought Trump was being authentic when he insulted opponents. Trump supporters who did admit he was 'racist', 'crazy', 'unqualified; or 'corrupt' did not mind these flaws in Trump. Trump was very popular among Evangelicals, despite bragging about having multiple affairs, the "Hollywood Access Tape", and his sex life as they saw him as someone who would appoint judges to fit their agenda. Trump's constant bashing of the Republican establishment made many members of his base feel like he was one of them. Trump's base has disdain for the GOP establishment, viewing them as elitist (Jacobson).

The recent attacks on the Capital that occurred on January 6<sup>th</sup> are yet another an example of the rise in right-wing extremism. Right Wing militias and other extremist groups viewed their insurrection attempt as vital to saving America and urged other members to keep the fight going through online interactions. Members of these groups livestreamed themselves on social media attacking the capital. Other members also said they wanted to murder members of Congress

including Vice President Pence, Mitt Romney and the Capital Police. They then spread rumors that it was the left wing who started the attacks. Members of Congress like Matt Gaetz repeated this claim. To mainstream Republicans, the events were shocking, however most researchers said the events were incredibly predictable. There had been discussions in online communities about overwhelming the police. QAnon's constant threats of overthrowing the government played a role in the incitement as well as the language President Trump used. The riot was incited from the baseless lies that the election was stolen from Trump. The vast majority of Trump supporters and Republicans believed Biden did not legitimately win the election, with around 60-80% (Associated Press) believing Biden did not win. Some researchers have said what once seemed like online fringe voices have now seem to overwhelm the discourse in political discussion (Nguyen et Scott). What is disturbing about the Capital Riots is that in addition to militia members, many of those arrested were "normal" Trump supporters who were middle aged and middle class without obvious associations with extremist groups. The vast majority of those arrested were not previously involved with far-right groups, with only 11% being involved in a far right group. 40% of those arrested were business owners or had white collar jobs. More than half came from counties that Biden won (Pape and Ruby).

Breitbart is a once fringe website that has become mainstream in conservative circles and is read by high profile figures such as Donald Trump. Breitbart often demonizes immigrants and portrays all Muslims as extremists and terrorists. Breitbart previously had a section of their website titled "Black Crime" and have stated that Blacks are committing crimes against white Americans at a rising rate. The comment section is often overtly racist, and commentators complain about "black culture" and often compare blacks to chimpanzees. Editors like Katie McHugh had called Native Americans savages and called for a ban on all Muslims. Steve Bannon had publicly denied

that they were trying to appeal to racists, however investigations proved that was not true. Former editor Milo Yiannopolous was friends with white nationalists like Richard Spencer. Yiannopolous had written a story about the alt right and had reached out to white nationalist Devin Saucier to edit it. He also worked with the editor of the neo-Nazi site the Daily Stormer. (Barnes). Breitbart is one of the most popular news sources on Facebook and is in the top 200 most popular websites in the U.S. (Piggott). In 2017, Editor Alex Marlow admitted that Breitbart thought the sexual abuse allegations against Alabama Senate Candidate Roy Moore from a woman who claimed Roy Moore dated her when she was 14 and he was 30 were credible, but they still purposely tried to discredit her. Breitbart were staunch defenders of Moore, who advocated for criminalizing homosexuality, claimed America deserved 9/11, advocated for removing all Amendments after the 10th, believed protesting against the national anthem is illegal and does not believe Muslims should serve in Congress. Moore barely lost the election to Doug Jones and would have won despite holding far right views if not for these allegations. Trump and other ultra conservatives endorsed Moore even after the sexual abuse allegations (French)

Alex Jones is a far-right conspiracy theorist know for launching the website Infowars. Infowars receives more visits on the internet than the Economist or Newsweek. Trump has been on Jones's shows and has told him he has done excellent work. Jones has spread conspiracy theories that the Sandy Hook School Shooting and the moon landing were fake, the government were attempting to turn frog's gay, 9/11, Oklahoma City Bombing and the Boston Bombing were carried out by the government (Gold and Lima). Jones has doxed families of the victims and sent some child pornography (Garber).

The conspiracy theory group QAnon has been increasing its influence since 2017 through the internet. A mysterious figure named "Q" has posted anonymous online posts. He claims to be

a highly ranked government official. Most of his posts are vague, which Q members interpret differently. It expanded from the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory that state that Hillary Clinton and other Democrats were running a child sex trafficking ring under a pizza shop. QAnon believes that the world is ruled by the Deep State, and they believe most politicians and actors are part of it. They believe they worship Satan and abuse children. They cover this up through the media. Many members of “QAnon talk about taking “the red pill”” which has woken them up to the world. They believe in an event called “the Storm” led by Donald Trump that will defeat the pedophiles. Trump refused to denounce QAnon, claiming he did not know anything about it, but that they were against pedophilia. They believe that Trump had a plan to arrest everyone in the government. QAnon has been able to appeal to those who are not religious, as it involves other aspects like COVID, the Vatican or immigration. Members of QAnon post videos on YouTube about these theories and YouTube’s search algorithm will then direct them to more extremist content. The FBI has warned that QAnon will very likely motivate extremists. Polls suggest that around 23 million Americans hold a somewhat favorable view of QAnon. QAnon uses many old conspiracy theories such as Jews having a secret plan to take over the world and use figures like George Soros as fuel for their theories. People with fringe beliefs often find their friends and family wanting little to do with them, which isolates them further in the community. It will be difficult to stop QAnon, since members would need to admit the errors of their ways and getting people to admit their wrong is not easy. The author Loxton Daniel, discourages shaming people (Loxton). Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green had previously expressed support for QAnon. She also expressed beliefs that school shootings and 9/11 were fake, and that the California wildfires were caused by Jewish Space Lasers (Chait).

The Republican Party does not have a desire to change or become less extreme despite losing control of Congress in 2020. The party's base is hesitant to change. Members of Congress who voted to impeach Trump were censured by their state parties and Trump is still popular with many Republicans. Republicans do not believe they need to make changes to win and they might be right, considering that Trump was very close to winning in a few swing states. States are making it harder for people to vote. (Bacon Jr). State politics are even more extreme than politics in Congress, as Republicans have more power at the state level. The minority party typically does not have tools like the filibuster at the state level and Republicans usually have large majorities, which allows them to gerrymander and restrict voting. The attack on voting rights increased after the 2010 midterms. Media organizations typically report mostly on federal policy as opposed to state level, which means Republicans do not have to worry about backlash. The Republican establishment is weak at the local level. At the state level, its easier for politicians to come and go, so Trump and his team invested a lot in states to have pro-Trump officials. Republicans like Senator Mitt Romney are relatively rare today, as most have been voted out of office and Trump Republicans make up the majority. Most pro-Trump officials are at the state level. Research by political scientist Jake Grumbach shows the biggest predictor if a state took anti-democratic steps, such as gerrymandering or making it difficult for people to vote were if Republicans controlled the state legislature and governor's office. (Bacon Jr). Republicans have been upfront that they do not want certain people voting. Many have said they want to make voting difficult or else Republicans will have a difficult time winning elections. The Supreme Court is uninterested in voting rights and often vote in favor of states having voting restrictions. The Supreme Court said gerrymandering was allowed even if done for partisan reasons. Republicans have more advanced

technology now to map out districts. Republicans are responding to the lie that the election was filled with fraud to make it more difficult to vote (Levine).

Right wing militias have used the internet to their advantage to organize and plan violence. The militia movement started under Republican President George H. W. Bush after he mentioned of a “New World Order” for the post-Cold War world. By 1992, calls of a leaderless resistance or fighters who do not report to anyone began being used by movements (SPLC Timeline). The threat of militia groups has increased since Trump’s rise. They have caused violence at protests and attempted to kidnap elected officials. Some militias threaten more violence than they actually commit while other militias are more violent and extreme. Militias have been protesting COVID restrictions and Black Lives Matter Protests, as they view these things as threats to their liberty. Some law enforcement has friendly attitudes toward militias, which encourages these groups. Militia movements used to be anti-federal government but were largely supportive of Trump’s presidency. These groups prepare and train for war. They have social media accounts which often have a false view of American History. Militias are responsible for more political violence than any other group. Militias are increasingly using social media sites to communicate their next protests.

The “Three Percenters” is a militia named after the myth that only 3% of the 13 colonies fought against the British. They became prominent after Obama’s won in 2008, with their goal being to fight tyranny. They are adamantly against gun control. Another prominent militia group is the “Oath Keepers” who name themselves after the oath to protect the U.S. from “foreign and domestic enemies.” They were also formed after Obama was elected. They focus on recruiting former and active police and military personal. These groups believe that the government is aligning itself with a ‘new world order.’ Members of the previous two groups often show up to

events armed. The majority of violence comes from right-wing street fights. Many of these members are young, masculine males. They also know how to use public relation and social media and making themselves seem reasonable on social media and beyond. The “Proud Boys” are one of the most extreme militias. Many members have hatred for liberals and are part of the group to simply provoke the left. They were founded by *Vice* co-founder Gavin McInnes. Members constantly make internet jokes and use humor, which undermines the violence they are capable of. Many members were encouraged by Trump’s remarks at the 2020 presidential debate where he told members to “stand back, stand by” and used that phrase on merchandise. Members threatened a second civil war if Trump did not win. Another group, “Patriot Prayer” was founded specifically to combat ANTIFA. The Group shot pepper spray and paintballs at protestors at a rally in support of Black Lives Matter in August 2020. These members believe feminism and communism are serious threats to America. Members wear shirts that say RWDS, which stands for right wing death squads. Many white nationalists have spoken at their events despite members denying being racist (Coaston). The “Boogaloo Boys” are a libertarian group that is preparing for the next Civil War. They often use memes and post on 4chan and reddit to recruit members and appeal to libertarians. These groups often form alliances with one another. Many of these groups said they would be at the polling station armed to “protect voters” when in reality it can be seen as intimidation. Many of them felt that Trump’s accusations that the election as rigged was justification for their response (Stall et al).

Right Wing militias first formed in the 1990s. Militia groups in the 1990s main concerns were abortion, gay marriage, immigration, free trade and gun control (Jones). Timothy McVeigh, who was responsible for the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995, and he was sympathetic to militia groups. By 2017, militia groups number were estimated to number approximately 500, which

doubled the number in 2008. The increase in membership after Obama's victory was due in part of fear of a black man being in charge of the federal government. Many militia movements have a deep hatred of Islam, which is attractive to some veterans returning to war. The DHS released a report detailing this risk in 2010 but was disowned due to the political risks. The FBI constantly investigates militia members in police forces but have to avoid telling the police in order to make sure the members are not tipped off (PBS).

While there are examples of far-left violence such as ANTIFA, the right is much more organized. Right wing attacks have grown in number since 2007. They increased under Obama and increased further under Trump. Muslims and Jews were often targeted. White supremacist Dylan Roof killed nine African Americans in a church in Charleston and spread his beliefs on the internet. Many of these groups are trying to not appear like the traditional "skinhead" white supremacist. The rise can be blamed in part due to the internet and social media, where members communicate on where to organize, travel, raise funds, recruit new members, training which can reach a large segment of the population. Members on Twitter use hashtags to reach out to people. Members also believe the U.S. is letting in too many immigrants (Jones).

Ruby Ridge and Waco were the biggest incidents that inspired militia groups to form. Ruby Ridge was an 11-day siege that began when white supremacist Randy Weaver did not appear at a court date for firearm charges and the United States Marshall Service attempted to arrest him, which he and his family resisted. His wife and 14-year-old son were killed. Weaver eventually surrendered. The FBI and other government agencies handling of the situation was criticized. Weaver sued the government and eventually won a court settlement of \$3.1 million. The Ruby Ridge engagement was criticized as being unconstitutional. Some members of the FBI attempted a coverup, which they later served time in prison for. Many conservative groups including those on

the far right believed an innocent family was being persecuted by the government. Many members feared that people who wanted to live off the grid would be next. Many far-right groups believed the government would come in helicopters and put them in concentration camps. Some members made maps of where the camps would be. This led to an increase hatred of the federal government. These groups took advantage of the rise of the internet in the 1990s to spread their message and recruit members (Wilson).

The Waco Siege was a 51-day standoff between the Branch Davidian religious cult and FBI members. David Koresh was the leader. The siege resulted in the death of 76 members from a fire, 25 of which were children. The cause of the fire is still disputed. For some on the right, Waco was the story of government overreach. There are those who believe the government acted too aggressively and should have been patient. The American Public saw a split after the Oklahoma City Bombing, as McVeigh was angry about what happened at Waco and Ruby Ridge which made some in the public turn a critical eye. The FBI changed their rules of engagement because of the backlash and no longer allowed shooting on sight. The FBI has since become more patient with standoffs with militia groups (Burton). The militia movement peaked in the 1990s in terms of membership and violence, although it has approached those highs under Obama and Trump.

The militia movement in the 1990's were angry at the government for Waco but they were weakened by the early 2000s. In the 1990's racial hatred was not militia groups focus, but with Obama, a racial element seemed to gain traction in their hatred of him. The peak of right-wing terrorist attacks was in the 1990s. Militia groups died down by the end of the 1990's, as many of their predictions did not come true such as Y2K and George W Bush's victory in 2000 made them less hostile. Guns and ammo sales increased sharply after Obama was elected. Militia groups often see increase when a liberal is elected, or societal change occurs. Many members did not believe

Obama was born in America. Commentators on Fox News started to spew sympathy for militia movements in 2009. The internet has made it easier to target specific people and places as well as give information on weapons (SPLC).

Most people are unaware of the threat right wing extremism poses to society, and believe the left is more dangerous. Many members of militia groups have a deep hatred for the government. Anti-abortion attacks are often targets of right wing extremists, with around 200 attacks in the last 45 years. Most of these attacks were lone wolf attacks (Frostenson). The rise of the internet has increased the likelihood of lone wolf attacks as terrorists like Dylan Roof who worked alone. The passage of NAFTA and gun control helped energize militias. (ADL).

The New York Times did a case study on a former follower of alt right figures named Caleb Cain. This case study is useful in showing how people can be sucked into right wing extremism and how he got out. There is an increased risk of adolescents being radicalized by extreme content. Those who get exposed to this content often describe it as thrilling. The content is usually provocative (Pauwels and Hardeyn). Cain did not have many friends growing up and never felt like he fit in. He starts to find people who are like him on the internet and goes on the internet. He was only mildly political, was anti authority, listened to punk rock like the Dead Kennedy's, and was atheist. He thought it was cool to have a black president in Obama. Watching YouTube videos made him feel rebellious. He still did not fit in when he went to college and dropped out. He went to live with his grandparents without a job and did not have a purpose in his life, feeling depressed. He started looking at self-help videos, one of which was Stefan Molyneux, who is a libertarian Canadian. Listening to him made Cain feel better, as Molyneux said that the struggles young men go through is not their fault and society is to blame. He was interactive with fans and talked about his life with his wife and daughter. Stefan helped him improve his life.

Guillaume Chaslot was in charge of creating the YouTube recommendations which had it so that you were recommended a video based on how much you watched a previous video, which has led people to an echo chamber of political videos, which happened to Cain. Over time he took on radical beliefs. Stefan would complain that men were treated worse than women and would rant about his hatred of feminism. Cain gained a hatred for “SJWs” also known as social justice warriors and felt like these people were trying to make everything politically correct in things he loved like video games after criticism was depicted at the industry for its treatment and over sexualization of women, this became known as “Gamergate”. Women who advocated for change were called whores, received death threats and online campaigns were launched against them. Gamers gained hatred for the media because they believed their way of life was threatened. They complained how SJWs were ruining other things like comic books or Star Wars. These people were not traditional Republicans or Democrats. Many of them were pro-marijuana or gay marriage legalization, but they felt like white straight men were being targeted just for being white.

Conservative figures often release videos of the “truth”, such as the truth about MLK or the truth about Travon Martin. It made their audience members feel like they were chasing truth. Cain then gets a recommendation for Milo Yiannopoulos, who as mentioned previously, is a gay internet and an internet troll with a hatred of Muslims. Milo spoke out against safe spaces and coddling of students on college campuses. Cain then gets recommended to a Steven Crowder video, a comedian who hates feminists and Black Lives Matter. These figures have around twice as many subscribers as news organizations like the New York Times. Crowder was the first upfront conservative to be recommended. He starts looking up Crowder videos, which then leads him to Gavin McInnes, who looks like a hipster. All of these figures consider themselves edgy. McInnes complains about crime committed by African Americans. He then gets recommended to Lauren

Southern who is a young Canadian libertarian who was known for interrupting feminist marches. She described rape culture as a myth. All of this feels like the same as punk rock content he used to be into and felt like a counterculture. They believe they were fighting against the liberal, elite globalist society.

Then came the rise of Donald Trump, who felt like a combination of all these figures. Cain hated Republicans but loved Trump. He would watch “social justice warrior cringe compilations” videos on YouTube and see videos of liberals beating up Trump voters, which made him hate liberals. He started to call himself a nationalist. He then sees a video of Richard Spencer, and found himself defending Spencer, and started saying things like his Nazi salute was not actually a Nazi salute and even if it was it was his freedom to be a Nazi. The other figures mentioned previously are not as bad as Spencer, but they do start calling themselves alt right. He then gets recommended a Jared Taylor video. He was a well-spoken man who made racism look respectable and would defend race realism, which said things like Whites have higher IQs than Blacks which is why they are living in poverty. He frames these views as secret knowledge. Cain started to argue with people in real life. He started worrying about white people being replaced after immigrants like Southern, Milo and Stefan warned about it. He said the New Zealand shooter’s manifesto was what he believed in. What changed his views was listening to a liberal YouTuber called Destiny who would annihilate his opponents in debates. When his opponent would say something ridiculous, he would not move on and instead prove them wrong. He started debating YouTubers he was a fan of and would often prove them wrong. For example, he was pitted against Lauren Southern who would often complain about the economy but was also against immigration which was beneficial to the economy. He then had more videos from Destiny being recommended to him. He then gets recommended to a video from a YouTuber named Contra Points, who is a former academic. She

points out that the “SJW” is a stereotypical figure of a liberal who most liberal’s dislike. She is a liberal who debates people, but her content is different. She says the best way to convince people who are not on their side is to understand where they are coming from and why they believe what they believe. Her goal is not to humiliate her opponent. Her content was also interesting and edgy. She knew what she was talking about which made her realize how wrong his heroes were. He then discovered a Youtube channel named Breadtube, which mocked the far right. He talks about how to help people with far-right crazy beliefs and empathize with them. He says how they understand how these figures look like the average person who cares about common sense. It’s hard for people to admit they were wrong after spending years believing these things. These YouTubers would talk about even more crazier alt right figures, and these figures would talk about how they knew how to work YouTube, build audiences and appeal to people. The alt right rabbit hole has been successful because they are bringing in young people by being edgy and using humor (Rabbithole).

Many independents claim to be independent due to the belief that politics is too ugly and polarized today and that they do not want to associate with either side. The number of Americans identifying as independent has risen over the last 40 years, with around 40% today. However, most independents are actually not independent and lean heavily towards a side and vote for that side nearly as much as partisans. They usually describe themselves as independent to avoid the negative stigma of being labeled partisan. Most Americans do agree that politics is too polarized today, including Democrats and Republicans. More people hide their political beliefs and are less willing to engage in civic discussion which is critical for a healthy country. They are less likely to become actively involved in the party, which results in die hard nominating ideologically extreme candidates and are more extreme than the candidates they are supposed to be representing. A prime example of this was the “shy Trump supporter”, who might have agreed with Trump’s policies but

abhorred the rhetoric of him and his supporters and did not voice their opinions due to the fear of being shamed (Skelley).

The book *If Then* discusses how television advertising in the 1950's would lead to the polarization of politics today. Republicans and Dwight Eisenhower successfully used advertising in the 1952 Presidential Election while Adlai Stevenson was hesitant to use advertising and appear on television as he viewed it as undignified to the office. Stevenson was mocked as an "egghead" by Republicans, showing how personality instead of character would become important in politics. This would foreshadow Republican's better use of technology compared to Democrats (Lepore). Ezra Klein's book *Why We're Polarized* talks about how the two political parties became what they are today and the effects of the internet on polarization. Before 1950, there was little difference between the Republican and Democratic Party. It was more common to have a wide variety of opinions. The Democratic Party could have the left wing in Hubert Humphrey and also have the most conservative Senator, Strom Thurmond. Parties were not split between conservative and liberal. Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign was a factor in removing the moderate wing of the Republican Party. Positive feelings for the opposing political party have dropped dramatically in the last 40 years. Ticket splitting was once common, but it is now rare for voters to engage in it. Klein mentions the fact that liberal Democrats would work with Southern Democrats who were racist in exchange for control of Congress which meant the South could legalize white supremacy. This time is remembered as a golden age of American politics in terms of lack of polarization, yet this was mainly because Democrats allowed the Dixiecrats to enforce segregation. The least polarized era in Congress had compromises on basic racial issues that the overwhelming majority of Americans would find awful today, such as striking down anti-lynching laws. Klein argues that

should be considered more extreme. Liberal democrats ignored racism and compromised with segregationists. Violent political disagreements occurred, but they were not within party (Klein).

Klein also debunks that just because political parties are sorted by political beliefs does not mean things are more extreme. He gives the example of half the country opposing the legalization of marijuana, and each party has equal number of members from each group which leaves America unsorted. However, if everyone who wants it outlawed moves to the Republican Party and everyone who wants it moved to the Democratic Party, both parties are sorted out but no one's opinion has actually changed. Issue based polarization can lead to political identity polarization. Goldwater's campaign allowed for racial conservatives to cluster around a party, and it can be argued that led disagreements to deepen. Polarization leads to more polarization, but not necessarily extremism. Fewer people today are in the middle (Klein).

Klein mentions that Washington was considered moderate in the mid twentieth century, but that this is a myth. He argues that the Vietnam War, McCarthyism and draft dodgers were all major issues facing the country. The Vietnam War and Joseph McCarthy were generally supported by the population especially conservatives, but today are looked upon poorly even by conservatives. Political leaders were assassinated, and civil rights leaders were beaten by the police. Protestors who were often young college students were commonly beaten and shot in the 1960's, such as the Kent State Shooting. Conservatives generally blamed the protestors for their deaths or injuries (Klein). The moderate majority is mentioned by Klein as something most political pundits use to describe America as moderate but moderates often hold more extreme views. Pollsters will describe some respondents as supporting universal healthcare but then wanting draconian measures placed against gays. What is considered extreme changes over time. A hundred years ago, people would view our current acceptance of people of color and gays as

extreme, and we would view their ideas as extreme. Klein also argues that people's political identity has become their social identity.

What helps defuse unfriendliness is if you view their social identity as similar, such as people of different political ideologies bonding over their favorite football team. Klein points out that Donald Trump read the market of polarization in the 2010's. Conservative politics were becoming more extreme in response to Obama. Trump had been spreading conspiracy theories that Obama was not born in the U.S. Trump's victory unleashed conservatives like Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham proclaiming that the America they are familiar with has changed due to immigration and discrimination against whites. This view is largely shared even among millennial whites. Both parties are having an increasingly mistaken view of the demographic of the other party, this was especially common among people who consume political content. Unfortunately, it serves in the best interest of political outlets to exaggerate their political opponent's flaws, as this gives them more engagement (Klein).

Klein then discusses the internet's effect on polarization. Most people do not use the internet to get new information but instead use it to choose where to get their information. Political scientist Markus Prior has said that internet has given rise to other information besides politics, which has widened the interested/uninterested divide. People interested in politics know more while those who know little know less than 60 years ago. The rise of technology allowed newspapers to be sent to people all over the country, which meant presses wanted to be non-partisan to offer broad appeal. The internet changed the formula where news sites are now trying to be the most appealing to a specific group of people. People who are interested in politics are almost always rooting for a side, which means they are more invested and will be engaged because they care. The news media had less information about its audience before the internet and audience

analytics. The creation of Nielsen ratings made it so that the news needed to put out information the audience wanted to hear in order to get ratings. The internet has allowed people to find each other online and form communities through message boards. Many people feel like they have found others who share their identity. In some ways, the rise of social media has simply shown what is already there. Media outlets before the internet were run by white men, and they mainly had stories that seemed important to their identities. If the George Floyd protests happened before the rise of social media and the internet, it is unlikely this would have attracted the level of media attention (Klein).

As mentioned before, YouTube's search algorithm has been a problem for online radicalization. Conservative content and Trump videos often lead to alt right content. This becomes the identity of many of those who are radicalized. Many alt right YouTube stars are funny and charismatic which creates loyal audiences. The internet has turned away from creating a community to forming a common enemy. Part of this is that making a mutual enemy can bond people. This has resulted in some strange alliances between groups like Libertarians and Evangelical conservatives who have a common enemy in the radical left. Attempts have been made to see if reading news from the other side moderated their views or caused reflection. The opposite occurred, as respondents became more partisan when they read opposite news coverage. Professor Christopher Bail has explained that a liberal seeing a tweet from Trump slamming Joe Biden will not make the liberal think Trump has made good points. They will spend their time trying to come up with why Trump is wrong or simply ignore him. Political media and social media are not designed for positive interactions. Most media is written for the side that agrees with them. Politicians tweet and send messages to their supporters rather than trying to convince people with opposing views to vote for them (Klein).

A polarized media can polarize the country if their audience is small, but they have the right audience. An example of this how is Trump became obsessed with Hunter Biden and Ukraine that was pushed by Fox News and other right wing news sites, which Trump got his information from. Politics is driven by the powerful, and those people listen to the polarized media as they believe that represents the country, as the media voice is loud. When you are only hearing the perspective from a certain news group, that will make a politician believe that perspective is the majority of their base's opinion and they will voice opinions and implement policies based on that perspective to get votes. The country then has to choose between more polarized sides as the larger the difference between the two parties becomes, the more even those not interested in politics feel the need to choose a side. This in turns polarizes them. More campaigns have also changed from trying to persuade swing voters to trying to fire up the base. Voters today almost always have their mind made up. Before the 1980's, party nominations were controlled by party bosses. Now control is given over to party primaries, which has made it easier for extremists to win as the process favors candidates with enthusiastic supporters. Congressionally, things have gotten more extreme as well. It is more common for candidates to run on their primary opponent not being conservative enough. Conservatives are worried about being upset in the primaries, so they take on more hardened positions. This has occurred on the left somewhat, with Hillary Clinton becoming more liberal in 2016, and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez upset primary win being examples. However, conservatives have a less ideologically diverse group of voters which makes it easier for them to adapt ultra conservative positions. The methods of campaign tactics and polarization that I have been criticizing in this paper do occur on the left, it is because of the left's diverse group of voters that Democrats do not engage in these tactics nearly as much as Republicans. The methods of campaign tactics and polarization that I have been criticizing in this paper do occur on the left, it

is because of the left's diverse group of voters that Democrats do not engage in these tactics nearly as much as Republicans. The Republican Party has more conservatives than Democrats do liberals. Despite slightly more people identifying themselves as Republicans, far more people identify as conservative in the U.S. at around 35% compared to liberals at around 26%. This is another reason why there is more extremism on the right, as the U.S. is simply more conservative. Only around 51% of Democrats identify as liberal compared to 73% of Republicans identifying as conservative. Independents and moderates also generally side with conservatives (Saad).

It has become common for the leader of the party to disagree with what other candidates say, which often excites voters and makes them vote for an antiestablishment candidate. Trump's victory was won in large part because of people who hated Hillary or the Democrats agenda. Moderate candidates and extreme candidates have an equal chance of being elected today while in the past a moderate candidate was much more likely to be elected. People are willing to vote for candidates they do not like in order to beat the other side. Now when a party nominates anyone, they have the guaranteed support of nearly that entire party, no matter how extreme. Coupled with the fact that parties have lost control on who they nominate, this has led the country on a dangerous path. The National Review editor Richard Lowry had opposed Trump because he believed Trump did not think constitutionally, wrote egregious things on Twitter and did not respect the separation of powers. He still has the same views today, but in his mind, Trump's positives outweigh the negatives.

An example of the increased partisanship was the Merrick Garland Supreme Court nomination. After Antonin Scalia died, Republicans refused to nominate or hold a hearing on Merrick Garland due to Mitch McConnell claiming that it was an election year. In 2020, after Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, McConnell and Republicans nominated Amy Barrett despite it being an

election year. Supreme Court Justices today are far more likely to vote for the ideology of the president who appointed them than they were 30 years ago. It used to be more common for politicians to care about their local district, as a Democrat might vote for a Republican sponsored bill, but the bill help their state. This is untrue today, as people know more about national politics and less about local politics.

Earmarks were discarded in 2011 due to being seen as corrupt, but they did help bring about bipartisanship. Politics used to be less competitive, which Klein argues might have been a good thing despite conventional wisdom stating otherwise. Control of Congress was often one sided. However, the last four decades has seen control of Congress go back and forth. It was common for compromise because the minority wanted to work with the majority who they assumed would be in power for years. In the past, if winning the majority in Congress was impossible, then winning reelection happened by bringing money to their district and passing bills sponsored by them. To do this, a good relationship with the majority party is crucial which eliminated the incentive engage in obstruction. Now that the party's power continues to change, they are more willing to fight with each other. When it seems possible to gain power cooperating no longer seems necessary because voters are more likely to make a change if nothing gets done. The goal becomes to defeat your colleagues.

Thomas Mann and Norm Ornstein, both center right and center left scholars described the Republican Party as extreme in 2012. They described the party as against compromise, dismissive of facts and science. By 2015, the GOP was listening to the Tea Party, and State politics had become more polarized than Congress. Ornstein said Trump was the logical next step for the party and not an outlier. Trump is a candidate obsessed with conspiracy theories and locking up his opponents. The Republican Party lack diversity to cancel out the extreme voices within the party.

The sorting of ideology by political parties has made Democrats more diverse while Republicans are too similar. Democrats need to win broad appeal in order to gain power, despite the perception of Democrats being intolerant of other ideas. Republicans have been able to get to voters purely through ideology. Conservatism is a group identity, not an ideology, which is why they are able to support Trump despite having beliefs and actions that contradict traditional conservatism. An experiment showed that people who identified as strongly conservative switched positions the most easily based off what Trump said. Conservatives have a far less diverse range of news sources and are far more likely to have one main news source such as Fox News. Conservative news media is deeply partisan and can be described as propaganda. Conservative media thrives in being hostile to the mainstream. Rush Limbaugh called the media, scientific community, academia and government “the four corners of deceit.” Republicans are able to run more extreme campaigns because they win over land rather than people meaning that the majority of states and counties are generally Republican, but these places are usually less populated. While the majority of the population might not agree with them, they live in condensed areas which gives them limited power. Many Trump voters felt that Trump was their last chance to take their country back and save America. They like Trump because he is a fighter, and they believe they have been too nice in the past. However, increased polarization is not necessarily bad. Polarization would have resulted in no civil rights legislation. Polarization is the logical conclusion of the internet (Klein).

Trump was able to get the support of Americans who do not care about issues like gay marriage or other issues that anger social conservatives, but instead people who hate political correctness and what they view as social justice warriors or SJWs, and other issues like false rape allegations. Some of these people are fine with pornography, sex before marriage, violence in movies and video games, gay marriage and marijuana legalization. Many of these people are

libertarians and have been nicknamed by some as “Barstool Conservatives” or “South Park Conservatives”. This group is younger, mostly male. While they may view some social conservatives as “insane”, they do not view them with the hatred they feel for some on the left. Given the choice between siding with the stereotypical easily offended liberal college student or the ultra-religious conservative who believes in conspiracy theories, they will usually side against the liberal (Wather). There are many people who are not conservative who worry about cancel culture. Cancel culture is the idea liberal people have the power to get people who do not agree with removed from their jobs. Republicans have done a good job of making it seem like out-of-control liberals will try to get someone fired over the smallest thing. Republicans had similar complaints about activist judges in the 2000s, politically correct college students in the 80s and 90s and outside agitators in the 60’s. Conservatives often use this language to appear less bigoted. They warn about children being forced to change their gender, those who follow the Constitution, or free thinking will be cancelled. A lot of the ultra-radical ideas Republicans accuse Democrats of having are actually divisive in the Democratic party, such as the negatives of capitalism, defunding the police or the debate if there are more than two gender identities. Cancel culture is often used by conservatives to describe things they do not like. Swing voters might resonate with the GOP’s message if they believe cancel culture goes too far (Bacon Jr). For a moderate Republican today, Trump was still closer to their political beliefs than Hillary or even Biden. They want conservative judges and tax cuts. There are those who hate Trump but hate Democrats more which meant they still voted for Trump, due to the perception that Democrats are too far left. They might hate Trump but like his policy. What gives right wing extremists and those with fringe beliefs power is when moderates decide that fringe figures are more tolerable or like their policies more than Democrats. On their own, the far right should have little power, but moderate’s

acceptance of fringe figures and beliefs gives extremists no reason to change and helps them win elections.

### **Conclusion**

The internet has allowed for fringe voices to become mainstream. People who would not have previously been radicalized before the internet are now more likely to with social media, the internet and YouTube. Extremist figures are often able to come across as charming, relatable and edgy which attracts a lot of viewers. What led to this however was America's history and the prevalence of right wing extremism. The number of extremists and ultraconservatives have been underestimated in the Republican Party and there are those in the media and academia who overestimate the stereotypical suburban socially liberal fiscally conservative Republican. This can be seen throughout the 20th century with the GOP's use of the Southern Strategy. The establishment, both conservative and liberal often live in an ivory tower and are concerned about issues most Americans do not care about. This can be seen with some liberals focus on gender pronouns which most Americans do not care about and are instead focused on their livelihoods. Additionally, sometimes a broken clock is right twice a day.

One of the reasons conservative media is able to get an audience in the first place is due to a poorly researched or wrong stories written by a mainstream outlet and a good story written by a fringe outlet. This can be seen with the Andrew Cuomo nursing home scandal. The media must be accurate in order to maintain credibility. Additionally, there are times when those on the left legitimately go too far, which does turn off moderates an example being the violence that occurred in the summer of 2020 in response to police brutality. Many moderate Republicans who refused to vote for Trump have left the Republican Party, so there are few factions within the Republican

Party that can get it to change. Many moderates often try and make themselves feel better by saying their Republican friends and family do not believe the insanity, but they are most likely lying to themselves. Politics today areas polarized as ever. However, the height of unity and less polarization was the period where progress was not made. What is considered the golden age of American democracy was less liberal than it is today. Trump's most insane beliefs were considered mainstream not long ago. The percent of people supporting interracial marriage was under 50% until 1996 (Miltmore). Liberals in Congress were fine with compromising on racism and the number of open white supremacists and KKK members in Congress were much higher 60 years ago compared to today. Extremism and the number of extremists today is not necessarily worse, extremists just have a bigger voice and have revealed themselves. The best way to curb extremism is with face-to-face debates. However, deradicalization is very difficult. Getting people to hear the other side is difficult. People are hesitant to admit their wrong and do not want to admit they have been wrong for years. Many extremists will say any source that does not fit their views as fake news. Additionally, there are times compromise is not the answer. Change will always cause division and make extremists enthusiastic to combat it. There are times when there is only so much you can do to help a person eradicate their extremist views.

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