

AMERICAN E-DEMOCRACY:

THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE POLITICAL RADICALS IN SHAPING
CONTEMPORARY POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The 2020 Presidential election presented quite possibly the most significant test of American democratic institutions in modern history. The victor, Democratic former Vice President Joe Biden, campaigned as a moderate whose lengthy career in the halls of federal power would provide competence, care, and security. This was in sharp contrast to incumbent Republican President Donald Trump, a man whose electoral appeal was rooted in a combination of apparent success and outsider status as a corporate figure with no government experience along with nationalist populism. President Trump and many of his supporters contested the results of the election in every way possible, culminating in an armed mob attempting to seize control of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Given the profiles of the two major candidates, this election can be seen as a contest between established liberal democratic norms and illiberal populism. Rather than promoting ideological and value pluralism and the rule of law, illiberalism uses the veneer of democratic institutions and speaking for “the people” as a vehicle to promote authoritarian policies that aim to crush opponents. Although more establishment forces won this particular battle, the larger struggle of liberalism against illiberalism remains unresolved.

Recent years have seen intense political contestation in the United States, with several events serving as flashpoints for established democratic norms well before the insurrection at the Capitol. Polarization and populism have given rise to political actors with a disdainful attitude towards existing institutions. The positions and goals of such radical actors vary considerably, ranging from the furthest right to furthest left of the political spectrum. From calls for overt White nationalism to embrace of socialism to

pushes for radical solutions to institutionalized racism, the American political arena seems quite open to the positions of extreme actors who at one time would have been shunned. For some, this turn presents opportunities for long sought after, even necessary, paradigm shifts in American politics. For others, this radicalism is seen merely as a force for instability and institutional decay. However one may feel about the extant radical subcultures of modern politics, their impact is increasingly difficult to ignore.

One element of this rising radicalism that is especially fascinating is the role of the internet as a place where extreme subcultures flourish. Many political radicals are highly active on social media, making online activity a major part of the way modern political subcultures engage with both their own members as well as more established figures and institutions. Four political subcultures in particular – White Nationalists and QAnon on the right as well as Progressives and Black Lives Matter on the left – are very deeply immersed in internet culture. It can even be argued that these cultures either originated on social media or at least became their modern selves through online platforms. With the election of participants in this radicalism to the highest levels of the federal government, the extent to which they have entered into the mainstream political arena is a topic of much needed study in order to understand the directions that American politics might take

Chapter 2: Research Questions

In order to understand the impact of online political radicals more fully on the current political landscape, the following questions will be examined.

The first question is how and to what extent do prominent online political subcultures infiltrate the mainstream public sphere? Online subcultures may gain mainstream prominence in multiple ways. For example, interest groups. Just as earlier political activist organizations did, online activist subcultures have the potential to, and in some cases already have, morphed into traditional interest groups that are able to lobby elected leaders to consider their position. In addition, political groups can gain traction through major news outlets, particularly those geared towards the opinions of the network and its hosts rather than those adhering to objective or neutral reporting. Mainstream news can and has in the past adopted the rhetoric of radical groups. This may influence the mainstream public sphere because the general public, particularly older Americans, is more likely to watch those broadcasts than they are to participate in an online forum. Elected officials are perhaps the clearest indication of radical online subcultures becoming part of mainstream politics. There are a number of members of radical, conspiratorial, or activist communities who now hold elected office and therefore have an impact on actual legislation, especially in a closely divided Congress such as that which emerged following the 2020 Elections. Lastly, using the language of radical online political groups provides insight into the success of these groups as well. If elected officials and prominent media figures use ideologically extreme rhetoric reflecting online political subcultures, then it can be argued that those subcultures have shifted the terms of mainstream political debate closer to their position.

The second research question centers around what is the history of radicalism becoming mainstream in American political life and how does social media alter this trajectory because of its unique elements? As far as historical context is concerned,

myriad radical groups have emerged throughout American history, ranging from far-left to far-right to those more generally discontented with the political status quo.

Historically, though the end results of such populist efforts varied, there is precedent for radical groups achieving acceptance into mainstream politics over time, with social media potentially impacting the degree or speed at which they do so.

Further, there are questions about whether misinformation is more easily spread in the current moment, as well as to what extent American voters are acting within echo chambers that provide for radicalization. In addition, social media could hypothetically have the opposite impact for some, dissolving the wall that existed previously between the public, the press, and the politicians and allowing them to coordinate with or contest one another with near instantaneous speed. Last, social media provides an avenue for the near instantaneous spreading of media such as videos, which can potentially have a profound impact on debate in the mainstream political realm almost immediately when before its impact on major events could not be felt directly for some time.

Chapter 3: Sources of Data

The impact of a political subculture on mainstream political life is difficult to assess, especially as these groups are not political parties in the traditional sense and therefore do not receive measurable public support through voting. There are, however, four methods that offer insight into the extent to which political subcultures with an extensive online component are impacting mainstream political life.

The first of these methods is public polling. Data regarding public opinion on the goals of online political subcultures provides arguably the most direct evidence of said

subcultures impacting the political mainstream. If a significant portion of a voting population supports the ideology of an online political subculture, then that subculture has penetrated the public consciousness and therefore can be considered to have become mainstream. Mainstream in this context would mean double digit support from either the general population or members of specific major political party, meaning that in the American context they have significant numbers to hold noticeable political sway.

Second is mainstream news media coverage. In terms of determining precisely how much attention any particular subculture is given by the mainstream press, there are some difficulties, namely determining what exactly constitutes the mainstream press. For this analysis, I believe that impact on mainstream media can be determined by finding multiple instances of the subculture either being the subject of the story reported or having their message restated by a prominent anchor on one of the following sources: network news outlets (ABC, NBC, CBS), cable news outlets (MSNBC, CNN, Fox), and major national newspapers (The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The Associated Press).

Third is interest group formation. The role of interest groups in the functioning of modern American democracy should not be understated. Acting as campaign contributors, power brokers in elections, co-writers of legislation, and points of contact for federal officials for information on a wide variety of topics, interest groups are a major force in mainstream political life. As such, an online political subculture morphing into an interest group that formally and informally influences elected officials and the public is yet another sign that the ideology of the subculture has achieved mainstream appeal and members.

Fourth is action taken by elected officials. While this piece is not intended as an analysis of political parties, the extent to which party leadership places the goals of a political subculture onto their platforms or legislative agenda puts on record the degree to which online political subcultures have achieved mainstream prominence. The degree to which the goals of such subcultures are placed on the official agenda of a political party is one of the clearer methods of demonstrating a subgroup's mainstream political reach, their goals are reflected on the positions of elected officials in mainstream political parties.

Chapter 4: Method of Analysis

Analyzing the degree to which political subcultures that are active online have proven to be influential requires examining the above sources of data and to construct case studies that allow us to examine the research questions. As such, determining whether a political group and their ideology has become politically mainstream depends on answering the following questions regarding traditional outlets of power:

First, does some portion of either the general public or members of a major American political party – Republicans or Democrats – adhere to the ideology of an online political subculture? Second, are there multiple instances of mainstream news sources (see above) analyzing or mirroring the views of an online subculture since 2016 in forms such as bringing activists on TV or having flattering coverage of extreme groups? Third, has an interest group lobbying for the ideology of the online subculture formed at some point between 2016 and today? Fourth, has leadership of either the Democratic or Republican Parties passed legislation since 2016 that reflects the ideology of a political subculture that is active online? The four examined groups may regard these

channels of influence with differing degrees of importance, but as a whole these four factors demonstrate work towards achieving a traditional sense of power within a liberal democracy.

Chapter 5: Literature Review

Introduction to Existing Literature

A study of how online radical subcultures impact the public political arena necessarily requires examination of the scholarly work done thus far on the role of political radicalism in the American political sphere more broadly, the organizational infrastructure of activists from across the ideological spectrum, and the origins and current activities of the online subcultures in question. From this prior research, two major themes emerge. The first theme is that political radicalism is a well-established part of American political life, with various groups having emerged over time to promote extreme and wildly varied philosophies. The second major theme in the literature is that the relationship between established institutions of wealth and power, grassroots activism, and the online space differ quite significantly depending on whether the groups in question fall on the ideological left or right. The left has historically been less authoritarian and prioritizes organic public support over top-down leadership. The right, however, has generally been more comfortable collaborating with major business, media, and political figures. This dynamic has changed significantly in recent years, but the historical trend was that conservatives were more open to “strongmen” leaders whereas the left, although having notable strong figures, put greater emphasis on collective action.

History of American Radicalism

One of the most comprehensive accounts of American radicalism is Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. In this 1964 book, Hofstadter states that American politics has long been influenced by extremists paranoid that some conspiratorial cabal (e.g. Jesuits, Jews) was manipulating American politics for the worse (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 78). The assumption that there existed detrimental political movements borne of conspiracy took many forms, from anti-immigrant/anti-Catholic movements blaming sociopolitical ills on the Pope to abolitionists seeing their efforts as hindered by a sinister group of slaveholders (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 78). This history of conspiratorial radicalism was key to understanding the political movements going on in Hofstadter's own time, namely the rise of Barry Goldwater (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 77) as well as White Nationalism and Black Separatism at a time when the momentum for advancing Black civil rights was gaining steam (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 78). Given such political upheaval, it was necessary for researchers such as Hofstadter to place such radical shifts into historical context. Such is also the case today, with a thorough examination of American political radicalism through time being key to fully understanding the roots of modern American extremism.

If the prevalence of White Nationalism in modern discourse, particularly within the American right-wing, could be traced to any one 20th century national politician, it would be George Wallace, the hardline segregationist Governor of Alabama and later candidate for President of the United States. Such is the position of Dan T. Carter's *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*. Wallace's most famous line is his notorious

statement in his 1963 gubernatorial inaugural address that he supported “segregation now...segregation tomorrow...segregation forever” (Carter, 2000, p. 109). Although Wallace would try later in life to portray himself and his supporters as opponents of government overreach, at the time he admitted that his audiences were apathetic to his policies on schools, infrastructure, and taxes, but that overt racism always drew their attention and loud cheers (Carter, 2000, p. 109). The implication of this presentation of Wallace himself as an opportunist and his voters as primarily motivated by bigotry is that he signaled a way forward for modern American conservatives more broadly. Carter outright refers to modern American conservatives as the heirs to Wallace (2000, p. 7). Using social conservative signaling to draw in racist voters, the once electorally struggling Republican Party found a powerful electoral base. The once solidly Democratic South that had since the 1940s been in increasing contention with the more left-leaning, socially progressive national party, finding a new home with the Republicans. To Carter and others who share his position, White Nationalism is not a new element in American politics, but rather it is one that had already shaped the Republican Party of today in major if not always overt fashion.

Just as Carter chooses to examine George Wallace, Nick Salvatore in *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* also presents a study of a figure with often underestimated political influence, this time on the left. His biography of Debs, a labor activist and prominent socialist politician, suggests that Debs in many ways can be seen as the forerunner to modern American progressives. Having first affiliated with socialist and union activity following his participation in late 19th century railroad strikes (Salvatore, 1982, p. 129), Debs would go on to run for President multiple times throughout the late

19th and early 20th centuries. Although Debs was never elected Commander-in-Chief, he and his Socialist Party attracted a significant following, Debs winning five percent of the popular vote in the 1912 presidential election, Emil Seidel being elected mayor of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Victor Berger being elected to the House of Representatives. Though the issues of concern for Debs are not one-to-one the same as those of modern American leftists, his role as a significant force in the electoral and activist arena demonstrates the extent to which left-wing, anti-capitalist political activity is not something recent.

Also well-documented is the unfortunate trend of populists promoting conspiracy theories that are overtly anti-Semitic. One noteworthy example of this is Thomas E. Watson, a populist congressman from Georgia who promoted anti-Semitism in the early 1900s (Hingham, 1957, p. 560). A later example comes from Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest and populist demagogue. As documented in Tianyi Wang's *Media, Pulpit, and Populist Persuasion: Evidence from Father Coughlin*, Coughlin was deeply anti-Semitic. He alleged – using outright fabrication – that Jews were involved in massive conspiracies to bring about world domination (Wang, 2021, p. 9). Coughlin's demagoguery should strike those following contemporary politics as familiar. Not only has overt anti-Semitism survived to the modern day, but similar undertones of paranoia over conspiratorial cabals can be seen today in the case of QAnon followers.

In addition to the conspiratorial mindset of many political radicals, there also often exists an anti-democratic attitude, one which wishes to use the power of governmental institutions to suppress social and political dissent. Arguably the most notorious of these anti-democratic populists was Joseph McCarthy, a Republican Senator

who became a household name in 1950s America for his strident anti-communism. As documented in Richard H. Rovere's *Senator Joe McCarthy*, the Senator claimed to have a secret list of over two-hundred communists working in the state department (Rovere, 1996, p. 54). McCarthy's scare tactics proved effective, with the state department ousting many of the career bureaucrats that the Senator had targeted (Rovere, 1996, p. 12). McCarthy essentially combined the aforementioned conspiratorial undertones of populism with the hammer of the federal government to terminate the careers of suspected political rivals. McCarthy, through his position on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) put educators, civil servants, unions, and even members of the Hollywood film community under a microscope (Carr, 1950, p. 604) ending the careers of many.

Though Senator McCarthy's schemes would eventually come to an end, his connection to later right-wing populists run deep. Similar red baiting tactics helped carry Richard Nixon to congress (Smith, 2007, p. 55) and he would from there be propelled further until being elected President of the United States in 1968. McCarthy's aide, one Roy Cohn, was a mentor to Donald Trump (Rosza, 2021). This Senator, a figure once thought thoroughly discredited, may prove much more relevant to understanding modern right-wing politics in America than previously assumed. Rather than being a fringe figure, McCarthy's demagoguery and right-wing authoritarianism has provided a major building block in modern American conservatism.

In short, radical political agitation on both the left and right has well documented history in the United States, with the ideologies of these prior subcultures shaping modern ones in numerous ways. Paranoid obsession with conspiracy theories is also,

despite more recent media focus on the topic suggesting otherwise, an entrenched part of American politics as well. This being the case, a question naturally arises: What is the role of media in the survival and spread of political thought in general and radical subcultures in particular?

Role of Media in American Politics

Analysis of the impact and role of pre-internet media in the political space is well-documented, in particular the ability of the news media to sway public opinion for or against causes and candidates. One example of this can be seen in David P. Fan and Albert R. Tims' *The Impact of the News Media on Public Opinion: American Presidential Election 1987-1988*, which documented that increased negative coverage for Democratic Presidential Nominee Michael Dukakis coincided with a "steady and essentially unchanging lead from September to the election" for Republican Nominee George H.W. Bush (Fan & Tims, 1989, 161). The conclusion drawn from Fan and Tim's analysis is that media coverage has measurable sway over public opinion and even electoral outcomes. As such, it would be by no means unreasonable to assume the political activity taking place within newer media outlets such as the internet would also have measurable impact, although drawing such a conclusion requires further study. A more recent example of the influence of the mass media on politics could be seen in in the 2016 presidential primary elections. Donald Trump received far more airtime than his Republican rivals, "time worth millions in paid ad dollars" (Graber & Dunaway, 2017). In the view of some analysts, it is quite possible that, had the press not covered Trump so extensively, he would have had a much harder time defeating his more politically experienced rivals.

Given this evidence that there is measurable impact of media coverage on public opinion, how exactly these mediums of communication are utilized should consequently impact what exactly the public response will be. Examination of the ascendance of Fox News in particular is key to understanding the role of modern media in shaping political opinion, as the channel was fundamentally different from prior news media from its inception. According to journalist Jim Rutenberg, as quoted in *The Fox News Factor* by Jonatahan S. Morris, part of the appeal of Fox at its inception was that it “casts aside traditional notions of objectivity, holds contempt for dissent and eschews the skepticism of government as mainstream journalism’s core” (Morris, 2005, p. 60-61). The implication of this supposed abandonment of journalistic tradition is that media in recent years has become much more rigidly partisan, hostile towards opposition, and pro-authoritarianism, particularly on the political right. This raises a number of concerns for both the ability of those with opposing ideologies to work together cooperatively and the ability for the public to be truly informed, an oft-cited hallmark of a functioning democracy.

What the literature on the role of media in politics has seemed to conclude is that media does have a measurable impact on the opinions of the voting public and that such media has increasingly prioritized partisanship over more rigid forms of journalistic objectivity. Although online media is quite different from more traditional information outlets in its decentralized nature, the increasing ubiquity of the internet as a platform for political thought and activity raises the potential that similar trends may be seen in online spaces. However, the unique attributes of the internet also raise the question of how

traditional media and online media interact and whether one ultimately relies on the other for relevance and legitimacy.

Importance of Interest Groups to American Politics

The centrality of interest groups to contemporary American politics is not something to be underestimated. Well-funded and highly organized groups of lobbyists and activists have the potential to alter the trajectory of American politics. For example, a key element towards the shift of the Republican Party towards what Theda Skocpol and Caroline Tervo's *Upending American Politics: Polarizing Parties, Ideological Elites, and Citizen Activists from the Tea Party to the Anti-Trump Resistance* describes as "anti-government free-market libertarianism" (Skocpol & Tervo, 2020) was motivated by the efforts of the Koch brothers, whose organizational and fundraising efforts "grew into virtually a third major party able to work at the local, state, and national levels" (Skocpol & Tervo, 2020). The fact that this success was dependent on having strong campaign infrastructure able to sway powerful Republican figures to their views would suggest that the ability to influence the political realm may rest chiefly in such efforts. The question is therefore raised as to whether or not online political subcultures are able to engage in such activity themselves and impact politics in a similar manner.

Because such influential interest groups, particularly organized business interests such as the Koch Brothers networks, often run counter to what is front of mind for voters, some analysts find them outright detrimental to the health of American democracy. Among the more cataclysmic of outlooks is Brink Lindsey and Steven M. Teles' *The Captured Economy: How the Powerful Enrich Themselves, Slow Down Growth, and Increase Inequality*, which links relative stagnation in American economic growth with

increasing authoritarian politicians such as Donald Trump (2017, p. 3). This view that the motivation of Trump supporters is rooted in economic concerns differs from the older analysis attaching Republican leanings to social and cultural conservatism. For example, Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* describes the rightward turn of the Kansas Republican Party as being driven primary by opposition to abortion (2007, p. 95.). But concern over the ability of an elite few to steer government away from the public good is far from unprecedented, with Adam Smith and James Madison both expressing fears of this possibility (Lindsey & Teles, 2017 p. 17).

To summarize, the themes of existing studies into interest group activity are that they are highly influential but also at times dangerous to overall health of democracy as a result of activating intense political minorities catering to narrow interests over the broader wants and needs of the country. Whether or not this same principle applies to emerging online political groups is dependent on whether they also speak for narrow portions of the American electorate. If online political actors are, as they often claim, fundamentally more decentralized and grassroots-oriented than a traditional lobby group, it can be assumed that they have greater interest in the public good and by extension stronger democratic legitimacy. However, groups representing younger, more radical, online-centric political activity may in fact represent narrow interests lacking broad appeal, therefore falling into similar undemocratic trappings that more established lobby groups do.

Emergence of Politics on the Internet

In the existing literature regarding online political subcultures, the primary focus is generally placed on how these groups grew to their current level of prominence, how they operate within the internet space, and how the technology specific to the internet impacts their activity. The most prominent theme that emerges from the analysis of the origins of online politics seems to be that the more grassroots nature of left-wing activism creates online spheres with a noticeable detachment from established media and mainstream activist structures. This is in contrast to internet subcultures on the right, which have historically been more in sync with establishment outlets.

According to Chris Bowers and Matthew Stoller in *Emergence of the Progressive Blogosphere: A New Force in American Politics*, the early 2000s, beginning with Howard Dean's presidential campaign, saw the emergence of "a new constituency group, a new set of leaders, and a new forest of social relationships" (Bowers & Stoller, 2005). This is in contrast to the online activity of the American right, which was much more firmly rooted in offline political ties (Bowers & Stoller, 2005). According to these authors, "Conservative bloggers vastly outpaced of progressives in terms of total traffic" (Bowers & Stoller, 2005) during this early stage of online political activity, though progressive blog traffic increased dramatically in the mid-2000s (Bowers & Stoller, 2005). The picture created by this account of early use on online media for political purposes was that conservatives, who held a noticeable edge in viewership, acted on a top-down basis while progressives operated independently of the organizational structures of the Democratic Party. As this is an account of the early stages of online political activity, attention is not paid to how these internet subcultures, whether originating from real

world political ties or born on the internet, impact the physical space of real world politics.

Modern Online Political Activism

As far as examinations into how online political radicals operate, the research in that realm is extensive for both sides of the political spectrum. One work that examines the online far-right in great detail is *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right* edited by Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston. Compiling works by various authors, the book examines several cases of online far-right activity in the United States and other Western countries. Particularly in the American context, existing literature on far-right political subcultures online generally focuses on their toxicity. In contrast to far-right organizations in other countries, many of which try to downplay their most offensive elements and instead cater to patriotic and familial values (Karl, 2019, p. 72), the American online far-right is far more actively hostile to its opponents, with explicit racism, sexism, and homophobia often played for laughs (May & Feldman, 2019, p. 26). Although the European far-right typically tries to appear mainstream, the existing literature on the American far-right suggests an attempt to make their aggressive xenophobia mainstream (May & Feldman, 2019, p. 27). Paradoxically, the online far right in the United States also depends on a victim complex centered on White men. As discussed by Mark Davis in *The Online Anti-public Sphere*, conspiracies proliferate about how women, people of color, Jews, and “liberal elites” are conspiring to destroy White men (Davis, 2021, p. 8). This White male victim complex is somewhat hypocritical. In fact, right-wing extremist White men are, as stated earlier, are often the sources of the victimization of others.

Although online activity by the far-right is arguably more well-known, social media has provided an outlet for groups on the far-left of the political spectrum as well. However, they use the medium of the internet in noticeably different ways from their right-wing counterparts, as examined by Deen Freelon, Alice Marwick, and Daniel Kreiss in *False equivalencies: Online activism from left to right*. According to these authors, left-wing activism has a far more noticeable physical component, combining “on- and offline protest actions with transmedia branding, an approach known as “hashtag activism”” (Freelon, Marwick, & Kreiss, 2020, p. 1). In addition, left-wing activists “tend to connect with individuals and institutions along a much broader range of the ideological spectrum than the right, including much of the center” (Freelon, Marwick, & Kreiss, 2020, p. 3). The implication of these observations would seem to be that left-wing activism is more traditional in its modes of operation, even when it uses online outlets. This apparent contrast between how the left and right operate online and off is something that may need to be examined further, as the electoral success of far-right politicians in the United States calls into question the claim that the online far-right is operating largely in an ideological bubble.

As far as what the impact of online more generally is on the wider public and their views, a recurring theme is that the instantaneousness and apparent rawness of online media can profoundly reshape perceptions on major social issues. This is most visibly apparent in responses to the most recent wave of Black Lives Matter activism. Pieces such as *The Death of George Floyd: Bending the Arc of History Towards Justice for Generations of Children* see the murder of George Floyd as a major sea change in the ability of American society to confront racism directly, as “Now, we all can see the video

of a human being, George Floyd (a father, a man of faith, an athlete, a hip-hop artist in the 1990s, a man beloved by people who knew him), begging for his life, calling for help, and a police officer digging his knee into his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while 3 other police officers were holding him or standing by” (Dreyer, et. al., 2020). The writers’ proposition is that this video helped people change their attitudes towards Black Lives Matter from negative to positive. Moderates once uncomfortable with the movement embraced participation in it, from putting up Black Lives Matter yard signs to participating in protests. This is in part because millions of people could witness a clear, brutal abuse of police power and violation of civil rights immediately. A major advantage of the internet in facilitating the spread of information quickly in real time. Coming with this sense of immediacy is a sense of rawness, the idea that online footage is unedited and totally authentic. But the supposed inherent “reality” of online media is increasingly problematic, as online video can be edited or used out of context to mislead the general public, creating negative impacts on public political understanding.

Summary of Existing Literature

In conclusion, existing literature looking into both the radical right and left on the internet suggests that their ideological cores have long histories in American politics. Further, they have a long history of using media and interest groups to shape public opinion in their direction. Today, however, online space presents opportunities for unique behaviors and new levels of emotional impact on involved participants. What this literature examining both of these groups lacks, however, is a clear sense of how online activism translates into influence in the mainstream political arena. Instead, the existing literature has largely focused on studying either how online political groups act as

independent entities or the reverse causal relationship of the public sphere influencing the political goings on of the internet. As more figures tied to online radical subcultures hold office, the return of internet political actors to the public sphere requires attention of its own. If online radical subcultures fail to influence the political mainstream they may find themselves confined to the internet with little to show for their work in terms of more tangible shifts in ideology or policy. If they are succeeding in influencing the mainstream, then the United States may be faced with a major shift in terms of how political actors communicate and behave in the political arena.

Chapter 6: Right-Wing Subcultures in the Contemporary Political Arena

Introduction to the Online Right

As discussed in an earlier chapter, the history of far-right political subcultures in the United States and their reliance on media is centuries old. In the American context, groups that can be broadly labeled “far-right” are those with reactionary social views. Such views include racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, religious fundamentalism (particularly Christian fundamentalism), and jingoism. Often tied in with such views is a populist mindset that views established media outlets and political figures as too socially moderate and insufficiently patriotic. There are many subgroups within the American far-right, but two in particular are notable for the attention they attract and their internet savvy. The first of these groups is White Nationalists. Racism has a lengthy and dark history in the United States, but the increased openness to racist sentiments and even some overt ties to White supremacy among Republicans is a new development, as is the prevalence of White Nationalism online. The second group follows the QAnon conspiracy theory, a much more recent phenomenon native to the internet that has also

begun to take root within Republican circles. These two groups are fairly different in their origins and current online behaviors, but both present a clear danger to the health of democracy in the United States by encouraging violence towards political opponents and those of different cultural origins.

White Nationalism

History of White Nationalism in the Republican Party

White Nationalism is by no means a new concept in American politics or a new movement. As discussed earlier, there have long been different political factions which derived their electoral strength from pushing for the subjugation of non-Whites. However, the explicit embrace of racial segregation and overt White Supremacy has been considered taboo when running for nationwide office since the 1960s, especially outside of the Deep South. George Wallace, for example had supporters both within and beyond the former Confederate states, but when he ran as an independent candidate for president in 1968, his overall nationwide support was miniscule compared to the more racially moderate Democratic and Republican candidates. Wallace's comparatively poor showing meant that, at least at that time, the era of explicit segregationism as an electoral strategy was over. Instead of a blatant Dixiecrat brand of segregation, coded racist language became the regular means for signaling a lack of support or interest in the welfare of African Americans.

Nevertheless, racist voters still existed, and they would eventually find their way to the Republican Party. This presented a challenge for the Republican Party: How would they balance Southern segregationists with their traditional voting base in Northern and

Western states? The template for how the Republican Party would go forward was established by Ronald Reagan in 1980. The Republican presidential nominee stopped in Philadelphia, Mississippi to give a speech at the Neshoba County Fair. After some lighthearted banter and general condemnation of government, the Republican nominee for President stated that some institutions, specifically education, should be turned over to the states and he claimed further that “I believe in states’ rights” (Hutchison, 1980). At first glance, this remark appears innocuous, as it seems to support his small government conservative political leanings. But the history of this particular town gave the soon to be President’s speech a different context. Philadelphia, Mississippi was the site where in 1964 three civil rights activists, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner, were murdered (Federal Bureau of Investigation). That same year, Republican Senator Barry Goldwater voted against the civil rights act, comparing the outlawing of racial discrimination in public accommodations to a police state (Rudin, 2010). Goldwater would go on to be the Republican nominee for President in 1964. In the minds of critics, Reagan’s speech had a more sinister undertone than it may have seemed at first glance. The Republican Party would allow “local customs and values” to prevail over national norms and values of racial equality and civil rights.

There is strong evidence that this coded messaging was something that Republican Party operatives were aware of. The sentiment that conservative politicians of the Reagan Era held towards racial politics is best summed up by an infamous quote full of racial epithets from former Republican National Committee Chair Lee Atwater. After stating that direct racist slurs were now frowned upon, Atwater stated that Republicans now “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" (Perlstein, 2012). The implication of Atwater's statement is that contemporary American conservatism depends on the electoral support of racists, and he went so far as to claim that the actual intent of Republican policies was to harm African Americans.

Republican leadership, however, kept these discriminatory intentions hidden. Instead, they used the language of economic and social policy proposals as a code for maintaining existing racial hierarchies. One reason for this was the decades long trend of "suburbanites showing a pronounced Republican preference" in elections (Greenstein & Wolfinger, p. 473, 1958). These kinds of middle-class conservative voters are described by some as having attitudes that reflect "the standards of courtesy and taste that prevail within the white collar world" (Frank, p. 108, 2007). In other words, the traditional suburban base of the Republican Party would likely not countenance discourse that was overtly racist. In order to remain electorally viable, this discourse would need to be balanced with gestures towards socially far-right, especially Southern, constituents. Coded racist language was therefore key to Republican electoral success, as it appealed to White Nationalist voters while keeping overt racist sentiment at a distance. Avowed racists could understand the subtle messaging to them while non-racists could support potentially racially prejudicial policies because they were "totally economic things."

One of the clearest tests of this electoral balancing act came in 1991. David Duke, a neo-Nazi and the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan from 1975 to 1980, became the Republican nominee for governor of Louisiana (Suro, 1991). Duke was repudiated by national Republican leaders, chief among them President George H.W. Bush, who said

that “When someone has so recently endorsed Nazism, it is inconceivable that someone can reasonably aspire to a leadership role in a free society” (Suro, 1991). President Bush and other Republicans’ clear denouncement of Duke was admirable, but the fact that Duke became the candidate of the Louisiana Republican Party says something about how closely integrated White Supremacists were to the Republican Party by the early 1990s. In addition, Bush’s remarks would not stop many GOP supporters from embracing racial prejudice. Although Duke did lose to Democrat Edwin Edwards, thirty-nine percent to sixty-one percent respectively (West, 1991), Duke carried fifty-five percent of White Louisianans, winning that demographic by a clear majority (West, 1991).

The modern Republican Party has a complicated relationship with race. Various party leaders are aware of the fact that outreach to voters of color is likely necessary for the Republicans to remain electorally viable in an increasingly diverse country. Following the party’s poor showing in 2012, the Republican National Committee released the Growth and Opportunity Project. In this document, Republican leaders stated bluntly that one reason for their losses is that “many minorities wrongly think that Republicans do not like them or want them in the country” (Republican National Committee, 2013, p. 4). Indeed, the Republican Party continues to struggle with voters of color. The 2020 Presidential election saw Donald Trump carry only thirty-eight percent of Hispanic voters and just eight percent of Black voters according to the Pew Research Center (Igielnik, Keeter, Hartig, 2021). Instead of attracting new voters of color, Republicans are heavily reliant on activating White voters without a college degree. For example, sixty-five percent of them voted for Donald Trump in 2020 (Igielnik, Keeter, Hartig, 2021).

This is not to claim that people of color have no presence within the Republican Party. Recent years have seen the election of Senators Marco Rubio and Tim Scott as well as South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley for example. But these conservative officials are often fighting an uphill battle against a significant portion of their party's base that holds racially prejudicial views, some of which are out of step with documented fact. For example, according to an August 2016 article from NBC News, forty-one percent of Republicans did not believe that President Barack Obama was born in the United States, despite the fact that Obama had produced his birth certificate showing he was in fact born in Hawaii (Clinton & Roush, 2016). Worth noting is that among the most famous proponents of this conspiracy theory was future President Donald Trump.

Although some people of color vote for the Republican Party and even hold high federal office as GOP members, the days of Republicans treating racial issues with balance may be over. Instead, the Republican Party increasingly caters to rural White voters without a college education. Certainly not all rural White voters or White voters without a college degree are racist, but such constituents are often very culturally right-wing, sometimes including on race related issues. This has led to an increasingly explicit embrace of racist views that previously were kept hidden or at arm's length. At least in the current moment, White Nationalist views are now acknowledged within the Republican Party, which is a major departure from the denouncement of such figures in the 1990s.

White Nationalism Online

The history of White Supremacists using online media to spread their message is almost as old as that of the internet itself. Major groups in the online White Nationalist

movement include Stormfront, EURO, the Proud Boys, and Identity Evropa, among others (Southern Poverty Law Center). According to Jessie Daniels' in their book *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights*, "David Duke and other white supremacists were early adopters of digital media" (Daniels, 2009, p. 3). This directly challenges stereotypical notions of White Nationalists as uniformly uneducated and unsophisticated. Instead they were operating complex media apparatuses that require a great deal of technical savvy (Daniels, 2009, p. 3). In fact, it is their technical sophistication that makes such groups especially dangerous to liberal democratic norms and civil discourse.

White Nationalist groups are aware that, in the words of Andrew Anglin of the neo-Nazi Website Daily Stormer, "Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non- ironic hatred" (May & Feldman, 2018, p. 27). Accordingly, White Supremacist websites are often "cloaked," meaning that their authors conceal their true identities and agenda (Daniels, 2009, p. 118). According to Daniels, the danger of these cloaked sites is that they reframe mainstream issues of racial equality as something open to debate, aimed especially at younger people born after the civil rights era (Daniels, 2009, p. 119). In addition to this cloaking, White Nationalists often lean into a light, humorous tone referred to as "lulz" in order to keep the public unaware of the sincerity and depth of their bigotry (May & Feldman, 2018, p. 27). The ability to hide their true agenda undermines notions of racial equality that are fundamental to the maintenance of American democracy. These dishonest tactics are used to undermine established ideas of equality and open the window of electorally permissible rhetoric and ideology in a significantly more racist direction.

This is not to say that all White Nationalists act with great secrecy or even much subtlety. Many White Supremacist sites do in fact promote open racial hatred (Daniels, 2009, p. 112). Cyberbullying, especially of women, is quite common, with many perpetrators tending to be White men (Daniels, 2009, p. 81). One example of this came in 2016, when Anglin and a group of followers referred to as “The Stormer Troll Army” directed hundreds of acts of harassment towards a Jewish woman named Tanya Gersh, a real estate agent (Kunzelman, 2020) “who had a disagreement with Richard Spencer’s mother” (May & Feldman, 2018, p. 32). Richard Spencer is a prominent White Nationalist figure. This reflects a long running tendency of White Supremacists to use mob violence against others. For them, online communication provides an easy to use, anonymous outlet to incite a mob mentality against not only prominent political and media figures but also ordinary citizens.

In summary, White Nationalists online employ a mixture of overt and subtle tactics to draw in support for and convey their racist ideology. The most eye-catching and personally destructive of these is their explicit harassment of marginalized people. But it is their use of cloaked methods that may prove the most detrimental to liberal democratic norms. By concealing their true identities and intentions they work to undermine mainstream ideas of racial equality, and in so doing online White Supremacists create dishonest discourse that creates an opening for anti-democratic ideas to reach a large audience. Because of this, the mainstreaming of White Nationalist views in established political and media institutions may prove detrimental to America’s democracy in years to come.

White Nationalism in Mainstream Media

Recently, overt White Supremacy has extended beyond niche online forums and onto the airwaves of major news sources. At the forefront of this inclusion of White Nationalism into the mainstream conservative news space has been Fox News. As one of the most viewed news channels in the country (Foyella, 2021), it is arguably the defining media outlet of the American political right. As such, it is important to note when Fox promotes extreme beliefs. While some, especially those on the political left, are often dismissive of the content of Fox News, the channel's role as a hegemonic source of information for right-wing America means that extreme right views appearing on Fox is a very effective tactic for making such ideologies mainstream. Over the past few years, Fox has allowed one host in particular to lean into increasingly explicit White Supremacist views: Tucker Carlson. Among Carlson's most notorious acts has been promoting Replacement Theory on his show, stating that "In order to win and maintain power, Democrats plan to change the population of the country" through immigration (Encarna, 2021). His discussion of some of the most explicit White Supremacist ideas one can find on mainstream media earned him the praise of White Nationalists such as Anglin and Nick Fuentes (Anti-Defamation League, 2021).

Once again, the arms' length relationship between racism and conservatism in America seems to have diminished and in its place is the two becoming increasingly intertwined, with mainstream right media receiving praise from the racist extreme right. Carlson's promotion of demonstrably racist conspiracy theories is especially problematic for the health of American democracy given how popular Carlson's show is. A report from Forbes "Tucker Carlson Tonight delivering an average total audience of 2.8 million

viewers” for the week of June 13th (Joyella, 2021). This made Carlson’s show the most watched program on all of cable television (Joyella, 2021). Rather than being confined to online forums or smaller, more obscure news outlets, White Supremacists views are now espoused on a leading news channel for conservative American viewers.

White Nationalist Elected Officials

Fox News is not the only example of institutional conservatism becoming a more open partner of White Nationalism. With increasing frequency, Republican elected officials embrace White Nationalist rhetoric and overtures to racist voters, with Donald Trump especially enjoying electoral success by doing so. Not only was Trump elected President in 2016 but he only lost his bid for re-election relatively narrowly and carried nearly forty-seven percent of the popular vote (CNN). President Trump in particular seems to have upended the previous delicate balance on racial issues that prior Republicans maintained by coming very close to an outright embrace of White nationalism. For instance, President Trump claimed active sympathy for the White Nationalists who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia and clashed with counter protesters. He described some of them as “very fine people” just as those who opposed them were “very fine people” (Gray, 2017). Trump also seemed supportive of the inclusion of White Nationalism as a key pillar of American political life. In this same statement, one which followed White Supremacists ostensibly rallying around a monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee, Trump said that “This week, it is Robert E. Lee. And I notice that Stonewall Jackson is coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you have to ask yourself, where does it stop?” (Gray, 2017). With these remarks, Trump, a

man who continues to remain highly influential within the Republican Party, seems to be saying that he views Confederate Generals as equals to America's founders and that White Nationalism is morally equivalent with the framers' support of a constitutional republic.

Other Republicans have gone even further than the president. Iowa Congressman Steve King may be the most obvious example. Over the course of his time in office, King regarded the term "white supremacist" as inoffensive and likened immigrants to animals (CNBC, 2020). These remarks were nothing new for the congressman. An earlier example of his racism came in 2005 when he sued the Iowa Secretary of State "for posting voting information on an official website in Spanish, Laotian, Bosnian and Vietnamese" (Gabriel, 2019). In 2010, King encouraged racial profiling by saying police could stop undocumented immigrants by seeing "What kind of clothes people wear ... what kind of shoes people wear, what kind of accent they have" (Gabriel, 2019). Compared to Trump's broader, more accommodationist perspective, Representative King goes beyond that to explicitly racist discourse. Worth noting is that King lost his campaign for renomination in 2020. However, the extent to which this was due to his racism in the subject of debate. Some have argued that the key factor in this electoral defeat was not King's racism but the reaction to it. More specifically, he was stripped of his committee assignments by House Republican leadership and that damaged his standing in a district heavily reliant on agricultural legislation (CNBC, 2020). There is also the fact that King came within two points of losing his seat in 2018 in a district Donald Trump carried easily (CNBC, 2020). This decline in support from voters, many if

not most of whom are likely not following the inner workings of Congress closely, suggests the possibility that his far-right views contributed to his electoral failings.

In total, the punishment of King by House Republican leaders and his sharp drop in voter support suggests that, despite the increasing overtures to White Nationalists that occur within the party, the Republicans still have a line regarding White Nationalism that they cannot cross, at least nationally. Though to many Donald Trump's statements following the events at Charlottesville represent a clear embrace of White Nationalism, his specific phrasing and his status as President and de facto Republican Party leader may have given him just enough distance from such groups to keep him electorally viable. For lower-level politicians, such as Steve King, the more explicit pro-White Supremacy rhetoric may have been a bridge too far.

King is not alone in his clear embrace of White Nationalism as an elected Republican. Arizona Republican Congressman Paul Gosar has allied himself with Nick Fuentes multiple times (Blake, 2021). Gosar also was in frequent contact with "Stop the Steal" organizers leading up to the January 6, 2021 attack of the Capitol Building by a far-right mob (Blake, 2021). Gosar and Georgia Republican Congresswoman Majorie Taylor Greene were also in talks to form the "America First Caucus", which decried immigration as a threat to American identity and asserted that the United States was at its core a country of "Anglo-Saxon political traditions" (Blake, 2021).

In summary, recent Republican officials, including the former President of the United States, have stepped away from subtle nods to White Supremacists in the electorate and instead are explicitly evoking their rhetoric and aligning themselves with White Nationalists. It is clear that the rise in number and prominence of such figures

represents a major challenge for American democracy. As the United States becomes an increasingly diverse society, a group of elected officials seems increasingly open to attacking both that diversity and the liberal democratic norms that diversity represents.

White Nationalist Public Support

Because the United States is a democratic society, the presence of White Nationalist support in prominent positions of the news media and elected office suggests that a sizable portion of the American population holds racially discriminatory views. And indeed, recent polling seems to confirm the presence of a sizable faction of the electorate that is comfortable with racism. According to Pew Research Center data, racial insensitivity remains fairly common in the United States, particularly among people that lean towards supporting the Republicans. Perhaps most worrisome is that thirty-one percent of Republican leaning Americans and five percent of Democratic-leaning Americans see the country as having “Gone too far” in giving Black Americans equal rights to White Americans (Horowitz, Brown, & Cox, 2019). Another poll found that twenty-one percent of Republican or Republican leaning people saw the population of the United States becoming majority non-White as a bad thing (Pew Research Center, 2019). In other words, these polls suggests that a significant portion of one of the major parties in American politics is not simply content with the racial status quo, but in fact explicitly wants the United States to reverse racial equality. However, it is worth noting that this number is down significantly from a few years prior, when in 2016 thirty-nine percent of Republicans saw a majority-minority United States as a bad thing (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Still, the Republican Party having such a high percentage of people that want to see racial progress rolled back helps explain the success of Donald Trump. Particularly in a primary as crowded as the 2016 election for the Republican presidential nomination was, Trump's more overt gestures towards White Nationalism may have caused far-right voters to coalesce around him at the expense of more moderate rivals and activated right-wing Republican voters who had been unsatisfied with John McCain and Mitt Romney's candidacies.

This hostility towards racial diversity extends to antagonistic attitudes towards immigration as well. Notably, fifty-three percent of Republicans see the United States as at risk of losing its identity if it is too open to the outside world (Pew Research Center, 2019). In addition, Sixty-seven percent of Republicans see growing numbers of immigrants as a threat to "traditional American customs and values" (Pew Research Center, 2019). This poll suggests that a clear majority of Republican Party voters view immigration as a threat to the country. If these polls are truly indicative of the attitudes of Republicans, then the popularity of Tucker Carlson becomes fairly easy to explain. Carlson and conservative Fox News viewers are in a feedback loop in which those with pre-existing anti-immigrant views are drawn to and reinforced by Carlson's show which creates a reality where those views are appropriate and never challenged as wrong.

In summary, many Republicans are overtly hostile to racial diversity and racial progress, meaning that White Nationalist supporters can likely be counted as a notable, though small, faction within the modern GOP. Relatedly, the majority of Republican Party supporters see immigration as a threat to the country, a common talking point shared by White Nationalists. Though most Republicans may not wish to clearly align

themselves with racists, connective tissue exists between White Nationalism and modern mainstream conservatism. What is clear from these levels of public support is that White Nationalist views are a part of mainstream politics once again, with a significant faction of the electorate embracing racists views once thought thoroughly defeated. Given the conspiracy-theory obsessed, hostile, and anti-democratic attitudes such racist figures tend to have, the seeming prominence of them within the Republican ranks presents a real danger to the future survival of liberal democracy in America.

Racism in Current Elections

In conclusion, White Nationalism is currently an integral part of the modern Republican Party. Historically and in some cases today, this integration of racist views has come in the form of coded rhetoric. An example of this in recent electoral politics can be seen in the 2021 Virginia Gubernatorial Election. Over the course of that year, conservatives made Critical Race Theory a major campaign issue. Critical Race Theory is a concept largely confined to academia suggesting “that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies” (Sawchuck, 2021). Proponents of this concept are often deeply critical of individualist, liberal approaches to tackling inequality and the supporters of such measures (Kennedy, p. 18, 2021). Different aspects of this theory are, to varying degrees, subject to controversy and debate, but that debate is not what is fueling conservative backlash to the idea.

Instead, conservatives have pushed the idea that this theory, again a high level academic concept that is largely disconnected from broader anti-discrimination efforts existing within K-12 schooling (Sawchuck, 2021), encourages discrimination of White

children (Sawchuck, 2021). Legislation seeking to outlaw Critical Race Theory has passed in several conservative states. These laws are often worded so vaguely as to, in the eyes of many educators, prohibit or at least heavily restrict teaching the history of racism in America at all (Sawchuck, 2021). In short, a complex academic concept has become code for stopping or limiting any form of race-conscious education. The 2021 gubernatorial race in Virginia was perhaps the biggest test of this tactic, an election that “was stoked by conservative alarmism about critical race theory” (Seitz-Wald & Gomez, 2021) that saw Republican nominee Glenn Youngkin emerge victorious. One of Youngkin’s advertisements featured Laura Murphy, a woman who tried to have the Nobel Prize winner author Toni Morrison’s novel “Beloved” banned from Virginia schools (Merica & McKend, 2021). That piece of Youngkin’s campaign may be the most revealing of the true nature of the fight over “Critical Race Theory.” When Republicans are stoking the ire of voters over this concept, they are, in reality, targeting any act of education on racial history in America. In this vein, Youngkin issued an executive order declaring that he would work to ban “divisive concepts” from schools (Brooks, 2022).

In addition to the continued use of coded racism, an increasing number of elected Republicans and prominent conservative media figures have evoked the racially prejudiced rhetoric and anti-democratic attitudes of online White Supremacists. Given the apparently high prevalence of negative racial views among Republican voters, as well as the historical moves the party has made to placate anti-race voters, the rise of White Nationalists within the party should not be surprising. Rather than being fringe outliers, White Supremacists have long constituted a sizable faction within the GOP. However, while prior Republican leaders have kept such people at arm’s length, modern GOP

leaders seem less keen to do this. As such, conservative media, the Republican Party, and online racist subcultures have become more synchronous. And as the events of January 6, 2021 demonstrate, this move towards a clear embrace of White Nationalism could have severe consequences for liberal, pluralistic democracy. This threat becomes even more dire given that this is not the only Republican faction with violent, anti-democratic tendencies.

QAnon

What is QAnon?

QAnon is quite likely the most talked about conspiracy theory in several decades. It began with someone posting on the website 4Chan, a message board well-known for hosting far-right, often conspiracy theory centric content, under the name “Q” (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). The “Anon” portion of the name is short for “Anonymous”, and this shorthand is very common for anonymous, political conspiracy theory posts on 4Chan (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). The definitive identity of the initial poster was remains unknown (Zadronsky & Collins, 2018), but a study covered in a recent New York Times report determined the most likely suspects to be Paul Furber and Ron Watkins (Kirkpatrick, 2022). However, they claimed to be an official working for the federal government exposing the attempts of the “Deep State” to undermine President Donald Trump (Roose, 2021). This supposed Deep State is alleged to be comprised of Satan-worshipping pedophiles engaged in a global sex-trafficking ring (Roose, 2021).

The conspiracy theory spread widely from there through individual accounts as well as a massive, decentralized network of right-wing outlets online. These range from

smaller, independent content creators to larger media enterprises. On the smaller end, these include less famous personalities such as Tracy Diaz, a YouTube channel with ninety-thousand subscribers that was one of the conspiracy theory's earliest progenitors (Zadrozny & Colins, 2021). The centrality of smaller YouTube channels to the growth of QAnon represents the role that independent content creators play in online media. Smaller entities, though, are not the only ones playing key roles in the rise of this conspiracy theory. On the larger scale, one major proponent of QAnon theories is the YouTube channel Edge of Wonder which boasts almost four hundred thousand subscribers and whose most popular QAnon content has been seen nearly a million times (Rothschild, 2019). Edge of Wonder is funded by New Tang Dynasty (NTD) (Rothschild, 2019), the media arm of the Falun Gong (Lawrence, 2004), an anti-science, racist religious movement described by some as a cult (Tolentino, 2019). The involvement of NTD demonstrates the extent to which those who believe in conspiracy theories are ironically prone to further manipulation by forces with their own agendas.

Public Support for QAnon

Although believers of QAnon conspiracy theories are in the clear minority of the general American public, enough of the public believes in such conspiracies to constitute a significant political force. According to polling done by Public Religion Research Institute, fifteen percent of Americans believe that “the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation” (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). Included in this are fourteen percent of self-identified Independent, eight percent of Democrats, and twenty-three percent of Republicans (Public Religion Research Institute,

2021). Almost a quarter of one of the United States' major parties, enough to qualify as an identifiable and significant faction of said party, believes that the American government is run by Satanist child molesters. However, these numbers may in fact be inaccurate. Recent polling work in the United States has at times underestimated support for the far-right, most famously failing to predict the scale of electoral support for Donald Trump (Russonello, 2020). As such, the actual number of QAnon believers in America may be significantly higher than what polling data can capture. This is especially worth considering given that a person with extreme anti-government beliefs is likely to be less inclined to answer a pollster, as a lack of trust correlates tightly with being a non-responder to polling (Matthews, 2020).

Nevertheless, even the fifteen percent support that this poll was able to capture shows a sizable portion of Americans who believe in such conspiracies. The fact that such extreme anti-government beliefs have sizable support, particularly among Republicans, potentially means that American democracy faces a serious threat. This same poll found that fifteen percent of Americans, including twenty-eight percent of Republicans, believe that "Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country" (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). Even if this support is underestimated, these results suggest that conspiracy theorists and supporters of political violence constitute a genuine faction of the Republican Party. With such significant support for anti-government conspiracy theories and political violence coming from a major political party, the future of the United States as a society upholding liberal, deliberative democratic norms seems fraught.

Psychology Behind QAnon

The rise of QAnon likely can be explained at least in part by aspects of human psychology. First, the rise of negative partisanship in the United States. Negative partisanship refers to adopting a certain party identity or voting pattern not out of affinity for said party but rather out of antagonism towards the opposing party (Drutman, 2020). This negative partisanship has grown consistently in America over the past few decades (Drutman, 2020). Given how much modern partisanship is based on negativity, it is not unfathomable that a significant portion of Americans would imagine political opponents as outright monstrous. Even ostensibly establishment and moderate figures in politics such as Illinois Republican Adam Kinzinger have referred to opponents in a defamatory manner, as he referred to Democrats as the “Blame America Left” following the killing of Iranian General Qassem Solamani (Kinzinger, 2020). With even established right-wing figures espousing anger or dislike for left-of center political opponents, the emergence of QAnon is, at least in some regard, not surprising. Republican voters are already told that Democrats are conspiring to take down America or at the very least that liberals are outright enemies rather than just ideological opponents, so it logically follows that at least some of them would take this to a new extreme.

Further reinforcing this is the negativity bias that human beings have when seeking out information. Psychological studies have shown that people tend to be drawn to negative information over positive information even in infancy (Vaish, Grossman, & Woodward, 2020). As such, negative depictions of political opponents are likely to psychologically draw in partisans. A conspiracy theory that one’s political rivals are literal agents of Satan that conspire to sexually abuse children is certainly a negative

perception, and by extension one that will generate a great deal of attention. With today's partisan attitudes so distrustful and negative towards one's opposition combined with the human tendency to fixate on negative information, the rise of something in the vein of QAnon is not entirely shocking. Already existing negative attitudes towards opposing partisans are exacerbated by politicians and an increasingly hostile media environment. When this is combined with the human psychological bias towards both confirmation of existing beliefs and negativity, the emergence of politically extreme conspiracy theories becomes highly likely.

In addition to partisanship and negative thinking, there is also the fact that conspiracy theories are a well-established aspect of American life. For example, one QAnon "prediction" was that John F. Kennedy Jr., the deceased son of former President John F. Kennedy "would appear at that spot, emerging from anonymity to become Donald Trump's vice president when the former president is reinstated" (Kornfield, 2021). Though connecting these two figures may at first glance seem like an entirely random decision, this is in fact a clear demonstration of how belief in one conspiracy theory interacts with others. The history of the Kennedy family is a font of conspiracy theories, most obviously those centered around the death of President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's son being incorporated into the world of QAnon would suggest that believers in the conspiracy theory are being exposed to many other conspiracy theories that can be used interchangeably

Connection to Evangelical Christianity

Existing data seems to suggest a strong correlation between Evangelical Protestantism and belief in QAnon. One poll from Denison University political science

professor Paul Djupe (Rogers, 2021) suggests that half of White Evangelical Christians believe in the conspiracy theory. This data is likely reflective of both the partisan alignment of Evangelical Christians as well as their psychology.

Evangelical Christians have been a reliably Republican voting bloc for many years, with eighty percent of them supporting Donald Trump (Rogers, 2021). Given the supposed heroic role of Donald Trump according to QAnon, this aspect of the conspiracy theory fits well with the political orientation of Evangelicals. However, partisanship alone does not explain support for a baseless conspiracy theory. That comes from the way in which many Evangelical Christians think about themselves and the world around them. Because this group is deeply distrustful of mainstream news outlets (Rogers, 2021) and consists of people of deep faith and rigid views of morality (Rogers, 2021), it is the ideal community for QAnon to flourish in. QAnon's view of Democrats as flatly evil Satan-worshippers aligns well with Evangelical views of their ideological opponents as flouting or ignoring biblical doctrine. Debunking efforts by mainstream news do not penetrate this community and the failure of many QAnon prophecies is met with continued unwavering faith not dissimilar from beliefs in other forms of divine prophecy (Rogers, 2021).

Unfortunately, those elements make the Evangelicals Protestant community frequent targets of exploitation and even life endangering practices. For instance, televised preachers, or "Televangelists," are notorious for asking for money from ill viewers in exchange for God's curing of their ailments. One example of this is Texas preacher Kenneth Copeland, who has come under fire for his lavish spending on luxury items such as private jets (Bote, 2019) and more recently claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic would come to a swift end because Christians summoned the "wind of God" to

destroy the disease (Woodward, 2020). Unfortunately, followers of Copeland and others often turn away from medical practitioners and succumb to their illness, including fellow televangelist Marcus Lamb who died of COVID-19 after he and his network, Daystar, preached against vaccination (Boorstein, 2021). Whether or not the rise of QAnon within this community will present similarly life-threatening concerns should be examined further in future studies of right-wing extremism, conspiracy theories, and the Evangelical Christian community.

QAnon Candidates

Going into the 2022 midterm elections, dozens of candidates that profess belief in QAnon are running for elected office (Zitser & Ankel, 2021). Worth acknowledging however is that the vast majority of QAnon believers running for public office are highly unlikely to be elected for several reasons. The first is that candidates that believe in QAnon are often figures with checkered pasts. For example, one fairly prominent QAnon supporting candidate from California was incarcerated for six months after pleading guilty to stalking (Zitser & Ankel, 2021). Having criminal backgrounds or other personal issues will likely cause problems for their electoral viability, even in reliably conservative territory that may be more accepting of belief in QAnon. Many others are running in solidly Democratic districts or states and therefore have little to no realistic chance of being elected, such as the aforementioned convicted stalker (Zitser & Ankel, 2021). These districts would present an uphill battle even for moderate Republicans, so the campaign of a far-right conspiracy theorist is essentially doomed. The candidacy of QAnon believers likely reflects apathy on the part of local Republicans who assume defeat in such lopsided, pro-Democrat electorates. This was one factor cited in the

nomination of a known Neo-Nazi as the Republican candidate against Democratic Congressman Dan Lipinski in 2018 (Managan, 2018) and it is not unreasonable to assume that this same principle applies to other factions of the far-right.

However, those who subscribe to this conspiracy theory should not be dismissed entirely by political observers. There are two QAnon believers serving in Congress today: Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of Colorado, both Republicans (Zitser & Ankel, 2021). Boebert's election is the more surprising of the two, by far. Her district in Western Colorado voted for Donald Trump by a relatively narrow, single digit margin (Daily Kos). Given that past Republicans that leaned into extremist views saw their vote totals decline by as much as thirty percentage points, the fact that Boebert was elected was quite unexpected. This may reflect the increasing rigidity of party affiliation and the decline of split-ticket voting across the country (Rakich & Best, 2020). Greene, by contrast, was elected from a rural Northern Georgia seat that voted for Trump by a nearly fifty-point margin (Daily Kos). The high percentage of Evangelical conservatives in the rural American South means that Greene may in fact fit her district very well, as those demographics would suggest a high level of QAnon interest or belief, as discussed prior.

As far as how influential these representatives are on the Republican Party or the public at large, that is somewhat unclear. Greene and Boebert certainly draw a great deal of attention to themselves, thus increasing the likelihood that their message informs the typical perception of conservatives or Republicans. In terms of the larger Republican Party, especially within government, their influence seems minimal and may even be shrinking. Representative Greene, for example, got into an intense argument on Twitter

with fellow Republican Nancy Mace of South Carolina (Pannett, 2021) and more recently provoked the ire of Dan Crenshaw. When Greene attacked the Texas Republican's COVID-19 testing proposals, Crenshaw called Greene an idiot in a post to Instagram (Dorman, 2022). History has shown that, while lambasting opponents is a well-tested political tool, attacking one's own party allies serves only to sour relations with them. As discussed earlier, Steve King found himself ousted from the halls of federal power after increasingly negative media attention and diminished connections with fellow Republicans. It is not difficult to imagine the two QAnon believers in the Republican caucus finding themselves in a similar position, especially if there are no fellow far-right conspiracy theorists elected to join them.

Lack of QAnon Interest Groups

Even within the context of political extremism, QAnon exists on the margins of institutionalized politics. The movement lacks the clear leadership, organization, and established media outlets that more widely established extremist movements possess. For instance, as discussed earlier, White Nationalists have a lengthy history of organized political activity and electoral influence. Likely because of the anti-government sentiments at the heart of QAnon, supporters of the conspiracy theory are not at the moment engaged in traditional forms of democratic political participation beyond public demonstrations and social media activity.

This raises the question of the future political influence of QAnon. Without the use of institutional channels of political influence, QAnon lacks the ability to influence government in the same way that a traditional interest group would. But given that the crux of QAnon is disgust and antagonism towards government, perhaps measuring

potential political influence in this way is insufficient in determining the impact of its conspiratorial ideas. A conservative electorate may increase its support for and influence of QAnon, but it is hard to see that translating into institutionalized influence such as the formation of interest groups.

Inconsistency

What is confounding about QAnon is the selectiveness of its populist mindset. It is true that there are cases of prominent figures in business and politics committing horrific acts of sexual abuse against minors, with the most notorious of these in recent memory being Jeffrey Epstein. Epstein had connections to various prominent figures including Prince Andrew of the United Kingdom (BBC, 2022), computer entrepreneur Bill Gates (Flitter & Stewart, 2021), and former President Bill Clinton (Wieder & Brown, 2021). The fact that these men had a sexual predator as their associate and friend is absolutely worthy of condemnation. Some skepticism of those in power is healthy for protecting the broad public good. But it is also worth noting that among these famous friends of Epstein and those who worked to conceal his crimes are Donald Trump and his associates. Chief among these Trump confidants with ties to Jeffrey Epstein was Alex Acosta, the former Secretary of Labor who resigned from office after it came to light that he had mishandled a case against Epstein during his tenure as a federal prosecutor (Hill & Katersky, 2020). Trump himself seemed well aware of Epstein's crimes, implying as much when discussing Epstein's proclivity for young girls (Farenthold, Reinhard, & Kindy, 2019).

Yet QAnon believers did not turn on Trump when this information surfaced. Despite his known association with arguably the most notorious pedophile of modern

times, the former president is still treated by this conspiracy theory as an almost messianic figure. This is another element of QAnon that threatens to erode deliberative norms of democratic participation. Selectively holding political figures to account can discourage a shared culture of rooting out corruption and misdeeds. The Republican Party in particular has had an issue with selective accountability for some time. After the September 11, 2012 terror attacks in Benghazi, Libya, the then Republican controlled House of Representatives launched investigations into then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy later went on Fox News and said “What are her numbers today?” (Dionne, 2015). Tools of government oversight and accountability were seemingly being weaponized for partisan gain. Whatever concerns of corruption or abuse of power right-wing Americans may have, left-wing Americans may remember things such as the Benghazi investigations and see the inconsistency of QAnon believers and also use these tools for partisan advantage. This can lead to the outright dismissal of even legitimate concerns, discouraging collaborative oversight and thereby weakening a democratic political culture that can truly hold the powerful to account.

Embrace by the Republican Party Establishment

The clearest embrace of QAnon believers came from Donald Trump, who referred to believers as “people that love our country” (Lucey, 2020). What is surprising about this is not necessarily the fact that the now former President of the United States is embracing a thoroughly discredited conspiracy theory. Trump has engaged with various conspiracy-driven outlets and figures in the past, calling into Info Wars, the online show hosted by far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (Bradner, 2015) for instance. Because of these past interactions, what is surprising is his relative lack of embrace of QAnon and

its followers. Though Trump has often embraced the world of conspiracy theories, he has been unwilling to explicitly validate QAnon thus far.

If analogies can be made between QAnon and any prior political movements, it would be White Nationalism. The leadership of the Republican Party seems to be aware of the unpopularity of this conspiracy theory. The vast majority of Americans do not believe in it. However, with support at roughly one fifth of the American electorate and a quarter of Republicans, the party cannot simply ignore these supporters altogether. Instead, winks and nods are sent to this faction. QAnon supporters may not get the now former president's explicit validation of their ideas, but they do receive his confirmation for their supposed patriotism. Believers of this conspiracy theory will not hear Republican leaders directly claim that their Democrat colleagues are "satanic pedophiles," but they will hear them claim that Democrats are rigging elections, stealing votes, and hate their country.

The Danger of QAnon

Most likely, the QAnon conspiracy theory will remain quite limited in terms of its political influence for the simple reason that it is highly distrustful of the political mainstream. For those who see political opponents as an "evil cabal" conspiring against "real Americans," working within the system seems outright illogical. As such, one should not expect any QAnon-centric interest group to organize and lobby for greater influence within the Republican Party. That being said, it would be ill-advised to ignore the popularity of this conspiracy theory among American conservatives. As the events of January 6, 2021 demonstrate, people who believe themselves to be fighting for a righteous cause as a result of having fallen down a conspiratorial rabbit hole can cause a

great deal of damage. This is especially true if those in the political mainstream are unwilling to discourage such violent behavior or callout these unfounded beliefs, as many Congressional Republicans and conservative media outlets have been. Allowing QAnon views to flourish publicly only contributes further to the erosion of the democratic norms and values that underpin American life.

Summary of the Online Radical Right

In summary, the current online far-right movements of White Nationalism and QAnon followers represent similar strains within American extreme conservatism. In both cases, these subcultures are prone to hostility and violence towards those they perceive as “other” and who therefore are inhuman. Neither supports liberal democratic norms that encourage honest deliberation and broad popular participation. Both have found supporters within the right-wing media and political establishment that are willing to overlook the unsavory tendencies of extremists in the name of electoral gain. White Nationalism and QAnon are, however, clearly distinct in notable ways. White Nationalism has existed in American politics for centuries and acknowledgement of it at least in some form has been part of the Republican Party’s electoral strategy for decades. QAnon, by contrast, is an idea born on the internet and as a result of that, as well as its newness, is far more decentralized, erratic, and fluid, likely keeping it from gaining genuine traction in conservative political circles. The fact that racism and fringe conspiracy theories constitute significant electoral factions inside a major political party is highly concerning. As recent events have shown, these groups are prone to violence, and the seeming acceptance of them within the modern Republican Party puts American democracy in a deeply precarious position.

Chapter 7: Left-Wing Subcultures in the Contemporary Political Arena

Introduction to the Online Left

Like their right-wing counterparts, leftist subcultures are not a new phenomenon in the United States, and neither is their use of media to convey their message. In the realm of America politics, leftists have two dimensions: social/cultural and economic. The social/cultural left advocates for feminism, LGBT rights, and anti-racism. The latter is particularly important given the rise of Black Lives Matter movement from a social media hashtag to one of the largest social movements American politics has ever seen. The economic left historically supported moves to regulate the market economy through increased taxation, regulation, and in some cases public ownership of utilities and railroads. Today, supporters of this ideology often label themselves as “democratic socialists” and their media apparatus and legislative influence have both grown significantly in recent years. The social/cultural left and the economic left are not mutually exclusive, but leftist policies can generally be considered one or the other and the two do not necessarily correlate. Unlike their right-wing counterparts, these groups present limited if any real or existential threat to democracy, instead generally embracing elections and protest activism rather than conspiracy theories and open hatred of others. However, they do represent a strident new force in modern politics that presents a serious challenge to entrenched conservative norms.

Black Lives Matter

History of Civil Rights Politics

Although the Black Lives Matter itself is a relatively recent phenomenon, having originated in 2013, the struggle for Black Americans to be legally and socioeconomically equal to White Americans is centuries old. Ever since the abolition of slavery following the end of the Civil War, activists and progressive politicians have made racial equality central to their ideology and platform. The success of this movement has evolved over time as governments and citizens have ebbed and flowed in their support. Although in the public imagination these struggles against racism are thought of as one long unified movement, the reality is that these movements contained quite a bit of ideological variance.

The most relevant element of diversity within previous movements for Black civil rights in America to Black Lives Matter is the division between Black political activists that sought to appeal to elected officials and those pushing for a more confrontational approach. One example of this can be seen in W.E.B. Du Bois' seminal work "The Souls of Black Folk," which criticizes fellow Black activist Booker T. Washington for his neglect of political rights and higher education for Black Americans in the name of appealing to Whites (Du Bois, p. 50, 1903). Du Bois's concerns would ultimately lay the groundwork for civil rights advocacy of later decades, but at the time it was Washington who proved more successful in catching the attention of elected officials, even meeting personally with President Theodore Roosevelt (The White House Historical Association). Such would be the core contestation between the main wings of the movement for Black

civil rights: accommodation that would garner support from elites and elected officials versus a more strident, confrontational approach to making political and social change.

Among the more well-known examples of this division is the tension between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. King famously advocated for non-violent approaches to achieving civil rights and was able to have the ear of President Lyndon Johnson who, although wary of King and in disagreement with him over the Vietnam War, did collaborate with King to pass landmark civil rights legislation (Kragie, p. 63, 2015). X and the Nation of Islam were more accepting of violence and emphasized Black Nationalism. In fact, X, in one of his most best-known speeches, identified himself as outright anti-American, lambasted the Democratic Party for its reliance on segregationist Southern politicians, and advocated against voting if politicians compromise on civil rights (X, 1964). Both men would prove influential, but King would achieve more mainstream success, with him becoming a beloved figure of American history and his leadership culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. X, while certainly prominent, especially with the more anti-establishment Black Power movement and Black Panthers, remains much more controversial for his focus on challenging existing social and economic structures in America rather than seeking mainstream change.

Over time, the movement for Black civil rights importantly has become a core ideological constituency of the Democratic Party. The NAACP explicitly backs much of the Democratic platform such as increasing the federal minimum wage (NAACP, 2021). Black candidates have increasingly run for and held the very highest positions within the party. Shirley Chisholm, for example, became the first Black woman to serve in Congress

in 1964. She sought the 1972 Democratic Party nomination for President and her progressive platform attracted ten percent of the primary vote (Michals, 2015). Civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson sought the Democratic presidential nomination multiple times during the 1980s, winning several primaries in Southern states, winning the Michigan caucus, and running strong challenges to moderate, White rivals in Illinois and New York (Kornacki, 2019). And of course, Barack Obama in 2008 would not only secure the Democratic Party nomination but win the general election and become the first Black President. The critical role of Black Americans in the electoral coalition of the Democratic Party continues to this day, with Kamala Harris serving as the first Black Vice President. However, this election-centered approach is not universally embraced by anti-racism activists. Much like earlier radical activists in history, current anti-racism activism can often be much more hostile and resistant to established political leaders and mainstream politics.

Origins and Philosophy of Black Lives Matter

The origin of the Black Lives Matter movement dates back to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013 (Garza, p. 109, 2020). This acquittal provoked widespread controversy and was deeply mortifying to two women in particular: Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza (Garza, p. 111, 2020). Garza's online posting after the acquittal, in particular the original use of "Black Lives Matter" as a hashtag (Garza, p. 118, 2020), would draw massive amounts of attention, including from activist Opal Tometi (Garza, p. 119, 2020). Together, these women would become the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement (Garza, p. 121, 2020). The primary organization they created was the Black Lives Matter Global

Network, which states that its goal is to “eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, a).

All of these women felt that previous work to combat racism, in particular the election-centric work of clergymen such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson (Garza, p. 131, 2020), was insufficient for the work ahead of them. Instead, greater focus would be placed on combatting racism entrenched in societal structures and on intersectionality, particularly embracing feminism and LGBT rights (Black Lives Matter, a). These women would go on to be heavily involved in protests against police brutality that erupted in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. During this campaign, the group deliberately associated themselves with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, referencing the famed Freedom Rides by bringing in anti-racism activists from across the country to Ferguson to support local efforts (Garza, p. 125, 2020). As police brutality against Black people continued in the United States, Black Lives Matter would continue to gain in attention and popular support, becoming one of the largest social movements in modern America.

In terms of organizational structure, Black Lives Matter is heavily decentralized, avoiding having one particular leader. There is a central organization of the movement, the aforementioned Black Lives Matter Global Network (Garza, p. 161, 2020), but this nationwide organization often has no connection to the work of local activists that associate themselves with the larger Black Lives Matter movement. Garza states that rather than being leaderless, Black Lives Matter is instead “leaderful,” with many people able to take the movement in their own direction to suit their local community’s own

needs (Garza, p. 161-162, 2020). That being said, recent years have seen Patrice Cullors try to centralize the movement under her own control by forming a political action committee and agreeing to numerous corporate partnerships, much to the ire of many local chapters and activists (King, 2020).

Compared to right-wing counterparts which, as discussed earlier, often have online organizations which operate separately from traditional activism, the internet component of Black Lives Matter is much more integrated with the larger cause. Incidents of police killings of Black people attract immense levels of attention, with millions of social media posts being made surrounding these incidents and the Black Lives Matter movement in general (Wirtschafter, 2021). For young Black people in particular, polls show that the social media activism involved in BLM is very important to them as seventy-nine percent of Black social media users aged eighteen to forty-nine make posts in support of social justice (Auxier, 2020). Whereas right-wing movements have rarely relied on large scale physical protests, millions of people have taken to the street in support of BLM (Wirtschafter, 2021).

The running theme of Black Lives Matter's attitude towards cooperation with actors beyond itself is one of ambivalence. For example, Garza states that Black and Latino activists working together for racial justice can indeed provide greater solidarity and strength in numbers for opposing racial oppression (Garza, p. 150, 2020). However, Garza is also aware of anti-Black racism that exists within the Latino community (Garza, p. 150, 2020) and is wary of outside groups wading into and hijacking a space that exists primarily for Black social consciousness and uplift (Garza, p. 157, 2020). This ambivalent attitude extends to electoral politics. Garza states that elections are important

for making change in policy and power (Garza, p. 167, 2020) but is also ambivalent on the Democratic Party and its leadership. Garza, for example, took particular issue with Hillary Clinton, believing that the 2016 Democratic Presidential Nominee pandered to older Black voters (Garza, p. 170, 2020) and had a history of dog-whistle politics (Garza, p. 169, 2020). These included Clinton leaking images of Barack Obama in Somali dress and attempting to link him to Louis Farrakhan (Garza, p. 169, 2020), as well as the welfare and police policies of her husband President Bill Clinton that proved detrimental to Black communities while courting the support of said voters (Garza, p. 170, 2020).

Evolution and Accomplishments

Over time, Black Lives Matter has evolved significantly and in some areas has modified the vision of its founders. One such change is in the demographics of protesters. According to the Brookings Institution, a majority of Black Lives Matter protesters in 2020, fifty-four percent, were White (Fisher, 2020). This contrasts with Alicia Garza's views that Black Lives Matter should primarily be a separate space run by and for Black people to self-determine their own action (Garza, p. 157, 2020). However, the fact that protesters have been heavily White may in fact show the success of the movement and its roots in intersectionality. The involvement of White people suggests a level of acceptance into mainstream American politics that gives the Black Lives Matter movement the broader support necessary to enact political change. This follows the model of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, where efforts to promote the socioeconomic equality of Black people did have White allies.

However, Black Lives Matter still has something of a political outsider streak. The main Black Lives Matter organization, the Black Lives Matter Global Network,

explicitly affiliates itself with the likes of Representatives Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Cori Bush of Missouri, and Jamaal Bowman of New York (Black Lives Matter, b). The Global Network has explicitly endorsed legislation proposed by these members on proposals to ban Donald Trump from future political office and investigate White Supremacy within law enforcement and the military (Black Lives Matter, b). These members, along with two other leftist Democrats, make up “The Squad” and are considered the most left-leaning faction within Congressional Democrats. Many of them came to power by ousting long-standing incumbent Democrats in primary challenges. Bush, for example, was a nurse and Black Lives Matter activist before successfully ousting incumbent Democratic Representative William Lacy Clay Jr. in 2020 (Coleman, 2020). Bush had decisively lost the 2018 primary against Clay (Coleman, 2020), suggesting that the death of George Floyd and subsequent rise in Black Lives Matter protests gave electoral strength to progressives and allies of the movement.

In terms of impact, as stated earlier the online conversation around BLM has been immense in scope. With this online activity combined with widespread protests, the conversation around racism in America shifted, exposing to many the entrenchment of racism within sociopolitical structures (Worland, 2020). In response, a number of concrete reforms were enacted in several jurisdictions. Some cities pledged to focus greater amounts of financial resources on public safety over policing, although some have since retreated from some of these proposals. San Francisco, for example, “launched crisis response teams to respond to behavioral health calls in lieu of police” (Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). Greater oversight of policing has also been enacted in localities such as Columbus, Ohio (Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). Legislation has been

enacted limiting officers' use of force, creating duties to intervene in cases of brutality, and keep watch on officers with a history of misconduct in a number of states and localities (Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). National policing reform has even passed the House of Representatives in the form of the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (Congress). In short, BLM has had an enormous impact on both the public conversation around racism in America and more concrete policy concerning policing across the country.

Controversy of Black Lives Matter

The founders of Black Lives Matter, particularly Patrice Cullors, have found themselves facing scrutiny for their financial dealings and their alleged failure to support many local activists. According to a New York Magazine article, many Black Lives Matter activists face homelessness due to a lack of funding from national leaders while they protest on the frontline against White Supremacy (Campbell, 2022). For example, Tory Johnson's work to disrupt a Ku Klux Klan rally in California was met with a firm denouncement from Black Lives Matter's national leadership (Campbell, 2022). This while the Black Lives Matter Global Network has taken in ninety million dollars in 2020 and ended 2020 with a sixty-million-dollar balance (Morrison, 2021). For some, this comes off as particularly hypocritical given the espoused socialist and even Marxist leanings of national Black Lives Matter leaders (Campbell, 2022). Even more troubling is the reactions that parents of victims of police brutality have had to these allegations. Parents, for example Michael Brown Sr., have argued that Black Lives Matter has abandoned families and young activists, requesting twenty million dollars in compensation from the organization (The International Black Freedom Alliance, 2021).

Samaria Rice, mother of Tamir Rice, decried such fundraising and business dealings as “hustling Black death” (Perry, 2021). Breonna Taylor’s mother, Tamika Palmer, called Black Lives Matter Louisville and State Representative Attica Scott, an ally of Black Lives Matter, “frauds” (WHAS11, 2021).

Accusations of inconsistency between actions and messaging also extend to allies of the Black Lives Matter movement in Congress. Cori Bush, for example, hired expensive private security despite being a proponent of “Defund the Police” (CBS News, 2021). When asked about this discrepancy, Representative Bush stated “They would rather I die? You would rather me die? Is that what you want to see? You want to see me die? You know, because that could be the alternative” (CBS News, 2021). In the aftermath of the January 6, 2021 attack of the Capitol Building, progressive politicians like Bush have clear grounds to be concerned for their personal safety. Thus, it is not unreasonable for Bush to increase her own security. However, this conflicts somewhat with Bush’s espoused political ideology. The full scope of efforts to “Defund the Police” will be examined later, but for now the key point is that Bush wanting police funding and presence in communities to be reduced dramatically while spending thousands on security guards for her own person can appear inconsistent.

Allegations of mismanagement expose the issues in BLM’s decentralized approach and those of online-centric social justice work in general. A lack of central leadership, while encouraging local engagement, may also lead to a disconnect between national leadership and local chapters. With activity ultimately falling to locals, there is a lack of incentive for national figures such as Cullors or Garza to fully fund and guide local activists. This despite the fact that local chapters and their activists would likely

benefit from national backing. In addition, while the founders of Black Lives Matter have in fact engaged in “on the ground” protesting and activism in the past, they have in recent years often failed to do so according to critics and instead have been working on continuing their online fame and securing business partnerships (Campbell, 2022). Cullors is considered especially prone to this, hosting livestreams on YouTube while local activists put themselves in danger (Campbell, 2022). This is arguably the result of the BLM movement being too focused on online activity rather than a physical infrastructure for social activism.

In 2021, Cullors stepped down as a leader of Black Lives Matter. Worth noting is that she denies allegations of financial mismanagement within BLM, claiming that such accusations are right-wing attempts to discredit her (BBC, 2021b). Instead, she stated that she left the organization to focus on a forthcoming book and a media deal with Warner Bros (BBC, 2021b). Still, the fact that a self-described “Marxist” owns four homes and has deals with major media companies (BBC, 2021b) has not gone unnoticed by critics. One could argue that with increased fame and influence corporate dealings became more acceptable. This despite the fact that such corporate dealings were ones that the founders of BLM once claimed to dislike about the center-left of the 1980s and 1990s.

Public Opinion on Black Lives Matter

A recent poll from the progressive firm Civiqs has public opinion on Black Lives Matter as almost evenly split, with forty-four percent of responders in favor and forty-three percent against. Support or opposition correlates with several demographic factors, some expected and some not. First is age, with fifty-three percent those aged eighteen to thirty-four and forty-six percent of thirty-five- to forty-nine-year-olds supporting the

movement, while forty-seven percent of fifty to sixty-four year-olds and forty-nine percent of those sixty-five and older are opposed to it (Civiqs). This was not particularly surprising given not only the overall more liberal political leanings of young people, but also their greater diversity and participation in protests. Second is race, with a fifty-one percent majority of White people opposing Black Lives Matter while Black people overwhelmingly support the movement with eighty-three percent (Civiqs). Again, this was not completely surprising as one would expect a movement for racial justice to be a greater draw for people of color than White people who continue to lean largely conservative. Third is gender, with fifty-one percent of women supporting the movement and fifty-one percent of men being opposed to it (Civiqs). This distinction was somewhat unexpected but may reflect the tendency of women to be more left-leaning than men or the fact that BLM leaders have been women who are explicitly feminist (Chatelain & Asoka, p. 57, 2015).

By far the starkest contrast can be seen in public opinion based on partisan affiliation. The overwhelming majority of Democrats, eighty-five percent, support BLM while the overwhelming majority of Republicans, eighty-six percent, are opposed to it (Civiqs). This last demographic divide will likely prove the most consequential for the movement of racial justice in America that BLM currently embodies. With Republicans so opposed to the movement, Republican governments are likely to not support actions on racial equity, but more importantly to be actively hostile to such efforts given racial attitudes within the party discussed earlier. The Democratic Party, by contrast, becomes the obvious political agent for tackling systemic racism. But BLM's founders' criticism of the Democratic Party make alliance with them less than straightforward. However, this

critical relationship also reflects a desire among the leadership of Black Lives Matter to leverage their influence to push the Democratic Party towards their agenda rather than have BLM adopt theirs and risk political cooptation. In summary, Black Lives Matter's political ends often clash with divided or negative public opinion about them.

Nevertheless, they are still supported among key constituencies of the American left and they hope to use that influence to create potential avenues for political change that match their goals.

Defund the Police

Probably the most controversial policy proposal associated with Black Lives Matter is to defund or outright abolish police departments. The Black Lives Matter Global Network lists "Defund the police" as one of their key demands and contrasts harsh treatment of BLM protestors by police with the comparatively lax treatment White Supremacists and the January 6, 2021 Capitol Building attackers received, stating "We have always known who the police truly protect and serve" (Black Lives Matter, b). The implication of this statement is that Black Lives Matter not only seeks to reduce police funding but sees policing itself as structurally racist. For many, this attitude is considered quite radical, making it not only unpopular but also cratering the electoral hopes of Democrats and progressive Independent candidates who have opted to support the policy.

This is not to say no jurisdictions have considered the idea or adopted at least some aspects of it. For example, San Francisco, as stated earlier, has moved mental health emergencies away from police and to a separate public health agency (Subramanian & Azry, 2021). However, both public opinion and recent electoral results demonstrate that supporters of the idea are clearly in the minority, with only fifteen percent of Americans

supporting lower police budgets (Parker & Hurst, 2021). As such, other localities have gone in very different directions. The most striking example of this came from the Seattle election for City Attorney. Though the election was officially non-partisan, the Democratic and Republican Parties still held primaries to nominate candidates. The Democratic nominee was a progressive challenger that ousted the incumbent City Attorney and expressed outright hatred for police (Carter, 2021). The Republican nominee vehemently opposed this idea and in fact ran on increasing prosecution of misdemeanors (Carter, 2021). The Republican nominee not only received the endorsement of prominent Washington State Democrats such as former Governors Gary Locke and Christine Gregoire (Carter, 2021), but was also narrowly elected to the office (Carter, 2021). The fact that a Republican was elected to office in a city that is famously a progressive bastion and is represented in the House of Representatives at the time of writing by the Congressional Progressive Caucus Chair shows how questionable “Defund the Police” currently is as a mainstream campaign issue.

What may be even more damning for efforts to eliminate policing in America is its unpopularity within the Black community the movement claims to be fighting for. According to Pew Research Center, only twenty-three percent of Black Americans support decreasing police funding (Parker & Hurst, 2021). In fact, many more Black Americans, thirty-eight percent according to this poll, want to see police funding increase (Parker & Hurst, 2021). This suggests that a gap is opening between the views BLM leaders and significant portions of the Black community, many of whom have much more conservative views on this issue than BLM leadership. That gap threatens to damage the political legitimacy and mainstream acceptance that the movement built up in the post-

George Floyd political moment. In fact, New York City Mayor Eric Adams, who is African American and a former police officer, recently proposed a budget that would slash municipal spending broadly while leaving the police budget intact (Fitzsimmons, 2022).

All of this is not to say there is no room for debate on police reform or that the current approach to policing in America is just for all citizens. Violent crime did decrease dramatically in the wake of the 1993 Crime Bill (Statista, 2022) that progressives, including the Black Lives Matter movement, are critical of, but not without cost. The criminal justice system in America sees the highest rate of incarceration on earth (Widra & Herring, 2021) and the very existence of Black Lives Matter suggests a significant amount of people are dissatisfied with the state of American policing. Nonetheless, a recent Gallup poll found that a majority of Americans continue to consider violent crime a very serious issue (McCarthy, 2020). As such, it is questionable for BLM to throw its weight entirely behind a policy that does not acknowledge genuine concerns with crime among both Black and White voters.

The Future of Anti-Racism in America

The fight against racism towards Black Americans is one that has been going on for centuries and is unlikely to end any time soon. Black people in America continue to face disproportionate poverty (Creamer, 2020), a continued gap in attaining a college degree compared to White people (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), and disproportionately harsh treatment by the criminal justice system. Verdicts on high profile cases on the killing of Black Americans have yielded mixed results. For example, the killer of George Floyd was convicted (Chappell, 2021) while the officer that killed

Breonna Taylor was not even directly indicted for doing so (Bates, 2020). The legal merits of these decisions are beyond the scope of this thesis, but there is no denying that such varying results creates deep frustration for both Black and White progressives.

Given the fact that Black Lives Matter has now been continuously active for several years, it is safe to say that the movement will continue to be a part of the American political landscape for the foreseeable future. BLM has been embraced by Democratic Party leaders and voters. Further, it has dramatically expanded in scope, and has already significantly shifted the terms of debate around racism and police reform. However, the future direction of Black Lives Matter remains open. Its decentralized nature means that its exact goals are fluid and shift with the times. The founders of the movement have departed and BLM's intentionally diffused power structure means there is little direct control over the movement by its leaders. Given the founders' farther-left political leanings and embrace of non-mainstream policies, their absence may noticeably soften the movement but in a manner that may make it more influential. The future of Black Lives Matter remains unwritten, but in the present it has certainly left a mark on American politics as one of the most consequential social movements of modern times. This same tension between ideology and impact can be seen in other movements working to pull the Democratic Party leftward.

Democratic Socialists

History of Leftist Politics in America

The United States is considered by some to be a broadly conservative country, one that often touts commitment to free market principles, military strength, and

traditionalism among its key values. However, given the diversity of the American population and the negative attributes of unfettered capitalism and rigidity in social values, the emergence of leftists as a political force in the country was inevitable. As discussed earlier, socialists were fairly prominent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, their opposition to the First World War would result in harsh repression by the administration of President Woodrow Wilson, most famously when socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs was convicted for his opposition to the military draft and had his conviction upheld by the Supreme Court (Oyez). Despite this effort to purge socialism from American politics, the Democratic Party would drift considerably to the left on economic issues beginning in the 1930s and continuing through the 1960s. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's four terms would see extensive government intervention in the economy, chief among them regulating the stock market through the Securities and Exchange Commission (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 1999), establishing Social Security (Social Security Administration, 1935), and enshrining the right to unionize through the Wagner Act (National Labor Relations Board). During the 1960s, Lyndon Johnson expanded the social safety net through programs such as Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 (National Health Law Program) as well as his work to combat racial discrimination, promote education, combat pollution, and provide housing to poor Americans (U.S. History, 2008). But, particularly with the latter, many progressives felt that the Democratic Party was not going far enough to bring sociopolitical change.

A second surge in left-wing political activity in America came from the New Left of the 1960s. The New Left was very diverse, but common beliefs among the disparate

groups within the movement included opposition to the Vietnam War and disdain for racism (Menand, 2021). Among these groups was Students for a Democratic Society which, in their famous manifesto the Port Huron Statement, decried the lack of work being done to promote civil rights and economic justice because of excessive Cold War militarism (Menand, 2021). The New Left also included more avant garde elements, namely the Youth International Party or “Yippies” who used grand satirical gestures such as performing an exorcism on the Pentagon in outright rejection of the American sociopolitical system and traditional methods of protest (Farber, 1988).

In 1972, the New Left achieved perhaps its clearest victory when South Dakota Senator George McGovern became the Democratic nominee for President of the United States, attracting vocal young followers with his firm opposition to the Vietnam War and left-wing economic views (Petrow, 2020). However, opponents painted McGovern as a radical, dubbing him the candidate of “Acid, Amnesty, and Abortion” (Noah, 2012). This smear tactic along with a scandal decrying the mental illness of McGovern’s running mate, Missouri Senator Thomas Eagleton (Noah, 2012), allowed incumbent Republican Richard Nixon to win re-election in a landslide. Though this loss would prove traumatizing to the point where McGovern’s loss hovered over progressive presidential contenders to this day (Petrow, 2020), the New Left proved very influential on the Democrats in the long term. As explained earlier, the Democrats would become the primary electoral vehicle for anti-racism and social justice. In addition, the Democrats would gradually adopt the causes of feminism, secularism, and a more diplomatic foreign policy (Democratic National Convention, 2020). However, as this shift came in tandem

with the growth of the moderate flank of the party, America's left flank found itself with new cause for action.

Beginnings of the Modern American Left

The modern progressive wing of the Democratic Party came into being in the 1990s. Beginning in the 1980s, in response to a major presidential loss in 1984, the Democratic Leadership Council fought to turn the Democrats in a somewhat more conservative, pro-capitalist direction (Smith, 2011). That approach was electorally successful, culminating in the election of Bill Clinton to the White House in 1992 (Smith, 2011). Those on the left of the party, however, began to chafe under increasingly centrist leadership and thus began organizing. This culminated in the creation of the Congressional Progressive Caucus in 1991 (Congressional Progressive Caucus), a coalition of left-leaning House Democrats that would come to match their moderate New Democrat rivals in membership in later years, today having ninety-six members in the House of Representatives (Congressional Progressive Caucus). In a sign of its eventual strength, one of the founding members of this caucus was California Representative Nancy Pelosi (Marans, 2018), elected to represent progressive San Francisco. She went on to become the first woman to serve as Leader of the House Democrats and Speaker of the House. Pelosi's ascendancy being a sign of progressive political power is somewhat ironic today, as she has become a figure of some ire for the current anti-establishment left (Marans, 2018).

Another one of the most prominent progressive Democrats of the late 1990s and early 2000s was Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone. A former professor, Wellstone was described as a "fiery, fist-shaking liberal" (Ragsdale, 2002) and was among President

Clinton's most strident left-wing opponents. Most notably, he fiercely opposed bipartisan efforts at welfare reform, decrying them as essentially theft from the poorest and most vulnerable (Wines, 1996). Although Republicans assumed that this bucking of his own party's efforts to cut welfare would make for an effective line of attack against Wellstone, the incumbent Democrat survived, winning re-election by a fairly comfortable nine-point margin (CNN AllPolitics, 1996). Wellstone had presidential ambitions, considering a run for President in 2000 before ultimately opting against it (Keen, 2019). A Wellstone candidacy may well have greatly altered the trajectory of the Democratic Party going into the twenty-first century, but in 2002, while campaigning for a third Senate term, Wellstone and his family were killed in a plane crash (Ragsdale, 2002).

Also prominent on the Democratic Party's left flank during this time was Vermont Governor Howard Dean. Dean was not as ideological as Wellstone but he backed a standard liberal platform of opposition to the Bush Administrations tax cuts and enacting healthcare reform (Sourdout, 2014). He was a consistent opponent of the Iraq War (Sourdout, 2014) at a time when many within the Democratic Party, including Dean's rival and eventual 2004 presidential nominee John Kerry, had mixed views on the war at best (Saletan, 2004). Dean's campaign also was a pioneer in using the internet to attract small donations (Sourdout, 2014). Unfortunately for Dean, his loss in the Iowa Caucus was followed by the infamous "Dean Scream," a shriek of "Yeah!" that would go on to be one of the earliest true memes in American political history (Murray, 2019). Fortunately, Dean's political career was not over as he would go on to become Chair of the Democratic National Committee. His leadership is often cited in the massive electoral

successes the Democrats enjoyed in the 2006 and 2008 congressional elections (National Democratic Institute).

In summary, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party that came into being during the 1990s had by the late 2000s become a leading force within the party. That being said, many voters and politicians felt that the Democrats still were not doing enough to address issues such as healthcare access, economic inequality, and climate change. As online media continued to grow in prominence, these more firmly left-wing voices would find an avenue for spreading their message and becoming an electoral presence of their own.

The Campaigns of Bernie Sanders and the Re-Emergence of Socialism

Modern leftists almost certainly would not have the level of prominence in American politics that they currently do if not for one man: Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. Sanders. An independent member of the Senate (Senate) and self-identified “democratic socialist” (Kruse, 2015), Sanders sought the Democratic Party’s nomination for President in 2016 and 2020. Although Sanders did not win the nomination, he proved effective at galvanizing the various left-wing forces that existed within the Democratic Party and American politics in general, especially young people (Jordan, 2016) just as McGovern did in 1972. During his first campaign for the presidency, Sanders performed well in Western, Midwestern, and Appalachian states as well as his native New England (The Wall Street Journal, 2016). However, Sanders performed poorly in Southern states (The Wall Street Journal, 2016), reflecting an overall weakness among voters of color, older voters of color in particular (Jordan, 2016). He did, however, perform well with Latino voters during his 2020 campaign (Bacon, 2020).

Sanders' flagship proposal was the enactment of a single payer healthcare system or "Medicare for All" (Kliff, 2019). Given that the United States is the only industrialized nation without universal health insurance in some form (Fisher, 2012) and the fact that the American healthcare system overall is ranked among the worst in the developed world according to the World Health Organization (Tandon, Murray, Lauer, & Evans, p. 18, 2000), expanding the popular Medicare to all Americans was an attractive policy to many. In addition to this policy, Sanders also promoted elimination of tuition costs for college education (Prokop, 2015). Given the trillions of dollars in total student debt accumulated by students in the United States (Hanson, 2022b), this policy proposal had great appeal to many young people and many middle-class Americans carrying tens of thousands of dollars in college debt beginning in the 1990s (Hanson, 2022a).

Unfortunately for Sanders, his campaign ultimately lost to more moderate rivals. However, the Democratic Party has since moved ideologically closer to Sanders' positions and the Vermont Senator has proven a key ally of the Biden Administration. He has become a vocal advocate for the president's domestic agenda (Senate, 2021). Included in Biden's campaign platform were reductions in student debt, a plan to expand access to public health insurance, and an increase in the federal minimum wage to fifteen dollars per hour (BBC, 2021a). While more conservative Senators such as West Virginia's Joe Manchin have worked against many of these proposals (Senate, 2021), it is clear that the Sanders campaign has moved the center of the Democratic Party to a much more progressive position than it had earlier.

The Online Left

As discussed earlier, progressives have been active online for decades, using blogs to spread their message and support candidates aligned with their values. In terms of connection to more established political outlets, the online left is similar to the online far-right in that its internet networks operate largely separately from the mainstream apparatus of a major party, in this case the Democrats. What is different, however, is the degree to which left-wing internet personalities have directly taken a role in electoral politics, supporting left-wing candidates and in some cases running for office themselves. The relationship between the online left and the Democratic Party is somewhere between that of Black Lives Matter and a traditional interest group, often hostile but clearly more open to using the party's electoral mechanisms as a vehicle for their ideological ends.

This can be seen most clearly in the creation of Justice Democrats, a political action committee founded by Sanders supporters that has supported a number of progressive candidates (Stuart, 2018). Two of the group's founders were leaders of Bernie Sanders 2016 presidential campaign, but the other two founders were YouTube personalities: Cenk Uygur of The Young Turks and Kyle Kulinski of Secular Talk (Stuart, 2018). Like their right-wing counterparts, the online left is prone to a combination of borderline conspiratorial concern for ideological purity, including the aforementioned mission of challenging Democratic representatives deemed insufficiently left-wing (Stuart, 2018) and pushing falsehoods in the pursuit of ideological ends. The Young Turks, for example used their online platforms to promote anti-GMO views, such as a Facebook post in 2013 that lauded Chipotle for removing such items from their menu (The Young Turks).

Despite his espoused commitment to pure progressivism, Uygur has come under fire for an intense campaign to block the unionization of The Young Turks staff (Thompson, 2020). Critics may argue that Uygur is using progressive branding simply to push a product, not unlike the exploitive practices of corporations that Uygur and his cohort claim to dislike. Regardless of how one may feel about the policies of Senator Sanders, it would be fair to regard his campaign focus on the working class to be more consistent than that of his online fans. This contradiction between leftists' rhetoric and actions going against working class interests is one that could be extended to allies of the online left currently holding office.

The Squad

“The Squad” is the colloquial term for a group of Democratic members of the House of Representatives consisting of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, and Cori Bush of Missouri (Bush, 2021). They are all relatively young, are all people of color, and are all among the most left-wing members of the chamber (Cummings, 2019). Most of them were elected in primary challenges to long-term Democratic members, the most notable of them being Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who unseated Joe Crowley, a member of House Democratic Leadership in 2018 (Cummings, 2018). The members of this group support much of Bernie Sander's platform, in particular implementing a single-payer healthcare system (Seitz-Wald, 2020). However, they have often taken the lead on issues considered especially pressing to young people such as climate change. A collection of broad climate goals and policies referred to as the “Green New Deal” is among the Squad's most notable proposals (Seitz-Wald, 2020). As

socialists, primary challengers, and relatively young people of color, a key aspect in the appeal of the Squad is their ability to bring an element of newness to a political landscape long dominated by moderate to conservative, older, White men. Yet they grounded themselves in the image of popular progressives of long ago, most obviously Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Likely this was done so as to locate themselves in the long progressive tradition in American politics rather than as an outside, radical force.

The Squad's various members differ in terms of fame and controversy. Ocasio-Cortez, colloquially known as "AOC", can be considered the face of the Squad due to the combination of her own media savviness and personal charisma along with right-wing opponents having a particular fascination with her. The youngest member of the Squad, Ocasio-Cortez is very active online, using social media to engage with voters and other politicians. Her online activity ranges from the lighthearted such as her using Twitch to livestream herself playing the video game *Among Us* with young fans (D'Anastasio, 2020) to the much more serious such as taking to Instagram to recount her experience with sexual assault (Grayer, 2021). She is notable for having taken to the floor of the House of Representatives to denounce Florida Republican Ted Yoho for cursing at her and calling her a derogatory term (C-SPAN, 2020). In many ways, AOC often represents the modern left at its most appealing: a working class, young, woman of color whose personality and struggles connect to those of the average American and who fiercely denounces the bigoted power structures opposed to her such as patriarchy.

Other members of this group are more controversial for reasons ranging from fairly innocuous theatrics to flagrant bigotry to substantive policy concerns. Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar are probably the most notable here. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan is

perhaps most well-known for her profane declaration of intent to impeach then President Trump (Rupar, 2019). As the first two Muslim women in Congress, figures on the right such as Tucker Carlson have attacked them for their religion (Cummings, 2019). Issue-related controversies largely center around their foreign policy views, namely an opposition to Israel that some feel borders on outright anti-Semitism (Cummings, 2019). Positions on how the US should engage with either side vary considerably between the major parties as well as within them, but most of the Squad are among the most anti-Israel members of Congress. Tlaib, for instance, reportedly told President Biden “The U.S. cannot continue to give the right-wing [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu government billions each year to commit crimes against Palestinians. Atrocities like bombing schools cannot be tolerated, much less conducted with U.S.-supplied weapons” (Wise, 2021). Even fairly modest support for Israel in the form of missile defense is opposed by many of them (GovTrack, 2021). In fairness, the opposition, at least from one member, stems from personal heritage. Rashida Tlaib is of Palestinian descent and has invoked this heritage when denouncing a congressional resolution in support of the two-state solution (Wolf, 2019).

Nevertheless, these positions are not popular with the American public, within the Democratic Party (Brenan, 2022), and even among some members of the Squad. Jamaal Bowman of New York voted with the vast majority of his party in favor of defense spending for Israel (GovTrack, 2021). This is not the only foreign policy stance that has caused criticism of the Democratic Party left, the Squad in particular. The Squad, for example, are among the members of Congress most likely to be conciliatory towards the communist regime in Cuba (Custodio, 2021). This is a position that some critics have

charged hurts Democratic electoral chances in vote-rich Florida (Custodio, 2021). Bush and Omar were also the only two Democrats to vote against banning Russian oil imports in response to that country's invasion of Ukraine (Marcos, 2022).

In addition to foreign policy controversies. These members are the most likely to go against party leaders on significant domestic legislation. For example, the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law passed with no support from Squad members (McCammond, 2021). While they defended these votes on the grounds that the bill did not go far enough in terms of spending, some Democrats felt that the Squad was simply being oppositional for little or no real reason (McCammond, 2021). As was the case with Black Lives Matter, one could argue that these representatives are less interested in popularity among Democrats in Congress, and more concerned with achieving their ideological goals. However, given that these individuals are elected officials, prioritizing being an ideologue over appeal to Democratic constituencies is a much more pressing concern for their future careers as well as their ability to turn legislation in their direction and thus actually achieve their stated goals. In fact, Ilhan Omar ran twenty points behind Joe Biden during her 2020 re-election campaign (Greinetz, 2020), suggesting that the Squad's positions may be losing more support than it gains from the far-left and politically disaffected as some claim it does.

Though Sanders attracted thirty-five to forty-five percent of Democratic primary voters, The Squad's membership within the Democratic Caucus consists of just six members (Bush, 2021). This may suggest that the appeal of the Squad is more limited electorally than that of Sanders. The reasons for this are multi-faceted. First, Sanders has broad appeal to many rural and White voters, while The Squad, all younger people of

color from majority minority, urban districts, rely on the support of multicultural voters and young, very ideologically left-wing, urban White people. Sanders has been criticized in the past for focusing his campaign too much on class rather than sexism or racism, but his electoral results suggest that the Senator proved more successful at attracting a broader coalition of working-class voters than the socialist members of Congress that have followed him.

Public Opinion on Socialist Ideology

Despite the emergence of socialist politicians in recent years, opinion of socialism among the general American population appears to be static. According to Gallup, support for socialism increased from thirty-six percent in 2010 to thirty-nine percent in 2019 (Jones & Saad, 2019). This despite the fact that the number of Americans that believe unregulated business is harmful to society increased from forty-five percent to fifty-three percent during the same time period (Jones & Saad, 2019). As expected, opinions of socialism diverge dramatically based on party affiliation, with sixty-five percent of Democrats having a positive opinion of it compared to forty-one percent of independents and only nine percent of Republicans (Jones & Saad, 2019). These results have wildly different implications for the electoral viability of socialist candidates. On the one hand, the majority of Democrats are apparently open to supporting them, but on the other hand such candidates are likely to be unpopular with the electorate as a whole. This may go some way towards explaining why Sanders failed to secure the Democratic nomination for President in either 2016 or 2020, losing to moderates not just because Democrats did not support his views but because he was seen as the less viable candidate in a general election.

Public opinion surrounding progressive's signature policy proposal, Medicare for All, is complicated. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, seventy-four percent of Americans want the federal government to be more involved in providing health insurance, including ninety-four percent of Democrats, seventy-seven percent of Independents, and forty percent of Republicans (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). However, Medicare for All itself is significantly less popular, fifty-three percent of Americans are in favor of it compared to forty-two percent who are opposed (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). Importantly, this same poll found that fifty-eight percent of Americans would oppose a Medicare for All plan that would eliminate private insurers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). In short, universal healthcare is widely popular with the American public, but opinion is more split on having a nationwide, government-run insurance plan for everyone and proposing the elimination of private insurance in the process is clearly not popular. Given that Sanders supported eliminating private insurers during his 2020 campaign (Wolf, Luhby, & Merrill, 2020), the unpopularity of this proposal may help explain the ultimate failure of his presidential effort.

The most noteworthy set of ideas proposed by younger progressives, the Green New Deal, has also proven divisive. A poll from the Green Advocacy Project found that forty-three percent of Americans support the initiative compared to forty-six percent who are opposed (Green Advocacy Project, 2019). Again, partisan division significantly impacts public opinion on the issue, with eighty-one percent of Democrats in favor of the proposal compared to thirty-seven percent of independents and six percent of Republicans (Green Advocacy Project, 2019). This contrasts with the sixty-five percent of Americans that believe the United States should transition to using one-hundred

percent green energy sources. Eighty-seven percent of Democrats, fifty-seven percent of Independents, and even forty-one percent of Republicans say that they support the move towards clean energy (Green Advocacy Project, 2019).

In sum, socialism does have a significant following in the United States, but a majority of Americans remain opposed to it. This seems to be hurting the policy proposals of socialist politicians in the Democratic Party. Even when causes such as universal healthcare and environmentalism have broad public support, the public seems to view the specific proposals of this group of socialists as going too far.

Future of the Socialist Movement

Recent attempts to add to the Squad's ranks have been mixed. Although their membership did expand from four members to six between 2018 and 2020, additional efforts to expand membership have proven difficult. Nina Turner, a former Ohio state legislator, Bernie Sanders campaign co-chair and candidate for the House of Representatives, who actually referred to voting for now President Biden as being like consuming half a bowl of feces, was unsuccessful in her bid against the more moderate Shontel Brown (Joseph, 2021). Turner blamed "evil money" for her loss but it is probably more accurate to say that her hard-left leanings and combative approach to politics burned bridges with key electoral supporters such as the Congressional Black Caucus (Joseph 2021). Turner performed especially poorly in suburban areas of her district both Black and White (Wasserman, 2021). If this lack of suburban appeal holds true for other left-wing candidates, such figures may struggle to gain traction in a Democratic Party increasingly reliant on suburban votes. Jessica Cisneros, a primary challenger to anti-abortion incumbent Henry Cuellar, was narrowly unsuccessful in 2020 and the result of

her 2022 challenge remains to be seen (Livingston, 2022). Though national progressives have rallied behind Cisneros, this rural South Texas seat may prove to be unfriendly terrain for a leftist. That being said, Senator Sanders' aforementioned strong 2020 showing among Latino voters in this region could give Cisneros a chance at an upset.

Other proposed additions to the Squad from within the existing Democratic Caucus have also proven fruitless. For example, Ritchie Torres, a progressive and one of the first two LGBTQ+ Black men in Congress, has not joined. Torres, in fact, is opposed to the group because of its opposition to Israel (Samuels, 2020). He chose to back Andrew Yang in the 2021 New York City mayoral election (Torres, 2021) over the eventual progressive favorite Maya Wiley, who Ocasio-Cortez endorsed (Maya Wiley for Mayor). Torres may also have similar feelings to fellow New York Democrat Hakeem Jeffries, who during this same mayoral campaign lambasted socialists as coming from the most gentrified parts of the city (Sherer & Weigel, 2021). While this may be an unfair criticism, as candidates like AOC undoubtedly represent people of color, the demographics of the districts in question make Jeffries' point clear, as AOC's district does in fact have more than double the White population of Torres' (United States Census Bureau).

For the time being, while the larger progressive cause gains strength within the Democrats, the farthest left faction of the party is struggling against the unpopularity of their policies and a party leadership that is skeptical of them. This suggests that the more cooperative approach of the larger progressive flank is the more viable method of extracting concessions from party leaders. However, much of the future of this group and the progressive faction of Democrats as a whole will depend on the results of the 2022

Midterm elections and beyond. A poor showing from the Democrats will likely discourage moving too far to the left and may even pull them back to a more centrist position similar to the 1990s. A stronger showing for the Democrats may make the party more comfortable with a leftward push and thus allow more room for socialists or otherwise leftist members. For the modern left, the future remains uncharted.

Summary of the Modern Left

Both Black Lives Matter and democratic socialists represent an online left that exists to uproot entrenched social and economic systems that in the eyes of critics entrench inequality. These two movements are intertwined and have a common appeal among politically active young people as well as a shared sentiment that the Democratic Party is insufficiently progressive. However, the two movements are approaching this common cause from different angles. For Black Lives Matter, the key concern is systemic racism and, though elections do matter to activists within the movement, they are just one part of a larger effort to combat mistreatment of Black Americans through activism, protest, and social change. Democratic socialists, by contrast, are motivated by economic concerns that, though not wholly separate from anti-racism, place central focus on class division. Socialists are also much more election focused, with online activists and politicians alike working to secure elected office for a greater number of fellow socialists. In both cases, there are significant portions of the American public that are at least sympathetic to the cause of alleviating racial and economic inequality, but specific proposals from the more ideologically rigid among these groups such as defund the police or Pro-Palestinian sentiment remain unpopular. Although both of these movements seek to overhaul entrenched power structures in the United States, neither are anti-

democratic. Instead, they want more democracy by promoting elections and participatory democracy to, in their view, raise the living standards of all citizens.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis set out to examine the degree to which online subcultures once considered to be on the fringes of American political life have been integrated into the mainstream and affected democratic norms as a result. In terms of popularity, all four of the subcultures studied here enjoy sizable support from the general public, within a major political party, or both. Not only this, but all four of these once ostracized subcultures have now seen extensive coverage in mainstream media as well as explicit support from elected officials. The entrance of all four of these subcultures into the mainstream political arena has also greatly impacted democratic norms, with populists on both the left and right proving to be a challenge to ideological and institutional norms.

The methodology of using these case studies that evolved in real time proved to be a major strength of this piece, but at times a challenge for the writing process. Choosing case studies generally necessarily means prioritizing depth of analysis over breadth of examination of the online political left and right. However, these cases are both representative and timely, making a thorough study of them useful for understanding the broader political trends underpinning them. The fact that these cases are contemporary and reliant on online activity meant that new information came to light throughout the writing process. This made the case studies timely and they encompassed current political developments as they were occurring. This meant that there were

surprises in real time that the cases attempted to cover. These included attacks on critical race theory proving electorally successful and the revelation of who QAnon may be.

It is apparent that Black Lives Matter, the socialist left, White Nationalism, and QAnon have attracted a significant portion of public opinion support, establishing themselves in mainstream media and political outlets, and in some cases moving legislative action towards their agenda. Ideas that were at one point considered to be on the fringes have been integrated into mainstream political life. Given this sizable public support, it is clear that the internet is not only a powerful tool of political communication, but a force for political change in and of itself. Traditional analysis focusing strictly on political parties, elected officeholders, and established interest groups may miss this fact, as such examinations ignore the degree to which the internet is a fertile ground spawning new political activism and emerging ideas and policies.

The question of whether or not these groups have been successful depends on what their goals are and how one measures success. If one measures success through electoral results and legislative accomplishments, then these groups appear to be less successful. A common trend of politicians who emerge from subcultures heavily reliant on online activity is their inability to maintain electoral and institutional strength due to their confrontational attitudes. Right-wing politicians that immerse themselves in White Nationalism have drawn negative attention to themselves to the point that they put safely Republican seats in serious risk. While the re-election ability of QAnon believers has not yet been tested, it is within the realm of possibility that their views along with their public spats with other Republicans could hurt them at the ballot box. Results for the left are more mixed, with Black Lives Matter becoming firmly accepted within in the Democratic

Party, while its issues such “Defund the Police” and socialism seem to hinder the electoral hopes of progressive candidates. This is in addition to rousing the ire of party leadership for not backing the party’s position on major legislative efforts. This fighting with the mainstream elements of their respective major parties has great potential to stymie the enactment of their espoused agendas even as they accumulate significant public support.

This is not to say that the examined groups are uniformly unsuccessful. Given the conservative groups’ rejection of liberal democratic norms in their entirety and the progressive groups’ opposition to firmly entrenched power structures, traditional metrics of influence may not be how these groups define success. Though each of the four groups have been shown to have achieve varying degrees of influence within the political channels outlined in Chapter 4, said groups may not regard them as equally important or important at all. From the examined groups’ perspective, success may come chiefly from convincing society at large to embrace their ideology rather than convincing actors in channels of elected power. Alternatively, these groups may derive a sense of achievement from engaging in ideological theatrics designed to draw attention to themselves and rally supporters. Provocations ranging from advocacy of deeply unpopular policy to costumed displays to outright violence may give members of these groups a feeling that they are subverting existing power structures. This aligns with Judith Butler’s conception of “performative politics,” whereby acts primarily serve to unsettle hegemonic political understandings (Youdell, p. 4, 2006). Given that online subcultures have undoubtedly shifted the terms of American political debate, brought previously fringe ideologies into

the mainstream, and have upset elite concepts of politics, one can argue they have been very successful from a performative politics standpoint.

Ultimately, whether one can judge online political movements as successful depends on which factor is being examined. In terms of level of media attention and carving out a significant bloc of the American population that supports them, then these movements have been successful in achieving their goal. As far as which of these factors is prioritized, these groups exist on a spectrum, QAnon being the least interested in mainstream conceptions of power and Black Lives Matter being the most concerned with concrete change to systems of governance. The success of the examined groups may reflect the current populist-centered moment for politics in the United States and elsewhere. As the broader acceptance of liberal democratic norms erodes in the United States and across the world, these online movements that prioritize populism, purity, and pomp may find their influence increasing.

While much of the information found over the course of research did not come as a shock, there were a number of genuine surprises. First, given the nods to QAnon made by Donald Trump, twenty-three percent support for the conspiracy theory among Republicans seems lower than anticipated. On the other hand, the Republican Party seems much more open to overt racism than expected with a majority of them expressing dislike of immigrants on a cultural level. This suggests that Republicans are increasingly open to far-right views, but there are limits to the type of anti-democratic, conspiratorial, and unfounded views they will embrace. For the left-wing cases, what was surprising was their commitments to ideas that at first glance seem fairly detached from their primary cause for action. For Black Lives Matter, the emphasis on feminism, particularly among

its founders, was somewhat unexpected as it has received little attention in the mainstream media. For socialists, the depth of their commitments to foreign policy running counter to Western norms came as a surprise and one that seems to have little to do with the cause of economic reform at home. Both of these facts suggest that the modern left puts a great deal of emphasis on intersectionality, intertwining various social and economic concerns into a larger fight for social justice.

As far as what the institutional impact of these movements may be going forward, that varies considerably between groups. Both White Nationalism and beliefs bordering on QAnon support seem to be gaining further traction within the Republican Party in response to Joe Biden's nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court. Not only did the Republican Party attempt to smear Jackson by linking her to the cause of opposing critical race theory (Republican National Committee, 2022), but Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz of Texas insinuated that Jackson was soft on child pornography cases (Sorkin, 2022). Critics found Cruz's position to not only be in bad faith but also potentially a nod to QAnon (Sorkin, 2022). For the left, socialists seem poised to add some new membership in Congress, namely a seat in Austin, Texas (Walker, 2022), but they will almost certainly remain a small faction among elected Democrats at the national level. Black Lives Matter seems to be the only movement examined in this thesis that has achieved truly mainstream political acceptance, drawing majority support among both Black Americans and women. In short, none of these movements seem likely to disappear in the near future, but the influence they wield will vary considerably, with the most anti-democratic and conspiratorial of these subcultures appearing to be gaining traction within the Republican Party.

The seeming rise in influence of racism and conspiracy theories within the Republican party is reflective of the lopsided nature of American political polarization. As the more homogenous and ideology focused party between themselves and their Democratic Party rivals, Republicans face much stronger pressure to be pure ideologues than Democrats do (Grossman & Hopkins, p. 120, 2016). The rise of fringe beliefs within the Republicans may therefore be an inevitable outcome of such ideological pressure. Given the exclusionary and hostile nature of White Nationalism and QAnon, a continued rise in anti-democratic attitude among Republicans could be possible. It is this rising sentiment against liberal democratic norms that has prompted some researchers to wonder if the historically strong democracy of the United States will hold on (Levitsky & Ziblatt, p. 2, 2018). Thus far, the United States and its institutions have stood firm against radicalization, subversion of democratic institutions, and even violence. And the more progressive of online political movements have arguably brought greater racial justice and ideological diversity that in fact expanded the democratic discussion by including the active participation of socialists. But as the influence of the internet and the most undemocratic of the political actors therein continues to grow, increased government dysfunction, party infighting, and even violence are real possibilities. For the strength of liberal democratic norms and institutions, the next few years will be a crucial test.

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