

# **UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF RIGHT WING POPULISM**

## **Honors Thesis**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Science in Political Science**

In the School of Arts and Sciences  
at Salem State University

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Commonwealth Honors Program  
Salem State University  
2022

## Abstract

The United States is experiencing an astonishing wave of populism. Left wing populism appeals to fighting the root causes responsible for the economic destitution and lack of livability that many millions of Americans face. However, the more successful counterpart to left wing populism, right wing populism, appeals to nativist rhetoric and cultural hegemony as a way of overcoming these issues. The commonplace interpretation of average outsiders looking in is that individuals who vote for right wing populist candidates (*viz.* Donald Trump) are just, individually, racist. That however cannot explain the incredible popularity and effectiveness of Donald Trump's campaign nor the immense power that right wing politicians hold in the American political discourse. Research in this field is immense but writers often either focus too specifically on the actions of particular politicians or focus too specifically on economic conditions facing the working and middle class. But these two cannot live separately from each other. Right wing political actors capitalize on the unstable conditions of the working and middle class by appealing to the "culture war." Additionally, while many sources point out the tactics used by right wing political actors they rarely recognize the underlying intention- the cornerstone of right wing populism: to undermine and replace traditional sources of authority with right wing political actors. By analyzing data, events, video clips, and quotes found through texts and online, and incorporating theories of other writers I was able to provide, what I believe, is a partial explanation for the rise of right wing populism. Mainly, **(1)** a number of underlying economic plights caused by policies which favor the desires of the billionaire class and corporations (to pursue maximum profit) over working class and middle class people, **(2)** the economic and political manipulation at the hands of bourgeois political actors (such as the Koch family), and **(3)** a series of intentional political strategies used by right wing political actors to inspire outrage, garner support, and manipulate the political narrative with a particular interest in undermining traditional sources of authority and promoting nativist rhetoric. While I believe that my theories do explain the rise of right wing populism *to an extent*. I believe the possible explanations are far too numerous to be contained in any single piece of writing, no matter the length. This is because any particular subject which one presents as a "reason" can be analyzed indefinitely, becoming incredibly niche and demanding its own topic of study.

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## Acknowledgements

Words cannot express my gratitude toward Doctor Mulcare for his investment in me and my project. His instruction, advice, and (most of all) patience both inside and outside the classroom were invaluable to not only the creation of this thesis but also to my ability to graduate. I have never had an instructor who is as knowledgeable, understanding, and impactful as him.

I am also extremely grateful for Scott Nowka who guided me through the lengthy process of graduating with honors. He has been there to assist me through every missed deadline and subsequent heart attack to ease my stress. His permanently kind and thoughtful disposition has been crucial for both graduation and my mental health.

Thanks should also go to the Political Science and Philosophy department professors at Salem State who have not only contributed specifically to the analysis of my thesis but to my academic ability and achievement. Without a foundational understanding, both in Political Science and Philosophy, I would not have been able to complete this.

I would also like to thank my many classmates who challenged my views in the classroom. Though rather unsuccessful in that endeavor, I believe it is more due to my own stubbornness rather than a lack of validity in your arguments.

I would also like to acknowledge Sammuel Zichella, Raymond LaBru, Kay Scott, Izzy Welch, and Cassidy O'Connor, without whom it is likely I would not be here today. Their friendship, advice, and compassion mean more to me than anything. Izzy Welch, in particular, has been so incredibly helpful with editing and reviewing Political Science assignments and opinions.

I would also like to say thank you to my parents and my brother and his fiance. (hopefully wife depending on when you read this.) Their unending love (and financial support) has always been the source of my passion and empathy which guide me through every aspect of my life.

Finally I would like to thank my partner, Jenny Dolby. Her love and support for me while going through the last four years of school have been so important. She is perhaps the most valued connection I have in this life and she has changed me and my outlook on life in ways that are ineffable. My love for her is stronger than anything I have witnessed and without her I would be lost.

I would be remiss, however, to not acknowledge my (cat) assistant Charlotte Neo-Xwing, who spent time with me every night I stayed up doing homework and sat on only the most important of documents.

## Preface

This project is the culmination of about a year's work while attending Salem State University. It represents not only my thoughts on the rise of right wing populism but also the culmination of my work at SSU. I am proud of what I have accomplished in this paper but I would like to address several things first.

First is my background; as a queer leftist my paper has an inherent pedagogical bias. I tend to make vastly different interpretations of pieces of information or source material than a conservative would. When I examine sources I am not just thinking about the individuals directly involved but the working and middle class individuals involved as well. There is one section, Section III, which is somewhat theoretical, meaning it is not available to me in terms of the topic at hand, so the creation, exploration, and analysis of some concepts is entirely my own. Because of the inherent leftist bias I make several assumptions which, for the sake of the arguments in which they are claimed, must be taken at face value (e.g. That gender is not a binary spectrum) So when reading I urge you to keep that in mind.

Second I would like to address a wording decision I have made, mainly the term Populist right vs. conservative vs. republican vs. The right. While I recognize their independent natures I must protest their separation into different natures because I believe from a working and middle class view there is no functional difference. What I mean is this: Let's assume that politician X is a populist republican and person Y is an average fiscal, conservative, Republican. When person Y goes to vote is he going to pick politician X, the republican or is he going to choose politician Z, the democrat?

Essentially, though, I see no difference between what some might distinguish as "populist right" and "conservative right" or "republicans." If you are part of the working or middle class and you support a party, is it not now a populist party?

In this section I would also like to distinguish how I use working and middle class. Middle class is based on my interpretation of what defines middle class which I set, in my head until this point, at \$150,000. While the working class is typically defined by the type of job you have, I don't believe a lot of working class people are making more than \$150,000. So I believe we can safely assume that "working and Middle class" refers to all people making under \$150,000. Upper class would refer to people who make more than that but are not part of the billionaire class.

That is all for this page, if you are reading this, thank you! I hope you enjoy my analysis.

This is version one of this paper. I intend to continue working on it in the future and hope to get it published. So, if you are reading this in the Salem State Honors lounge in a year after 2022, please feel free to email me ([Pkroyak@gmail.com](mailto:Pkroyak@gmail.com)) if you have any questions or want a (potentially) updated copy, though I cannot guarantee that I will still have this email depending on when you are reading this.

## Introduction

The United States, like many countries in the West today, is experiencing a wave of populism. While the populist left in the United States has certainly attracted thousands through the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, the populist right, or more accurately the influence of the populist right, has grown amazingly to the point where two-thirds of self-identified Republicans want Donald Trump to retain political power. More astonishingly, forty four percent of self-identified Republicans want Trump (who will be around seventy-eight) to run for president in 2024.<sup>1</sup>

Right-wing populism has been dominating the American political discussion since at least 2016, though the precursors to this movement go back further. This paper will discuss the underlying causes of the recent surge in right wing populism and the intentional strategies that right wing political actors use to both gain and retain support for the populist right in the United States.

The rise of right wing populism cannot be attributed to a single person, movement, or event but rather a series of **(1)** a number of underlying economic plights caused by policies which favor the desires of the billionaire class and corporations (to pursue maximum profit) over working class and middle class people, **(2)** the economic and political manipulation at the hands of bourgeois political actors (such as the Koch family), and **(3)** a series of intentional political strategies used by right wing political actors to inspire outrage, garner support, and manipulate the political narrative with a particular interest in undermining traditional sources of authority and promoting nativist rhetoric.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn, Amina. "Two-Thirds of Republicans Want Trump to Retain Major Political Role; 44% Want Him to Run Again in 2024." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, December 20, 2021.

Mainly, many people in the United States are unable to live basic lives because of a constraining economic system and legislation which favor imminent and permanent indebtedment, disinvestment from public goods, tremendous income inequality through financialization and wage theft, and corporate interests. This inability to live comfortably has caused disillusionment with the government for most Americans and is particularly salient with white men who are feeling the heat of unfettered capitalism in ways that contradict their view of the American exceptionalist framework. This disillusionment coupled with the infiltration of right wing views in the political and cultural views by presenting new sources of legitimate discourse and authority is capitalized on by right wing political actors through scare tactics and nativist/white nationalist rhetoric in order to achieve the political, cultural, and economic power to drive their movement.

## **The Declining Conditions of the Working and Middle Class**

### **Maximization of Profit and Financialism**

The first underlying cause of right wing populism is perhaps the most visible and understood as it is impossible to ignore if one is not part of the upper class. The crumbling infrastructure and unlivable economic conditions of the United States are plain to see for most everyone as the basic needs of the working class are not being met. Wealth inequality caused by financialization, massive amounts of unavoidable debt, the rising price of basic necessities, stagnant wages, and a lack of state assistance due to disinvestment in public goods, all done for the maximization of corporate profit, has led to not only a dire economic position for workers but

also a serious distrust in the political system and has pushed people towards populist parties with the hope of change.

Wealth inequality in the United States has reached a point where the bottom fifty percent of Americans own half as much wealth as the top one percent of Americans.<sup>2</sup> This wealth inequality simply means that many Americans, and surely a vast majority of the working class, are unable to fully participate in the American economy. This is not a fluke but a consequence of the development of modern capitalism into a fiat currency which incentivizes the maximization of profit and the manipulation of incorporeal wealth- financialization.

This issue starts and ends with the concept of the maximization of profit. Corporations, and individuals, are incentivized to maximize profit by any means necessary in order to acquire the maximum amount of capital to stay competitive. But this concept, fundamental to the progression of capitalism and thus our economy, is necessarily at odds with the rights and livelihood of the workers who provide the labor for corporations.

Corporations have a vested interest in not only keeping wages as low as possible but also in preventing any worker benefit which costs money or time. Corporations, and all employers in general, will actively deny sick pay, overtime pay, maternity leave, retirement and health benefits etc. if they know that the repercussions of denying these fundamental rights will cost less than the wealth they save by implementing rules and regulations which enforce these policies. While this certainly paints corporations in a bad light when they do so it would be foolish, under a capitalist system, to *not* do so (assuming it is profitable.) This is the same logic used to justify improper waste management by large corporations. In 2013, for instance, Walmart was fined \$82

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<sup>2</sup> Paul, Jean-Michel. *The Economics of Discontent: from Failing Elites to the Rise of Populism*. Warsaw, Poland: FormattingExperts.com, 2019.

million after illegally dumping hazardous waste, including pesticides, in California and Missouri. That same year Walmart reaped approximately \$128 *billion* in revenue.<sup>3</sup>

Individuals and companies also participate in the financialization of capitalism, as previously mentioned. Financialization can be described eloquently as “profit without production.” Essentially it describes a shift in capitalism away from owning physical capital towards the manipulation of incorporeal wealth for profit. Instead of investing wealth into infrastructure and/or job creation, as would happen in early capitalism, wealthy actors (corporations, affluent individuals) invest in abstract forms of wealth creation *viz.* The stock market. This is because stocks allow one to guarantee wealth growth through stock value increases, dividends, and inflation. This has resulted in massive disinvestment in practical goods and immense investment of what Sociologist John Bellamy Foster calls “increasingly speculative, casino-like pursuits” as opposed to “long term investment into the real economy.”<sup>4</sup>

This accumulation of wealth comes in the form of monopolistic gain for the few who actually benefit who then use their surplus to invest in speculative forms of profit. This, essentially, is how economic bubbles and the subsequent crashes (*e.g.* the 2008 recession) come to fruition. But this process is, in a sense, unavoidable for wealthy actors. As the “bubble” grows it becomes more fragile because preventing a “burst” is contingent on growth.<sup>5</sup> But the larger the bubble the larger the burst. These bursts, while they have an impact on shareholders, have a more pungent impact on the working class people who are, inevitably, laid off for the sake of maintaining profit. In 2008 2.6 million Americans lost their jobs and unemployment reached 7.2%- the highest it had been since 1992.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Clifford, Stephanie. “Wal-Mart Is Fined \$82 Million over Mishandling of Hazardous Wastes.” The New York Times. The New York Times, May 29, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, John B. “The Financialization of Capitalism.” Monthly Review, April 1, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Uchitelle, Louis. “U.S. Lost 2.6 Million Jobs in 2008.” The New York Times. The New York Times, January 9, 2009.

## Circular Debt and the Cost of Living

Maximizing profit and financialization have led to other, less abstract, economic consequences as well. The maximization of profit and financialization have caused an unmanageable debt crisis and an incredibly high (and rising) cost of living. Workers are forced to participate in a system which they know will financially ruin them and keep them bound to serve the financial interests of wealthy actors for life.

Starting with the facts, the average American, as of 2022, has about \$155,000 in debt.<sup>7</sup> Half of Americans have credit card debt, a quarter have student loan debt, and 21% have medical debt.<sup>8</sup> This debt, it goes without saying, is unavoidable. It is a result of a monetary value being placed on human rights and necessities. Medical care and shelter are obvious examples of this- debt is unavoidable if you need a roof over your head or an emergency heart procedure.

But so too is college education. Not only is education a fundamental human right, but the economic and/or physical consequences of not obtaining a degree in higher education are dire. One could work a labor intensive job, like construction work, and make a manageable income. But these occupations, that do not require a degree but pay a manageable salary, come at the cost of wearing down your body and many people are incapable or unwilling to do such labor. Simultaneously, the consequences of *getting* a college degree are dire as well. In 2010, for instance, PEW reported that the median household debt was double than the median household income in households that held any student debt.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dickler, Jessica. "Amid Rising Prices, American Families Fall Deeper in Debt." CNBC. CNBC, January

<sup>8</sup> Paul, 29

<sup>9</sup> Fry, Richard. "Young Adults, Student Debt and Economic Well-Being." Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020.

Additionally, debt is inherently circular, predatory, and financialized insofar as it is a direct link of lower and middle class Americans paying unearned wealth to wealthy actors (often private banking corporations.) So it is circular in that it reinforces the incentive to continue to give out loans but also in that it is directly contributing to wealth inequality. It is unearned insofar as usury is financialized and produces no commodities which can be utilized. Finally it is predatory in that it, much like the lottery, is only applicable with those who already do not have enough (the wealthy do not need to take out loans.) The most disadvantaged people must take out the largest, and riskiest, loans. For instance, the total student loan debt as of January 2022 was about \$1.7 *trillion*. According to an estimate done by the *Brookings Institute*, African Americans with student debt owe about \$52,000 whereas white Americans owe on average \$28,000.<sup>10</sup>

However one could retort that the point of indebting yourself is to achieve economic prosperity in the long run through a good occupation. However, because of the high cost of living, Americans are spending most of their money on their basic needs and have little left over to effectively participate in the economy the way that wealthy actors do. The cost of rent, for instance, rose 14% on average in the top fifty largest cities from 2021 to 2022.<sup>11</sup> The cost of rent, education, food, gas, and healthcare continue to rise. Yet the federal minimum wage is still set at \$7.25/hour and has not been increased since 2009. This has resulted in not only an inability to participate in the economy in the same ways as wealthy actors, but an inability to pay for basic necessities. According to the Brookings Institute, for instance, low income households (the

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<sup>10</sup> Hess, Abigail J. “CNBC Survey: Student Loan Holders Are More Likely to Be Women and People of Color.” CNBC. CNBC, January 28, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Cerullo, Megan. “Rents Soared in Many U.S. Cities Last Year - and May Keep Rising in 2022.” CBS News. CBS Interactive, February 2, 2022.

bottom 20% of households by their definition) spend over 80% of their income on basic needs with over 40% being spent on housing alone.<sup>12</sup>

The situation is obviously dire, low and middle income Americans are struggling to pay bills and obtain housing, education, and in many cases food. If one is to successfully navigate their way through life in America as a low income person it requires either a lot of luck, and constant budgeting which often is still not enough and causes great mental health problems. Ideally the state (meaning government) ought to prop up the downtrodden however the state offers little to no support.

### **Lack of State Support**

The issues mentioned above are plain and obvious. It is hard to claim that Americans are in a well placed economic position. Ideally the state, operating under the guaranteed principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, ought to step in and assist its citizens with a sort of social safety net. However it is not just the problems themselves that cause disillusionment with the state, it is also the lack of state response in addressing these problems.

The United State government has a lack of helpful infrastructure and the infrastructure that is present even still is rooted in capitalistic principles of wealth extraction. This is best explained through examples.

First, suburbs and cities are purposely designed to be less walkable to encourage buying a car. According to the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) walkable cities are more equitable and economic (for the individual.)<sup>13</sup> But, because of the maximization of

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<sup>12</sup> “Where Does All the Money Go? - Brookings Institution.” Accessed May 2022.

<sup>13</sup> “Pedestrians First: Tools for a Walkable City.” Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. Accessed April 2022.

profit, this is undesirable to construction and (particularly) auto corporations. Because of this, new infrastructure development is often car-centric with residential zones clearly spaced away from recreational and commercial zones. This is the case for American suburbia.

The second example is unemployment benefits, or rather, lack thereof. According to PEW only 29% of unemployed people received unemployment benefits during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.<sup>14</sup> This, of course, varied widely between the fifty-three different unemployment programs in the United States (one for each state, Washington D.C., the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico.) So whereas 65.9% of unemployed Massachusians received benefits, only 7.6% of unemployed Floridians received benefits.<sup>15</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic was (is) devastating, but so few Americans received aid other than three \$500-\$1,400 stimulus check that you may or may not have qualified for (and may or may not have received)<sup>16</sup> When you combine those missteps with the fact that Americans do not have subsidized healthcare, childcare, or education, it is easy to see why many may resent the state as a whole.

### **Seeking Alternatives**

Where does all this then leave the American people? They experience unparalleled wealth inequality, stagnant wages, a rising cost of living, inescapable debt, intentional capitalistic and predatory development, a lack of new infrastructure, an underdeveloped social welfare system, and often lack access to basic needs and rights. The cost of this is the degradation of trust

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<sup>14</sup> DeSilver, Drew. "Not All Unemployed People Get Unemployment Benefits; in Some States, Very Few Do." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, August 27, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Iacurci, Greg. "Almost 645,000 People Still Hadn't Gotten Their Third Stimulus Checks by Last Fall, Treasury Says." CNBC. CNBC, March 24, 2022.

in the United States as an effective state, a lack of interest in pursuing “typical” candidates, and an untreated epidemic level of mental illness, and they are certainly angry.

Plainly, there is little trust or hope in the United States right now. According to PEW, only 22% of Americans say they can trust the United States government to do what is best “most of the time.” Only 2% said they can trust the U.S. government, every time.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a Gallup report revealed that in 2010 72% of people disapproved of Congress (and that number has stayed consistent through 2022)<sup>18</sup>

These numbers probably are not shocking to the American reader. It has been standardized, culturally, to expect a disappointing government which offers disappointing solutions, brought to you by disappointing candidates who do not truly represent many people’s ideology. It is easy, as an American, to assume that this is the norm. But while other countries certainly have these problems to a certain extent, the capitalistic takeover of society is often held back by sensible legislation and a developed social safety net.

Denmark, for instance, a country famous for its comprehensive social welfare network, has the lowest rate of perceived corruption according to Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perception index report.<sup>19</sup> Perceived corruption of course is not exactly the same as trust, but they are undoubtedly linked. (It is important, and interesting, to note, however, that the Danish government attributes this trust to the cultural norms of Nordic Europe.<sup>20</sup> But it would be questionable to assert that that trust does not come, at least partially, from the trust instilled by a social safety net and legitimate political satisfaction.)

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<sup>17</sup> “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Gallup. “Congress and the Public.” Gallup.com. Gallup, April 19, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> “Corruption Perceptions Index 2021 - Publications.” Transparency.org. Accessed May 2022.

<sup>20</sup> “Trust a Cornerstone of Danish Culture.” Denmark.dk. Accessed May 2022.

Americans, however, have no such trust. Not only is there a lack of trust but the conditions in the United States have led to serious mental consequences undoubtedly linked to the issues described above. 50% of Americans list financial uncertainty as their highest stressor.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, 21 million American adults have experienced at least one major depressive episode in 2019.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, rates of depression are more prevalent in people of color, especially young women of color. And while adolescents (ages 12-17) experience higher rates of depression less than half of them receive care.<sup>23</sup> This undoubtedly solidifies the link between this alarming rate of mental illness with the abysmal conditions of the working and middle class.

Overall Americans are financially, physically, and mentally hurting. The cause, either direct or indirect, is evidently a lack of financial security and the inability to safely live a comfortable lifestyle which provides not only physical (basic needs) but mental and intellectual needs as well.

### **Why Right Wing Populism?**

While the economic disparities and hardships above are evident, one might assume that this has resulted in a massive rise of left wing populism rather than right wing populism. But it has not. That is not to say that left wing populist movements are not gaining traction, but one might assume that right wing populist movements, which offer nativist solutions rather than persuasive economic reform, would be written off entirely by the working and middle class. But,

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<sup>21</sup> Paul, 27

<sup>22</sup> "Major Depression." National Institute of Mental Health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Accessed March 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

according to Statistica, 42% of voters earning under \$50,000, and 43% of voters making between \$50,000 and \$100,000/year voted for Trump.<sup>24</sup> While that does not constitute a majority, it is not a number that undermines the validity of calling the Trumpist movement “populist.”

So then how do these problems contribute to the success of right wing populism? Such a critique was levied at this project before, and it is understandably confusing. But there are several factors, both with the methodology of this project and the unique cultural impact that unfettered capitalism has caused.

Firstly, this project is undeniably leftist in its critiques, methods, and conclusions. That is not to say that its conclusions are disproven on account of bias but rather that the method in which data is analyzed and compiled is focused on the impact and relation to class dynamics and is primarily concerned with the impact on the working and middle class. While this framework is useful for analyzing the rise of right wing populism, especially through the conditions of the American people, it is not representative of the majority’s understanding of those conditions. Plainly, most Americans, especially those who make up the working class base of right wing populist parties, do not view their own economic hardship in a leftist framework. So while many may *feel* these problems, and be able to recognize that a problem *exists*, they may not be able to recognize root causes which stem from the capitalist nature of our society.

Second, as mentioned above, the economic hardships of unfettered capitalism are now being felt in a new way, by new people, mainly, white men. Political scientist, Wendy Brown, highlights this in the introduction chapter in her book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. She writes: “[If people of color] were hurt as much [as white people] or more by neoliberal decimations of union protected jobs and public goods, by declining opportunities and educational access and quality, what blacks and latinos did not suffer

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<sup>24</sup> “2020 Presidential Election Exit Polls: Share of Votes by Income U.S. 2020.” Statista, November 9, 2020.

was the loss of pride of place in America or the West.”<sup>25</sup> Brown contends that unlike conservatist neoliberalism before the 2008 financial crisis, which decimated the economic security and capital of the white working and middle class, post 2008 conservatism had to provide more than perceived economic security. Middle and Working class white men felt the unbearable load of capitalism for the first time in their life. This, Brown says, along with the perceived inequality of equal opportunity programs and a distinct culture difference between rural and urban areas made white Americans, especially men, feel left behind and unappreciated by the thing that many of them hold in high regard: the United States government.<sup>26</sup>

It is these two things, the lack of understanding of the root causes of economic hardships, and a base of white Americans who had never felt ostracized by the United States before, that lead to a rise in right wing populism rather than left wing populism (which is undeniably propped up by minority groups and certain sects of academia.) Regardless of which side one chooses, the economically downtrodden are resentful, distrusting, and can easily tell that the system does not work for them (regardless if they recognize the root causes.)

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, Wendy. “Introduction.” In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, 3. Columbia University Press, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, 2

## **The Infiltration of Right Wing Political Actors: Examining the Koch Brothers**

The American working class is suffering like never before. The wealthy inequality and the failures of Capitalism are simply too blatant to ignore. Today, Americans of all backgrounds are feeling the economic weight of labor exploitation, disinvestment, financialization, and debt crises. Included in this suffering are working class whites, more specifically working class white men. But economic hardship alone is not sufficient to drive someone towards the populist right. This section will not talk extensively about the exact rhetoric of the right, though obviously talking about far-right rhetoric will be unavoidable to some extent, but rather the process of legitimizing far-right views through political manipulation (through the lens of the Koch brothers) and how this manipulation set the groundwork for Trump's 2016 campaign.

Through the careful funneling of money into thousands of organizations, partially astroturfed movements, politicians, and legal battles across the country, wealthy right-wing actors (such as the Koch Brothers) were able to manipulate the perceived prominence and legitimacy of right-wing viewpoints which presented libertarian explanations and solutions to the problems that Americans were/are experiencing. This legitimization allowed for more public and prominent far-right actors (Donald Trump) to latch on to an established and disheartened base and present far-right perspectives as a valid alternative.

“Far right” in this instance is referring to the explanations and solutions offered by right-wing activists which gained significant popularity throughout the 2000's and 2010's. Mainly, beginning with the Tea Party movement: focus on decreasing/ eliminating government economic oversight, opposing social welfare programs (especially for immigrants), belief in

traditional gender norms (opposition to trans rights, opposing LGBTQ visibility, patriarchal family structure,) anti-immigrant sentiment such as nativism and white-replacement theories, anti-globalism (which is often a dog whistle for antisemitism), anti-environmentalism, vehement anti-leftism (which is the broad application of their ideals to a singular political enemy,) and economic protectionism.

Additionally it is important to note that populist-right groups utilize blatant racism, ethno-nationalism, and/or neo-Nazism but are still able to attract people of color and other marginalized groups. So even though the specter of ethno-nationalism looms within many right wing populist movements, such as Donald Trump's campaign, these movements often have a sizable amount of people of color and other minority groups. The explanation for this will be built upon in the last section.

Finally, it is important to mention that while this section effectively uses the Koch brothers and their influence as a case study, they are certainly not alone in the legitimization business. However, the Kochs are the most obvious and well known example.

The Koch Brothers were able to fund thousands of organizations such as non-profits, conservative think tanks, school programs, and PACs, across the country which successfully promoted right-wing candidates and radical-right ideas, effectively astroturfing a new political ideology. While this process was not exclusive to the Kochs' influence, they provide the most plain example.

### **The Infiltration of Education**

In order to legitimize right-wing view points with younger people, the Koch's funded thousands of school programs and foundations aimed towards interaction with children. Through funding school curriculum, university programs and clubs, and scholarship programs, the Kochs

were able to get a solid grasp on the legitimate pedagogy of the United States for nearly twenty years. This not only convinced a generation of children who participated in these programs of the virtues of libertarianism but served to undermine traditional sources of authority by presenting Koch schools as legitimate and thus casting doubt onto traditional sources of education. When libertarian ideology was in obvious contrast to the reality of the United States these libertarians sought out Donald Trump's right wing populism as the cure for their ailments.

The Charles Koch Foundation lists nearly 200 partners on their website, a vast majority of which are Universities.<sup>27</sup> Included in this list are internationally renowned universities like Harvard, Yale, and MIT. But the list of partners includes many state universities as well as many organizations such as “think tanks” and non-profits.

One such non-profit is the 1889 institute, which is a libertarian organization who claims to offer principled analysis based on limited government in the state of Oklahoma. In reality, this institution pushed for the privatization of schools, the opening of the economy during the initial COVID-19 quarantine, and the ending of any amount of state sponsored healthcare, including Medicaid.<sup>28</sup> This is a common theme for the “non-partisan” organizations that the Kochs often funded.

The Kochs provide resources to universities as well. They provide funding for club resources, student leaders, events, and even school curriculums including textbook materials and teacher/professor training. As of 2015 the Charles Koch Foundation (CKF) offered teaching seminars to roughly 18,000 teachers and professors and provided resources to over 40,000

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<sup>27</sup> “Partner Organizations · Charles Koch Foundation.” Charles Koch Foundation, May 17, 2021. <https://charleskochfoundation.org/who-we-support/partner-organizations/>.

<sup>28</sup> Galbraith, Brad, Mike Davis, and Byron Schломach. “Independent, Principled State Policy.” 1889 Institute. Accessed May 2022.

classrooms.<sup>29</sup> These seminars not only taught teachers and professors proper general teaching techniques but emphasized a specific view of the social sciences. Mainly they emphasized teaching students the values of laissez faire economics, a historical focus on only white elites, no talking of social justice including racial justice, no talking of class struggle, and (especially) the denial and refutation of environmentalism.<sup>30</sup>

Though many of the CKF's partners are universities this does not mean that they did not provide materials for younger students and public schools as well. The Koch brothers (not exclusively through the CKF) also funded thousands of high school, middle school, and elementary school programs. These programs were both in the classroom (through curriculum and teacher training as described above) as well as after school activities. Often they were not directly tied to the Koch brothers but were tied to organizations that were tied themselves to the Koch brothers. One such program is Youth Entrepreneurs. This organization provided, according to Bill Bigelow from *rethinkingschools.org* “‘A high school free market- and liberty-based course,’ supported by the network of Koch foundations and Koch-supported organizations.”<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the Bill of Rights Institute (which provides yearly curriculum workshops) says part of its goal is to challenge common economic fallacies such as “rich get richer at the expense of the poor . . . government wealth transfer programs help the poor . . . private industry is incapable of doing functions that public sector has always done . . . unions protect employees . . . minimum wage, ‘living wage,’ laws are good for people/society . . . capitalist societies provide

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<sup>29</sup> Wilkie, Christina, and Joy Resmovits. “Koch High: How the Koch Brothers Are Buying Their Way into the Minds of Public School Students.” HuffPost. HuffPost, December 7, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Bigelow, Bill. “The Koch Brothers Sneak into School.” Rethinking Schools, August 22, 2020.

an environment for greed and materialism to flourish.”<sup>32</sup> Bill Bigelow successfully identifies this as the ideology of the Tea Party.

These programs often target (white) low income areas with the promise of gaining an economic edge over their classmates with flashy posters saying things like “do you want to make money?”<sup>33</sup> Students were encouraged to join after school activity programs funded by the Koch brothers where they would learn the same libertarian values. Additionally these organizations would provide scholarship essay contests where students would be asked to write essays that adhere to libertarian values. Essentially a child growing up in the 1990s-2000s could go to a Koch funded middle school, a Koch funded High School, attend Koch funded after school activities, get a Koch funded scholarship, and then be admitted to a Koch funded university that has a Koch funded curriculum and Koch funded student organizations on campus.

On top of infiltrating public schools, the Koch’s were able to push their anti-public education and decrease public funding for schools. According to Bigelow, they did this with great success, especially in rural parts of the country (thirty-six schools now use this Youth Entrepreneur’s curriculum in Kansas and Missouri, and did so that the Koch curriculum (often provided to schools for free) would be preferred over no curriculum.<sup>34</sup>

The Koch brothers have had a strong grasp on the pedagogy of social sciences in the United States for nearly 20 years. There are entire generations of people who grew up learning libertarian values. The Koch’s promised these children that if they worked hard that they would see success. But they did not. The realities of unfettered capitalism are too plain to see. But this movement left a huge conservative platform which is unlikely to leave their ideology. There

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Wilkie, HuffPost

<sup>34</sup> Bigelow, Rethinking Schools

exists now a dichotomy between an obviously oppressive economy and a reluctance to reject their conservative roots.

Regardless of the obvious fallaciousness of the Koch's schooling curriculum, it has had profound impacts on the public perception around schools and legitimate authority. PEW reports that as of 2021 a majority of Republicans and more than a third of independents have a negative view of the K-12 public education system.<sup>35</sup> There have been many calls to implement private and charter schools in even the most liberal states. But these private schools serve only to reinforce class and racial separation and to drain funding from public schools.

Through vouchers, private schools are able to utilize public tax income to pay for students to go to a "better" school. The justification of this is that public schools do not have the resources to cover many expenses- never mind that the reason for that is often because the same legislation claiming this are the ones who cut their expenses in the first place. These private schools are also ripe with discrimination. Private schools often have a disproportionate amount of straight, white, Christian students, often by enforcing culturally and gender-normative dress codes.<sup>36 37</sup> In effect, and possibly in intent, these private schools drain money from public schools and enforce the white nationalist cultural hegemony that the United States has always, at least implicitly, endorsed.

The implication that private schools provide better schooling is also problematic, especially if that private school uses Koch funded curriculums. Plainly, it undermines traditional

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<sup>35</sup> Green, Ted Van. "Republicans Increasingly Critical of Several Major U.S. Institutions, Including Big Corporations and Banks." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, August 20, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Fiffiman, Bayless, and Jessica Yin. "The Danger Private School Voucher Programs Pose to Civil Rights." Center for American Progress, February 20, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Levin, Jessica. "The Problem with Private School Vouchers." Progressive.org, August 11, 2021.

and objectively true sources of knowledge, such as climate scientists and critical race historians, by putting them at odds with what these children and teachers perceive to be legitimate pedagogy. It creates a false equivalency between dubious claims and objective scientific and historical fact. This is because the objective truth conflicts with the narrative that the conservative coalition, in this case the Koch brothers, wishes to sell *viz.* If you are deep into the production and exploitation of fossil fuels, you are not too keen on the acceptance of the existence and urgency of climate change. This is just one way on how right wing political actors shift the legitimacy of authority to suit their needs; a subject which will be discussed explicitly in the final section of this paper.

### **Citizens United**

The Koch brothers did not merely influence schooling, however. Their influence on politics, and how politics operates, was immense. The best example of this was the victory of Citizens United which effectively lifted restrictions on corporate donations to Political Action Committees (PACs) and campaigns. This exacerbated the power and influence that wealthy right wing actors had on elections and subsequently the political narrative.

Citizens United, decided in 2010, ruled that money was inherently free speech. The 5-4 ruling operated on the assumptions that independent spending on campaigns and organizations would be both transparent and incorruptible. Of course neither of these things are true. Dark money, as it is referred to, is funneled through non-profits who hide donor lists, into PACs which support political campaigns. This decision also allowed unlimited advertising for specific politicians, so long as the entity producing the advertisement is not collaborating with the

politician or their campaign.<sup>38</sup> When looking at this decision it is not hard to see how it benefits wealthy individuals who are able to spend more to express their political desires compared to working or middle class individuals.

The Koch brothers capitalized on this immensely and immediately. 86% of outside campaign spending between 1998 and 2018, for instance, was spent between 2010 and 2018.<sup>39</sup> According to the New York Times, in 2014 the Kochs, through sponsored nonprofits, paid to air around 44,000 television slots, and that was only by August.<sup>40</sup>

This was not of no fruition either. Following Citizens United Republicans had a 4% stronger chance of getting elected overall; in some states it was closer to 10%.<sup>41</sup> Citizens United was also capitalized on by sitting politicians to maintain power. Following Citizens United incumbents were more likely to be elected and the average number of candidates per race decreased.<sup>42</sup> This effectively decreased the inherent “amount” of democracy in every election.

Citizens United was a coordinated attack by the wealthy on our already precarious elections. This is evident by the process by which this court case was brought about (by an independent organization which was formed for the specific purpose of combating election spending laws)<sup>43</sup> as well as its results and utter lack of popularity.<sup>44</sup> It not only gave an advantage

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<sup>38</sup> Lau, Tim. “Citizens United Explained.” Brennan Center for Justice, April 12, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> “Ten Years after Citizens United, House Democrats Call on Senate to Take up House-Passed Government Reform Measures.” The Office of Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, January 14, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Goldmacher, Shane. “How David Koch and His Brother Shaped American Politics.” The New York Times. The New York Times, August 23, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Klumpp, Tilman, Hugo M. Mialon, and Michael A. Williams. “The Business of American Democracy: Citizens United, Independent Spending, and Elections.” *The Journal of Law & Economics* 59, no. 1 (2016): 1–43.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Mayer, Jane. “Money Is Speech: The Long Road to Citizens United.” Chapter In *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Rise of the Radical Right*. New York: Anchor Books, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Balcerzak, Ashley. “Study: Most Americans Want to Kill ‘Citizens United’ with Constitutional Amendment.” Center for Public Integrity, January 28, 2022.

to candidates who are supported by the wealthy, but also dissuaded many people from attempting to run for office. This resulted in more conservatives, who are undoubtedly backed by dark money, being elected and thus allowed the normalization and legitimization of far-right ideals to continue and thrive.

### **The Tea Party**

The Tea Party was a semi-astroturfed movement manufactured with the intention of bringing libertarian viewpoints to the public eye. Although the party would lose traction soon after its creation, the party successfully gathered thousands of conservatives who would move on to become the fundamental base of the new populist right seen in Donald Trump's national conservative campaign.

After the election of Barack Obama in 2008, Rich Santelli, a CNBC reporter, had an outburst on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile exchange that warned against the newly elected administration and called for the formation of a fiscally conservative movement which he deemed the "Tea Party." What would follow is a massive outpour of far right individuals who would come to influence the politics of the Republican Party for years to come.

First and foremost, the Tea Party movement united otherwise separated conservatives into a single movement. According to Gallup, at its height in 2012, about 25% of Americans said they were either affiliated or supported the Tea Party.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, 4% of Americans claim they have either been to Tea Party rallies or donated to Tea Party organizations.<sup>46</sup> This was,

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<sup>45</sup> Gallup, Inc. "Key Midterm Election Indicators at or near Historical Lows." Gallup Historical Trends, June 16, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> "Tea Party Supporters: Who They Are and What They Believe." CBS News. CBS Interactive. Accessed April 2022.

evidently, not a small movement but rather an active and angry organization of millions of people. Looking into their beliefs (using statistics from CBS and the New York Times), however, gives us a glimpse into the misguided hatred on which this movement was founded.

First it is important to note that 89% of Tea Party members are white Americans and 59% are men. The rhetoric utilized by the movement makes this fact unsurprising as the Tea Party is generally regarded as purporting discrimination and white nationalist rhetoric. For instance, 38% of party members believed that Obama was born in another country and more than half of the Tea Party believes that “too much has been made of African American Problems.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, 25% said that “the Obama administration preferred blacks over whites.”<sup>48</sup> Overall, 88% of Tea Party members disapproved of the Obama administration's performance.<sup>49</sup> However, this hatred is evidently blind as when asked why they do not like the Obama administration a plurality of the responders (19%) said they “just don't like him.” 11% said that Obama was pushing the country towards Socialism, 9% said because he was dishonest, while only 10% said it was because of healthcare reform. Additionally, 64% believed that the Obama administration had increased taxes on most Americans, despite this being false.<sup>50</sup>

When looking at this data it is hard not to return to the ideas presented in the first section of this paper. It is clear that Tea Party supporters did not have a solid grasp on the root economic reasons for their anger but rather were using the Tea Party as an outlet for their frustration. Being a majority white, Tea Party members had not experienced the brutal effects of American Hyper capitalism and were quick to blame a new administration, which was already the target of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Montopoli, Brian. “Poll: Most Tea Partiers Believe Too Much Made of Problems Facing Blacks.” CBS News. CBS Interactive, December 14, 2012. .

<sup>49</sup> Condon, Stephanie. “Poll: Tea Party Activists Small but Passionate Group.” CBS News. CBS Interactive, December 14, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Tea Party Supporters: Who They Are and What They Believe.” CBS News

critique by many conservative pundits and politicians, and had few foundational principles that were based in substantive economic policy- despite what they claim. The Tea Party was obviously frustrated but pointed their frustration towards people of color who they viewed as being prioritized over their own needs. This coalition of frustration, of a new and demanding conservative voice, is what the Kochs wanted, and funded.

Though the Koch family denied allegations of being involved in funding the Tea Party,<sup>51</sup> Several Koch owned organizations, notably the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, which David Koch was a chairman of, funded Tea Party activities. Only 48 hours after Obama was sworn in, for instance, the foundation launched a deadly attack on Obama's stimulus package deal. They organized several rallies around the country to protest public spending. They also hosted media events (often featuring Koch insiders), sponsored commercials attacking the Obama administration, and effectively platformed conservative media actors.\*<sup>52</sup>

While the Koch's claim that they were not involved in the Tea Party may be true in the sense that they never attended rallies or explicitly supported the party verbally, their actions and the actions of their organizations certainly contributed to the Tea Party's popularity, salience, and rhetoric. Even if one could deny that point, one could certainly not deny the fact that the Tea Party's prominence benefitted the bourgeois class of the United States, including the Koch family. While members of the Tea Party do not typically share the views of the Koch brothers, this was not the intent. The intent was to unite the populist right. This movement was able to give working class conservatives a space in which to share their views and to release anger while feeling like they are accomplishing something. This feeling of "taking power back from the

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<sup>51</sup> Mayer, *Dark Money*, 166

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 165-68

\* "Actor" in this case, as in the rest of the paper, should be understood as an individual who seeks to influence the political narrative, not an individual playing a part, so to speak.

elites,” and “Fighting for your freedom” is the same feeling that retained Trump’s base and is the same feeling that pushed for more conservative legislation, including notably anti-climate legislation.

### **From Libertarian to The New Populist Right**

While the Kochs’ libertarian view point is not the main ideology of the populist right in America today they actively promoted the ideology, and candidates, of the new populist right by directly funding and providing resources for Republicans and right-wing populists like Donald Trump. They were able to avoid the backlash of Republicans calling out the obvious failure of their ideology and transfer the same “Kochtopus” (as Jane Mayer, in *Dark Money*, refers to it) to funding new right Republican ideals.

Many politicians were given Koch money even if their interests do not align with the Kochs completely. The Kochs prefer Republican candidates to democrats regardless if the Republican candidates' views align with the Kochs’. As Lee Fang writes for the intercept: “principled laissez-faire activism was never a criterion for receiving Koch money.”<sup>53</sup> During the 2016 election, for instance, the Kochtopus committed all eight of its metaphorical limbs. Characteristically done through non-profit organizations, the Koch network took to battle ground states. Americans for Prosperity employed hundreds of staffers who made millions of phone calls and knocked on thousands of doors advocating for a Republican vote.<sup>54</sup> Koch foundations also rolled out their characteristic commercials to battleground states. According to political scientist

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<sup>53</sup> Fang, Lee. “David Koch's Most Significant Legacy Is the Election of Donald Trump.” The Intercept. The Intercept, August 26, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Thomas Ferguson, This “spending blitz,” as Fang deems it, was what ultimately won Trump the presidency in 2016.<sup>55</sup>

Between 2008 and 2016, however, there was a disconnect. The Tea Party lost traction. The Koch rhetoric became blatantly untrue and so those who believed in it so wholeheartedly were dissatisfied with the economy and sought explanations for why they were unable to find jobs, get paid a reasonable amount, or pay their basic expenses. But these people were still subject to Koch influence whether they were aware or not. Republican politicians were Koch funded, the school programs, mentioned above, were still in place, campaign ads on TV promoted Koch candidates; the Kochtopus was still alive and active if dormant. So while Libertarian idealism was not being advocated for, the ideas presented by the Kochtopus still held the same gravitas. This pushed what was once Tea Party members to what most Americans think of when they hear “populist right”: Donald Trump.

Many of the Koch ads purported Islamophobic, anti-globalist, and anti-immigrant frameworks.<sup>56</sup> The Kochs laid the foundation for these core Trumpist beliefs by simply providing funding for their initial consumption through ads and politicians. Working class whites, who had been sympathetic to the Tea Party and were searching for something new, did not turn to the left but sought Republicans who promised change. This was exceptionally effective; PEW found that Tea Party members were more likely to stay with the GOP other than any other group. In fact, 78% of Tea Party members supported Donald Trump’s 2016 election, despite the obvious oxymoronic nature of supporting both Libertarian idealism and Trumpist authoritarianism.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “Trump’s Staunch GOP Supporters Have Roots in the Tea Party.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center, August 28, 2020.

This transfer from Koch to Trump was not limited to the voting base of the Tea Party but also many prominent political actors as well. A large part of Trump's team were Tea Partiers or Koch organizers. Corey Lewandowski, Trump's campaign manager, was a Senior staff member for Americans for Prosperity; Alan Cobb, who worked as a consultant for Trump, was the Vice President. Donald McGahn, a legal consultant for Trump, represented the Kochs in hearings with the FEC.<sup>58</sup> This coalition of influential individuals were able to apply the lessons they learned from the failed Tea Party and apply them, with success, to Donald Trump's campaign.

Essentially when the Tea Party fizzled out, the Kochs latched onto all other Republican candidates. Combine this with their previous success in schools and Citizens United, they were able to transfer their Tea Party base into this new right base which, though antithetical to their small government views, still served Koch interests by not being tough on environmental regulations and large corporations. The Kochtopus was able to create, sustain, and then guide a base for the populist right.

### **Results of Koch Influence**

The influence the Koch's had (and still mostly maintain) over the public discourse, and the politics of the United States has resulted in a surge in right-wing populism, as shown above. But their influence did not begin and end with creating a populist base. The Kochs were able to pass and thus legitimize anti-environmentalist legislation.

For instance, in 2011, one year after Citizens United, congress introduced the "No more excuses energy act of 2011." It never made progress beyond being introduced. The bill granted tax credits to clean energy providers but was not worthy of the name "No More Excuses Act."

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Even before it died (as there was no *before* it died) it had included a specification of the term “air pollutant” which did not include “carbon dioxide, water vapor, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons, or sulfur hexafluoride.” Which are all air pollutants. It also repealed the prohibition against producing oil and gas from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and established a commission to oversee the operation. It also required the President to designate ten areas, made up of federal land, to allow private sector oil or gas refineries. Finally, the private companies establishing these new developments, implicitly to be built in Alaska, would also be issued tax-free bonds for the financing of such developments.<sup>59</sup>

The No More Excuses Act was introduced around the height of the Tea Party’s popularity,<sup>60</sup> and it would not be the only failed attempt at climate legislation. But Congress was not only interested in blocking environmentalist policy but also in introducing anti-environmentalist legislation. H.R. 680, for instance, was introduced. The bill was entitled “To prohibit United States Contributions to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.”<sup>61</sup>

Though environmental protections would be under attack constantly through the Obama administration, it was the Trump administration which made substantive progress against environmental protections. According to the Brookings Institute, the Trump administration curtailed environmental protections more than seventy times including:<sup>62</sup>

- congress introducing many bills limiting the power of the EPA;
- proposing a 30% budget cut, much of that being cut from the EPA’s research department;

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<sup>59</sup> “H.R.1023 - 112th Congress (2011-2012): No More Excuses Energy Act of 2011” Congress.gov. Accessed May 12, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Gallup, Inc. “Key Midterm Election Indicators at or near Historical Lows.”

<sup>61</sup> “H.R. 680 (112th): To Prohibit United States Contributions to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.” Congress.gov, February 11, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Gross, Samantha. “What Is the Trump Administration's Track Record on the Environment?” Brookings. Brookings, June 16, 2021.

- withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement;
- reversing twenty-eight rules on air pollution and emissions;
- reversing twelve rules on drilling and extraction;
- fourteen rules on proper infrastructure and planning;
- fifteen rules on animal protections;
- eight rules on water pollution; and
- nine rules on toxic substances and safety.<sup>63 64</sup>

The four years of the Trump administration fundamentally undermined the effectiveness of environmental protections as well as the importance. When little credence is given to combating what your political enemies claim is an existential threat, it is hard to rationalize the validity of that threat with your commitment to your movement or party. This means that many right wing individuals do not believe the scientific consensus around climate change. Though 72% of Americans believe climate change is happening, only 57% believe it is man made. States with the highest levels of climate denial are undoubtedly the “red” states.<sup>65</sup> This is evidence of a concept explained extensively in the final section of this paper, the undermining of traditional authority.

Though the Biden administration is slowly re-regulating climate in the USA, it is still far too little far too late. Little action is being done to combat a literal world-ending scenario, and this inaction is being done on behalf of corporations and political actors who benefit from fossil

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<sup>63</sup> Popovich, Nadja, Livia Albeck-ripka, and Kendra Pierre-louis. “The Trump Administration Rolled Back More than 100 Environmental Rules. Here's the Full List.” *The New York Times*. October 16, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Lehmann, Evan. “Trump Budget Cuts Funds for EPA by 31 Percent.” *Scientific American*. *Scientific American*, March 16, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> “Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2021.” Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, February 23, 2022.

fuel industries and other forms of industry which rely on the destruction of the Earth's environment.

## **Conclusion**

Through the 2000s and 2010s the Kochs, and other right wing political actors, were able to establish a populist base and legitimize conservative ideals. They did this by funneling money into organizations which purported libertarian social solutions to economic problems in schools, funding conservative candidates, capitalizing on Citizens United, and funding the Tea Party movement. This libertarian base would go on to form the bedrock foundation of the new populist right in America. Their disappointment in the material conditions of the US not improving coupled with their unwillingness to separate from their conservative ideals fostered the perfect relationship to promote their creation into the new populist right.

# **Methods Used by Right Wing Political Actors to Gain and Maintain Support**

## **Preface**

This section fundamentally differs from the last two sections of this paper insofar as it is not concerned exclusively in explaining how *particular* events or actions affected or contributed to the rise of right wing populism but rather the strategies used by right wing political actors to gain and maintain support. The strategies are inherently sociological and niche, using manipulation tactics to effectively manipulate the perception of threats as well as what is and is not legitimate. They are best represented through examples. While many of these topics are theoretical, insofar as they are of my own thought rather than based on source material, they are of no less validity as they are backed by examples as well as my own experience as a political science student, a member of a marginalized group who has experienced the effects of these tactics first-hand, and as a politically active and conscious American citizen.

Additionally many of the following subsections are smaller as they are often obvious or niche. But the size of these subsections should not distract from the importance and validity.

The first subsection will deal with the tactics employed by right wing actors around the utilization of the “culture war.” The second subsection will look into how specific “othered” groups are viewed and targeted and why that leads to continued support from the populist base. The third and final subsection will talk briefly about the intersectionality of the new right wing populist movement and what impact that has on the movement as a whole.

Some readers may notice that the first subsection of the following section entitled “The Culture War: Tactics Used by Right Wing Political Actors Seen Through Examples” does not include a subsection on Nativist rhetoric. This is not meant to say that this is not a tactic used by the populist right, far from it. Nativism has a special place in the hearts of all right wing populist movements. However, the second subsection entitled “The Enemy” talks about how right wing political actors utilize nativism, and other forms of discrimination. All this to say, it would be redundant to include it twice.

## **Introduction**

Right wing political actors who benefit from a right wing populist movement use specific methods of communication which ultimately give their movement the ability to inspire numerous loyal supporters. Mainly these actors invoke a hyperinflated culture war ripe with tactics of fierce masculinity and loyalty. They label and organize political and cultural “enemies” (especially immigrants) which can be used as a scapegoat or “boogeyman”, and intentionally incorporate members of the “enemy” to give a sense of righteousness and fairness. These tactics serve a single underlying purpose- to delegitimize traditional sources of authority by presenting as truthful, benevolent, and innocent so they can continue to expand their wealth and influence.

## **The Culture War: Tactics Used by Right Wing Political Actors Seen Through Examples**

*Controlling the Dialogue*

The political “dialogue” (or narrative) is controlled, undoubtedly, through the media. By media, I primarily mean cable television and through social media websites. This is the primary way that political actors speak directly to their base, other than speeches and events. Right wing political actors capitalize on the biases of corporate news media who wish to maximize their profits, *viz.* an inherent incentive to platform outrage through deceit and a willingness to present two unequal positions as true. On top of this, Right wing viewers are more enthusiastic viewers because of the aggressiveness and confidence that right wing political actors present in media appearances.

Corporate news sources are inherently biased. They, like all corporate entities, have a profit incentive in mind when publishing all stories. This means that they will publish stories which they know will get the most interaction, regardless of its content (assuming that it does not actively ruin their image or advocate anti-corporate positions that could be detrimental to this quarter’s profit margins.) This manifests in several ways.

First there is a lack of responsibility when reporting the truth. This is especially evident in the (in)famous cable news network: Fox News. Fox News, particularly Tucker Carlson has been known to spout erroneous claims about any number of the latest relevant topics in American political discourse. For instance he claimed that “The United States ended slavery around the world.” He also claimed “Unbeknownst to most people, the Green New Deal came to Texas; the power grid in the state became totally reliant on windmills.” Both are statements which PolitiFact deems “pants on fire” (in reference to the nursery rhyme.)<sup>66</sup>

These two examples barely scratch the surface of the sheer amount of lies that the Tucker Carlson show has espoused. These lies are often presented in a ludicrous and overwhelmingly

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<sup>66</sup> “Latest Fact-Checks on Tucker Carlson.” PolitiFact. The Poynter Institute. Accessed May 2022.

hyperbolic tone, to urge their (imaginary) gravity. But there are no legal repercussions to this besides many failed defamation lawsuits. Famously, one defamation lawsuit was won by claiming that Carlson's statements were using intentional hyperbole for effect. The judge concurred saying, "Given Mr. Carlson's reputation, any reasonable viewer 'arrive[s] with an appropriate amount of skepticism' about the statements he makes."<sup>67</sup>

Despite this, the Tucker Carlson Show is the most watched cable program as of 2021 according to adweek.com. In fact seven out of the nation's ten most watched cable news programs are aired by Fox News.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, 93% of Fox News viewers identify as Republican.<sup>69</sup> This means that an almost entirely Republican viewership's main source of news is a legally self-admitting, but not self-presenting, satirical show, which intentionally lies in order to garner more attention.

The second way this profit incentive manifests in through presenting two stances as though they are equal, even when they factually are not. News outlets will often cover both sides of an argument, as though to feign neutrality, in order to attract viewers from both sides of the argument. This phenomenon is called *false balance* and it is present in many media broadcasts, especially around the topic of climate change. This is especially salient for right wing political actors as it gives them a platform in which their, often unfounded, positions can be viewed as a legitimate consideration.

For a specific instance of false balance, the evolution debate between Ken Ham and Bill Nye provides the most stark example. While it was commonly acknowledged that Nye won the debate handedly, media platforms covered the debate with an air of neutrality. CBS, for instance,

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<sup>67</sup> Sheth, Sonam. "Fox News Won a Court Case by 'Persuasively' Arguing That No 'Reasonable Viewer' Takes Tucker Carlson Seriously." Business Insider. Business Insider, September 24, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Katz, A.J. "Top Cable News Shows of 2021: Tucker Carlson Tonight Is No. 1 in All Measurements for First Time Ever." TVNewser. TVNewser, January 3, 2022.

<sup>69</sup> Grieco, Elizabeth. "Americans' Main Sources for Political News Vary by Party and Age." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, August 18, 2020.

published an article summarizing the debate but spoke to nothing of the scientific validity of evolution outside of quoting Nye. Much of the article talked about Ken Ham's creationism museum, even providing a link to the museum's website. Additionally the article is entitled "Bill Nye defends evolution in Kentucky debate." This gives the implication that evolution, rather than young-earth creationism, was in need of defense.<sup>70</sup>

False balance is a tool favored by media outlets because it gains the most traction but it implies, dangerously, that scientific consensus is a matter for debate among people who are not specialists. While media outlets do have a duty to provide both sides in any given story, it is possible to do this while providing background information on the agreed consensus of experts in the topic of whatever that story is.

News outlets also capitalize on manufactured outrage. Right wing political actors often manufacture outrage and direness on topics that are non-issue. These actors will dominate news outlets, especially social media, and in so doing force a response from opponents (often left wing political actors.) If opponents do not respond, there will be unchallenged fallacious discourse on a given topic. If opponents *do* respond they present another form of false balance. Pointing out this false balance almost always leads to *ad hominem* retorts from the aggressor, which serves only to reinforce stereotypes. Essentially, there is no way to successfully retort these attacks in the eyes of the people who follow the aggressors.

There are many examples of this, but a more recent form of this phenomenon is the topic of Critical Race Theory. (CRT) CRT is a pedagogical theory which aims to understand the history and laws of the United States through a lens of race. Mainly, it asserts the undeniable existence of white supremacy which is present in every era of American history. One especially passionate opponent of CRT is Ted Cruz who believes that it purports racism against white

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<sup>70</sup> "Bill Nye Defends Evolution in Kentucky Debate." CBS News. CBS Interactive, February 5, 2014.

people saying that it is as racist as “Klansmen in White Sheets.”<sup>71</sup> As to not fall into the trap mentioned in the paragraphs directly preceding this, it must be pointed out that this is an obvious false dichotomy. To compare the extensive historic plight of African Americans to a pedagogical theory which points out that plight and in doing so invoking such charged and violent examples of that plight is unreasonable at best.

Regardless, this was effective. Through constant media coverage and alarmist rhetoric over a non-issue the conservative wing was able to pass laws in thirty-six states that limit the teaching of “Racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics,” as Chalkbeat.org categorizes it.<sup>72</sup> This is a stark and extreme example of controlling the dialogue.

Right wing political actors also invoke intentional misunderstanding in public events (like televised debates and interviews) in order to paint opposing views as ridiculous and further the perception of cultural divide among their base. For media corporations, this is just another controversy which is guaranteed to get attention. For right wing political actors, it is a platform which one can utilize to make your opponent look foolish or out-of-touch.

For example, in a segment on the Tucker Carlson Show, Bill Nye is asked several times by Carlson “To what degree is climate change caused by human activity.” Nye answers “The word ‘degree’ is a word that you chose, but the speed [at which] climate change is happening is caused by humans.” Carlson then insists on getting an exact percentage and then continues to ask nonsensical questions all the while performing a facial expression that implies that Nye is incomprehensible and unable to answer simple questions. In that one interview, where Nye laid

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<sup>71</sup> Falcon, Russell. “Texas Sen. Ted Cruz: Critical Race Theory Is as Racist as 'Klansmen in White Sheets'.” KXAN Austin. KXAN Austin, June 19, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Stout, Cathryn, and Thomas Wilburn. “CRT MAP: Efforts to Restrict Teaching Racism and Bias Have Multiplied across the U.S.” Chalkbeat. Chalkbeat, February 2, 2022.

down simple principles of understanding climate change, Carlson was able to imply that Nye's position was ridiculous and that he disconnected with the average American by failing to answer "simple questions."<sup>73</sup>

Intentional misunderstanding is a cornerstone for controlling the political narrative. It can be seen in numerous places from talk show hosts like Tucker Carlson to online conservative media voice, Ben Shapiro, to President Donald Trump. It, much like all manipulation tactics used by right wing political actors, puts into question the legitimacy of objectively true information and the authorities that offer it. This solidifies the loyalty of the populist base because once traditional voices of authority are discarded they are effectively replaced by the political actors that undermined them. This, as well as the other phenomenon mentioned above, can only be done because of the synthesis of the right's need to platform their unfounded beliefs, and the media corporation's need for controversy to drive profit.

### *The Enemy is Weak and Strong*

When confronted with an enemy, right wing political actors will often present them as both weak and strong. More specifically it is the dichotomy of "the enemy is too weak to beat us because we are strong and numerous," and "the enemy is so strong; they are taking over our culture and successfully destroying America." Essentially, right wing political actors appear under attack when needed, but appear strong and decisive when needed. In this way, this is a form of doublethink.

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<sup>73</sup> "Tucker vs. Bill Nye the Science Guy - Youtube." Accessed March 2022.

This can be seen most obviously in the rhetoric of Donald Trump. Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" comes with an implicit assertion: that America is not great currently. Yet at almost every opportunity, in speeches, in interviews, and (most infamously) on twitter, he spoke of how wonderful and *exceptional* the United States is.

Donald Trump saw great success during his presidency and often bragged about this success. Yet at the same time, the Q anon conspiracy, which Donald Trump endorses, claims that there is a deep state controlling the world and trying to be the undoing of Trump. These two contradicting realities are endorsed by Donald Trump and some of his supporters. Though this gives a broad view of this concept, a more specific example is helpful in showing how it is used as an appeal to emotion.

In senator Josh Hawley's speech at the National Conservative conference, the *de facto* gathering of prominent right wing political actors, he claims early in his speech that the American republic is under attack and is close to a breaking point at the hands of an almost unstoppable wave of liberal cosmopolitan elitism. He continues, just a few minutes later, to say that the National Conservatives are akin to Horatius, who heroically held the Pons Sublicius and defeated the Etruscan King and in so doing saved the Roman Republic.<sup>74</sup> Essentially, right wing political actors evoke strong emotions and appear weak to garner support but appear strong to install confidence.

### *The Enemy is Evil*

The idea exists in the miasma of the populist right movement that there is this great existential threat of a liberal take over. People who are opposed to right wing populism, or rather

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<sup>74</sup> "Sen. Josh Hawley: The Promise of the Republic - YouTube." Accessed April 2022.

any person belonging to the “enemy” is considered evil, hedonistic, selfish, lustful, wasteful, incompetent. Etc.

This concept is perhaps the most notable of any. There is a constant fear purported by right wing political actors that there is a solidified enemy. Though, the characteristics of that enemy are more of a generalized collection of boogeymen that any conservative in the United States would fear. For instance, one Trump supporter in Virginia believed that the enemy is going to destroy America, bring about communism, make your babies worship Satan, and turn your children transgender.<sup>75</sup>

This fear mongering is present in almost every speech, quote, advertisement, tweet, etc. that right wing political actors produce. Marjorie Taylor Greene, for instance, ran an election ad centered around stopping the socialist takeover of our nation.<sup>76</sup>

This fear of a socialist, communist, satanic, Islamic, etc. takeover is not just a powerful tool but a dangerous one. It not only rationalizes extreme action (such as the Texas trucks which tried to run a Biden campaign bus off the road, an action which Trump endorsed)<sup>77</sup> but gives a groundwork to not think of the “enemy” as individual groups but as a whole. (However, the “enemy” groups are targeted in different ways but their association in a single collective allows for a more general disdain for anyone outside the movement.) Ultimately this is the foundational principle for the Qanon conspiracy and is necessary for its existence, along with the established authority of right wing political actors who do so are what lead to the January 6th insurrection.

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<sup>75</sup> Soclockshadow. “The Republicans' Culture of Projection: Why Conservatism Can Never Be Redeemed by Reason.” Blue Virginia, February 19, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> O'Dell, Liam. “Marjorie Taylor Greene 'Blows up Socialism' in Bizarre Election Advert.” indy100, March 13, 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Shepherd, Katie. “Trump Cheers Supporters Who Swarmed a Biden Bus in Texas: 'These Patriots Did Nothing Wrong'.” The Washington Post. WP Company, November 2, 2020.

*Disagreement is treason*

There is a clear “them vs. us” that is established by right wing political actors. But to be in is to be *all* in. Any modicum of disagreement is met with ostracization. This creates a sense of community and companionship and makes people not want to leave the group. If one leaves the group then what does that make you? Using the populist right mentality, it means that you are on the side of the globalist elite who want to destroy the cultural norms of the United States. This also enforces loyalty, which Trump values more than anything on his own admission.<sup>78</sup>

Trump’s definition of loyalty is black and white. This made him the perfect figure for a populist right movement which thrives on establishing an “in” and “out” crowd. According to Roger Stone: “Loyalty to Trump is straightforward- support Donald Trump and everything he does.”<sup>79</sup> This is not just talk either. Any time anyone disagrees with Trump they are kicked out of his circle and deemed a “coward, idiot, moron, etc.” According to the Brookings Institute at the end of his presidency, President Trump’s senior level turnover rate was 92%.<sup>80</sup>

President Trump, and other right wing political actors, enforced a cult of loyalty and were reluctant to make exceptions. Trump even soured relations with the Koch network. He tweeted “I have never sought [the Kochs’] support because I don’t need their money or their bad ideas.”<sup>81</sup> (though as we saw in the second section, that did not stop the Kochs from contributing to his success.) This cult of loyalty strengthened the movement, making it more difficult to leave once you have joined.

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<sup>78</sup> Kruse, Michael, Jeremy B. White, Sam Sutton and Carly Sitrin, and Bill Mahoney and Josh Gerstein. “I Need Loyalty.” POLITICO Magazine. Accessed April 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Tenpas, Kathryn Dunn, and Ph.D. “Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration.” Brookings. Brookings, March 9, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Calia, Mike. “Trump Fires Back at Conservative Koch Brothers Network: ‘I Don’t Need Their Money!’” CNBC. CNBC, July 31, 2018.

*Appeal to “Traditional Masculinity”*

Traditional masculinity is a cornerstone in the right wing populist agenda. The right believes that traditional masculinity is under attack and that it must be protected and restored if we are to fix the country. This is because the populist right holds a patriarchal outlook on life and wishes to reestablish this as the norm for all Americans. This appeal blends intentionally well with the avid hatred of Transgender people.

Going back to Senator Hawley’s speech, after saying that the left wishes to deconstruct America he says “The deconstruction of America begins with, and depends upon the deconstruction of men.”<sup>82</sup> Again, here Hawley is using fearmongering to enforce his point, in this case the urgency of the culture war against men. This idea that men are under attack and that the new right can save them is very popular among right wing political actors. This is because fundamentally, the social order in which the populist right wishes to establish is one of patriarchy; anything that upsets this patriarchy is automatically labeled an enemy for the sake of potential cultural hegemony.

This attack on men was not difficult to explain to the populist base as they had already been seeing it with their financial struggles. But instead of identifying the root cause of these struggles, the populist right has been convinced that their struggles are seeded in the destruction of the culture of the United States at the hands of a globalist elite class.

This fear mongering around men and the globalist intentions with them often take form through Transphobia or transphobic dog whistles. For instance Allie Stuckly on the Candace

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<sup>82</sup> Sen. Josh Hawley: The Promise of the Republic

Owens Show, said “the left wants to erase the biological and cultural differences between men and women.”<sup>83</sup> The word biological, in this instance, is a Transphobic dog whistle which implies the false assumption that sex is binary and that gender and sex are the same.

The adherence to traditional patriarchy is accompanied by, necessarily, a critique of modern feminism. Much like how the enemy is forming an attack on men, from the populist right’s view, the enemy has tainted the true meaning of feminism. To right wing political actors this means the traditional family structure.

To Mary Harrington, a speaker at the 2021 National Conservatism Conference, this means reverting to a time before the sexual revolution. This regression should, she claims, push LGBTQ people out of the public eye, outlaw abortion, discourage pre-marital sex, and ban contraceptives. Doing this should allow us to un-embrace “universal, de-sexed, radical individualism.”<sup>84</sup> She also claims that the state should be monitoring divorce rates and birthrates. Paradoxically she believes the root problem is that the government is interfering too much in traditional gender norms by interfering with the culture of the United States.<sup>85</sup>

By presenting an appeal to these traditional gender norms, right wing political actors are able to connect with the white male base which, as described in section one, are feeling the effects of hypercapitalism now more than ever before. By promising a safe future where patriarchy can go unchallenged, they promise their base a return to “normalcy.”

### *Everything is Rooted in Morality*

When right wing political actors frame issues, they often frame them in moral terms. This is so that when their rhetoric is challenged they can claim the opposition is morally unjust. But

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<sup>83</sup> “The Candace Owens Show: The Lies of Modern Feminism: Prageru.” Home. Accessed March 2022.

<sup>84</sup> “Mary Harrington | Trads, Cads, and Radfems | National Conservatism ...” Accessed February 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid

often the more extreme the original idea, the more morally justified it must be. These moral crusades are often accompanied with extreme actions. By doing this, right wing political actors are able to do two things. First they are able to legitimize their own extreme stance because attempting to thwart it is met with heinous accusations. Second, they are able to convince their base of a dire situation and get an overwhelming amount of support.

These things can be shown with the debate around transgender bathroom usage. Right wing politicians framed this issue in terms of child safety, rather than civil rights and inclusivity. This is also despite the fact that there has never been a confirmed case of a transgender person assaulting a cisgender person in a public bathroom.<sup>86 87</sup> However, if opponents to anti-trans legislation spoke up they would be told they did not care for the safety of children.

The most extreme example of a moral crusade was the January 6th insurrection. After Donald Trump lost the 2020 election he claimed that it was stolen. A stolen election is, obviously, a bold claim. So it begat a bold response. Thousands of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol building with the intent to overturn the election and, effectively, the legitimate administration of the United States. This was the definition of a moral crusade. Right wing populists committed seditious acts because their only legitimate source of authority, Donald Trump, told them that the election was stolen. The attack on traditional authority and the call for a moral crusade amplified populist support. In fact as of December 2021, only 6% of republicans said they believe that Biden's victory was "definitely legitimate."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> TheAdvocateMag. "Texas Doubles down on Transphobic Legislation, Adding \$2,000 Fine for 'Wrong' Bathroom Use." ADVOCATE. Advocate.com, March 10, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Adler-Bell, Matthew Sitman and Sam. "Know Your Enemy: The Anti-Trans Agenda, with Gillian Branstetter." Dissent Magazine, March 31, 2022.

<sup>88</sup> Cuthbert, Lane, and Alexander Theodoridis. "Analysis | Do Republicans Really Believe Trump Won the 2020 Election? Our Research Suggests That They Do." The Washington Post. WP Company, January 7, 2022.

This list of tactics is not exhaustive. There are perhaps an infinite number of ways one could frame the tactics used by the right to maintain support and promote their ideals. These tactics (control the narrative, The enemy is weak and strong, the enemy is evil, appeal to traditional masculinity, everything is rooted in morality) give a good insight on the general stratagem of the populist right.

### **The Enemy**

The goal for right wing political actors, as in all right-wing populist groups, is to provide an “other” for people to blame for their financial struggles.. Right wing actors use fear and outrage to present groups as a threat. In the United States the “other” is manifested in several distinct groups which are all labeled as the “enemy.” Despite being lumped together, each othered group is utilized and treated differently, but when right wing actors talk of the enemy as a threat they combine those groups. These groups in the United States who are targeted by the populist right are Immigrants especially Latinas, LGBTQ+ people especially transgender people, and “Globalist elites”.

It is important, when reading this subsection, that one keeps in mind the concept “the enemy is evil.” The prescient understanding for this subsection is that right wing political actors use alarmist scare tactics to push their movement forward and that their movement relies on the existence of an “other” so that they can, knowingly or not, successfully pin the blame on outside groups rather than the capitalist system they purport.

#### *Immigrants*

The attack on immigrants by the populist right is perhaps the most well known facet of their movement. Nativism is the most exemplified value of the populist right; Donald Trump's campaign and his initial political popularity was built on a foundation of nativism. There is a symbiotic relationship between nativism and right wing populism.<sup>89</sup> Right wing populism searches for an explanation of economic problems but requires an "other" because the reality of those problems is hidden from those in the movement; Nativism needs an effective way to disperse its ideology especially in a society where it is not typically tolerated, Donald Trump was able to successfully merge these two things.

The relationship of Nativism and the United States can be traced back to at least 1965 with the passing of the immigration and naturalization act. This act ended the racial quotas system but in its stead, established a system where every country was allowed to send the same amount of immigrants. This did not take into account the size of the countries or the specific needs of each country. This effectively disintegrated the economic connection between Mexico and the United States. Before 1965, millions of Mexicans worked in the United States under the Bracero program. When the number was cut to just 20,000 (the flat number given to all countries) Mexicans had to choose between risking deportation or financial instability.<sup>90</sup> This is the moment that Mexicans and Latinas went from immigrants to criminals.

That rhetoric of Mexicans being criminals has stuck ever since. Donald Trump famously said during his campaign announcement speech: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."<sup>91</sup> Trump would continually utilize

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<sup>89</sup> Belew, Kathleen, and Gutiérrez Ramón A. "From Pat Buchanan to Donald Trump." Essay. In *A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, 265–66. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Ngai, Mae M. "Liberal Critique and Reform of Immigration Policy." Essay. In *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Reilly, Katie. "Donald Trump: All the Times He's Insulted Mexico." Time. Time, August 31, 2016.

the economic woes of the American people and pin them to immigrants, purporting that they were stealing jobs, causing crime, bringing drugs into the country etc. His solution, which ultimately won him the 2016 election, was the proposal to build a border wall that Mexico was going to pay for (despite the Mexican president explicitly expressing he would not.)<sup>92</sup> The need for this wall would be reiterated at every Trump appearance, it reinforced the racist rhetoric behind it and convinced his followers of its importance. So much so that 86% of Republicans were in favor of a border wall in 2020.<sup>93</sup>

The rhetoric which Trump uses often targets immigrants, especially Mexican and Latina immigrants. Often language around immigrants invokes hatred, violence, disgust, and the implication to fight back, a common theme in the speeches of right wing political actors. Trump, for instance, warned against a “migrant caravan” and claimed it was coming to invade the country.<sup>94</sup> After this warning he deployed several thousand national guardsmen to the border. This was an intentional move to try and ratchet up the seriousness of the completely fictional threat.

Another way Trump supported his movement is through tokenization. Trump often placed Latinas, possibly grifters, directly behind him when he spoke. Sometimes, he would have them shout into the microphone or camera.<sup>95</sup> The point of this is to have plausible deniability among people of color and those who would look to discredit him. Trump also combines this tokenization with the frequent use of white nationalist dog whistles, like when her purported

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid

<sup>93</sup> “Public Support U.s.-Mexico Border Wall, by Party 2020.” Statista, January 14, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Fabian, Jordan. “Trump: Migrant Caravan 'Is an Invasion'.” The Hill. The Hill, October 29, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Baker, Peter. “Trump Tries to Woo Hispanic Voters at Rally in New Mexico.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 17, 2019.

racehorse theory.<sup>96</sup> Dog whistles, much like tokenization, allow one to feign innocence while still communicating to, in this case, a white nationalist base.

### *LGBTQ+ People*

Battles around LGBTQ+ people are enticing to right-wing populists because it again plays into an imaginary boogie-man through which legislation and other significant political actions can be utilized. They are often targets of state legislation such as Florida's new Don't Say Gay bill as well as numerous states laws that limit the rights of transgender people.

Right wing populism has a vested interest in combating the LGBTQ+ community. Plainly, the populist right wants to establish a cultural identity based around traditional patriarchal forms. That culture is contingent on there being only two genders, which there are not. In this way, LGBTQ+ people are undeniably in direct opposition with the populist right.

Right wing media sources often talk about LGBTQ+ indoctrination of children (which was the justification for the Don't Say Gay bill.)<sup>97</sup> Right wing actors also often claim that LGBTQ+ people are pedophiles and urge that we ought to prevent children from interacting with them. However, these are always non-issues and the reactions are naturally overblown and do not constitute substantive discourse.

Ben Shapiro provides us with our best source of this. In his video entitled: "WATCH: Nickelodeon Pushes Trans Propaganda on Young Children" Shapiro says the word "children" over twenty times in the first two minutes. This was before he played the video.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> "Trump's Touting of 'Racehorse Theory' Tied to Eugenics and Nazis Alarms Jewish Leaders." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, October 5, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Izaguirre, Anthony. "Don't Say Gay' Bill Signed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis." AP NEWS. Associated Press, March 28, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/florida-dont-say-gay-law-signed-56aee61f075a12663f25990c7b31624d>.

<sup>98</sup> "Watch: Nickelodeon Pushes Trans Propaganda on Young Children." Accessed May 2022.

Many instances of non-issues are subject to hot debate among right wing populists. Namely transgender kids in sports, children being forced to transition, transgender bathroom usage. The ultimate strategy around the LGBTQ+ community is to slowly chip away at their rights and protections. But this is understandable considering the existential threat LGBTQ+ people pose to cultural hegemony. By fighting LGBTQ+ rights, right wing political actors can enforce cultural hegemony and provide fuel for their base at the same time.

### **Globalist Elites**

This group is the most abstract of all groups as it does not point to a specific set of people but rather the concept of a general enemy which is working against the people for their own gain. Each individual's interpretation of who the "globalist elite" are is different. But in general, these people, who live in the collective mind of the right wing populist movement, are the masterminds behind the liberal takeover of American culture. To some people these are communists, some satanists, some Jews (as "globalist elites" has always been a dog whistle.) Josh Hawley, for instance, says that the globalist elites are fanatic cosmopolitans who want to erase all cultures and unify the earth under a single culture.<sup>99</sup> But one defining part of these globalist elites is that they have a general disdain for America and the working class.

"Globalist elites" is best described the way it is used, as a catch-all for the theoretical "enemy." It serves as a Jewish dog whistle for white nationalists, leaders of the deep state for Qanon supporters, and the embodiment of all things a right wing populist is meant to hate for most others.

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<sup>99</sup> "Sen. Josh Hawley: The Promise of the Republic

## Conclusions

Ultimately the rise in right wing populism can be explained by the desperate conditions of the working and middle class due to legislation which favors large corporations and the bourgeoisie, the infiltration of American politics by the billionaire class through organizations such as schools and think tanks, and a series of purposeful targeting techniques made to single out marginalized groups, garner support, and manipulate the political narrative with a particular interest in undermining traditional sources of authority.

Right wing populism is not easy to pin to a single set of events or people. While the theories offered in this paper certainly hold merit, it is most definitely not representative of all theories around the subject. The United States is in a moment of exceptional tribulation, the infiltration of the populist right into every part of the political discourse is difficult to ignore. But if we are to attempt to combat it we surely must first understand it.

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