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Modern Media Manipulation: How the Right is Capturing Voters

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# Abstrakt

Seit 2010 erlebt die Welt einen Anstieg von Ethnozentrismus und Rechtspopulismus. Die Republikanische Partei in den USA spielte eine Schlüsselrolle bei der Schaffung der Voraussetzungen, unter denen ein Rechtspopulist wie Donald Trump unvermeidlich war. Die von ihr geschaffene Zustimmungsstruktur wurde genutzt und trat gegen Ende von Barack Obamas Amtszeit als Präsident der Vereinigten Staaten in Form der Alt-Right-Pipeline explosionsartig auf den Plan. Zwischen den Online-Bewegungen der Alt-Right und den Medienstrategien der Republikanischen Partei war das sozialpolitische Ökosystem der Vereinigten Staaten auf den darauffolgenden Sturm der Desinformation und Spaltung nicht vorbereitet. Die Nutzung reaktionärer Stimmungen in Verbindung mit Online-Desinformation ermöglichte den Missbrauch von Social-Media-Plattformen auf neuartige und schwer zu bekämpfende Weise. Heute sehen wir die Folgen in Form von abnehmendem Vertrauen in die Machtsysteme sowie zunehmender Feindseligkeit und Spaltung zwischen den verschiedenen politischen Sphären in den USA.

## **Schlüsselwörter:**

Alt-Right-Pipeline, US-Politik, Politische Kultur, Alt-Rechts, Rechtsextremismus, Republikaner, Daten, KI, Künstliche Intelligenz, Demokratie, Beeinflussen, Desinformation

# Abstract

Since 2010, the world has seen an increase in ethnocentrism and Right-Wing populism. The Republican Party in the US has played a key role in creating the condition upon which a Right-Wing Populist like Donald Trump was an inevitability. The permission structure that they provided was leveraged and exploded onto the scene towards the end of Barack Obama's time as President of the United States of America in the form of the Alt-Right Pipeline. Between the movements of the Alt-Right online and the media strategies implemented by the Republican Party, the Social-Political ecosystem in the United States was unprepared for the ensuing storm of misinformation and divisiveness that erupted. Utilizing reactionary sentiment in conjunction with misinformation online allowed for the abuse of Social Media platforms in ways that were new and difficult to address. Now, we see the fallout in the form of decreased trust in the systems of power and increased hostility and divisions between the different political spheres in the US.

## **Keywords:**

Alt-Right Pipeline, US Politics, Political Culture, Alt-Right, Far-Right, Republican, Data, AI, Artificial Intelligence, Democracy, Influence, Disinformation

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## Author's Note

Due to the fact that much of the available information and examples are not always clear or easily categorized, I repeatedly use the term “misinformation” within this thesis as a catch-all term denoting some combination of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, or outright deception. It is incredibly different to draw the line at times due to exaggeration, hysteria, and misattribution; however, the results are the same no matter the intention of the source, so I feel that using the term misinformation in this way is a non-issue.

The motivation for this thesis stems from personal experiences spanning over a decade. Many of the points I reference are things that I have personally struggled with and have had numerous conversations about with others over the years. The impact that online interactions and media consumption can have on individuals is practically impossible to comprehend without first-hand experience. It doesn't matter whether what has occurred in the West over the last decade is the byproduct of thought-out disinformation campaigns, right-place-right-time, or inevitable blowback from an alienated populace; the conclusion is what matters, and it doesn't look like it will be a good one. Without liberal governments and institutions making meaningful policy changes to address the material conditions of the working class, the Western project is dead; we are quickly moving towards conditions that will amount to little better than anarchy because we destroyed our culture and values in favour of “freedom.” “Freedom” means little to nothing for those who don't have community or prospects.

It is important to note that while this thesis is critical of the strategies of the Republican Party and the larger Right-Wing movement in the US, it is not intended to endorse the Democratic Party or claim that the Democratic Party is without its share of faults. This thesis focuses solely on the strategies and events within the Right-Wing ecosystem. I am sure that the Democratic Party has had its share of divisive strategies that were undemocratic or in bad faith. The purpose of this thesis is purely to look at the Republican Party because their strategies have been uniquely divisive and, in many ways, undemocratic and bordering on fascist, if not outright. The dangers to liberal democracy from Right-Wing Populist movements have become increasingly clear over the last decade, and one of the most significant risks is in the ability of groups with fascist aspirations to combine modern technologies with personal data; whoever manages to micro-target the best is going to control the whole system, and right now those on the Right are significantly outperforming everyone else with it.

I credit a lot of my motivation in writing this thesis to the Leftist Influencer Hasan Piker; his coverage of the 2024 US election campaigns brought to my attention many of the news articles and events that brought me to realising the increasingly dire state of US political division and the strategies that were being utilized to radicalize voters. People like Hasan are some of the few voices that are effectively counter messaging against these aggressive trends in the Online Right and help to provide an alternative to the Alt-Right spaces that have grown online over the last decade.

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# Introduction

*“...[Facebook] created a set of tools to allow advertisers to exploit that emotional audience with individual-level targeting, right? There’s 2.1 billion people, each with their own reality. And once everyone has their own reality, it’s relatively easy to manipulate them.”*

-Roger McNamee, The Great Hack(2019)

In the world as we observe it today, there are turbulent geopolitical situations everywhere, accompanied by complex internal political conditions that are undergoing confusing oscillations for all major powers. The United States of America, heralded by many as the bastion and headquarters of the “Free World,” has witnessed its own internal turmoil. Towards the end of President Barack Obama’s tenure as leader of the Free World, tensions circulated throughout the social discourse that favoured increasing isolationism and nationalism. Across the world, from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, the trends seemed to indicate that the political Right Wing from every national circumstance would have its fortunes favoured in the 21st century if a shift towards what the West deems “ethnonationalism” was appropriated to fit an orderly political narrative. Radical appropriation of the insecurities of the masses, populist rhetoric, inflammatory messages, and the mainstreaming of the fringe were tenets that seemed to favour a lot of these leaders across the world, so why not in the United States of America?

The Republican Party of the United States experienced a unique moment in American history during this time. Presidential candidate Donald Trump had become the figurehead of these “values,” and had suddenly become the most prominent choice for all radical Republicans. His rhetoric ranged from lambasting the Mainstream Media for being bought and sold commodities who feared him to blaming immigrants for making America not-Great (a reverse inference on his slogan, Make America Great Again); he presented himself as the poster-child of an anti-establishment, anti-Wall Street, old-school politics, where he vowed to make the US the place American veterans fought to protect and create. While this was in itself quite a movement, his masterful creation of a cult of followers defied the logic of American politics, where it was the party, not an individual, that a citizen’s political devotion had to be with. People tagged along, and as the Democratic Party nominated Hillary Clinton as their nominee, Donald Trump seemed to have won the people in a way that hadn’t been seen before. Brash, abrasive, honest, outspoken, and with the cowed support of the Republican Party, which hadn’t seen something like this since President Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States of America.

However, there was an underlying question to Donald Trump’s success: How did the Republican party reach this decisive conclusion? Why would the Grand Old Party, which once spearheaded the emancipation of African-Americans, now support a candidate who is accused of being a sympathizer to White-supremacy politics? What

changed in the realpolitik of the world, the United States, and the Republican Party, that it had to resort to these changes?

There is evidence to support the claim that the Republican party, over the last 70 years, has worked towards undermining the electoral process to the best of its abilities. From Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida to Governor Gregg Abbott of Texas, this theme is clearly painted on non-Trumpist party members. The role of technology, both intentionally and unintentionally, has played a significant part in popularizing Trump's presidency-defining positions through online Right-Wing discourse, becoming reactionary topics that are reinforced through algorithms and human biases primed to capture disenfranchised and alienated portions of the population. Additionally, the evolution of technology to the point of individual-based data analytics and prediction has thus helped the GOP inch closer to its goal of being the party of choice for all mainstream and fringe voters in the United States. Technology can be a boon, but in certain hands, it can become a curse for many others. Where earlier it would not have been easy to get targeted messages to individuals or consolidate support through mobilization, now a simple post on Facebook, X(Twitter), Instagram, or Reddit can reach all the targets and more and help create a socio-political echo chamber that wouldn't require stepping outside one's room. It is the use of similar apparatus by the Republican establishment and their adoption of the Trump brand of politics that is the core of this thesis. Investigating the means of mobilization is essential, and for the 2016 and 2024 elections of President Trump and the Republican Party, the way technology was utilized to create a specific environment for their success is of the greatest significance.



# Chapter 1: Technology and Techniques

The technology and techniques employed in Donald Trump's 2016 and 2024 political campaigns comprise a blend of populist messaging and modern data analysis supported by digital technologies and methods. Trump's rallies undoubtedly played a significant role in his ability to portray himself as a man of the people and cultivate a passionate and unwavering base of support. However, behind the scenes, Trump was working with experts who expanded his base of support and radicalized his followers towards a more extreme political agenda.

## **Cambridge Analytica**

The most influential player in the digital space of Trump's 2016 campaign that we know of was Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the 2016 campaign later made headlines internationally as questions were raised about the legitimacy of its operations and the direction of digital campaign strategies. Its activities are also what led to the Congress hearings for Mark Zuckerberg, in which he was questioned at length about how users' information was being used on Facebook and how secure the systems and algorithms they had in place were. (Scola 2018)

The question of Cambridge Analytica's role revolved around how they had obtained data that they were not supposed to have, provided to them by a professor at Cambridge University, and if the content that they were permitted to push constituted election interference. The real issue is in the insidious methods that they utilized.

Cambridge Analytica had a track record of interfering in elections globally and being very successful at it. In the US they orchestrated misinformation campaigns and crafted an image for Trump online that allowed him to become popular with far-right communities that then further promoted Trump and became stalwart defenders. The methods of microtargeting and misinformation that were utilized by Cambridge Analytica have become hallmarks of Trump's strategy and shaped the sociopolitical landscape that we see today.

## **Astroturfing**

Astroturfing is a tried-and-true method of influence that leverages the bandwagon effect and social conformity. (FasterCapital 2025) Astroturfing is also commonly known as botting when done through technological means (i.e., utilizing fake accounts to artificially like or interact with posts to inflate their visibility in recommendations artificially) or review bombing when it is directed by an influencer to manipulate the reception of content inorganically. For example, suppose an individual an influencer dislikes appear on a podcast. In that case, they may encourage their audience to dislike the video or report it, which in turn affects the content's reception and may result in its removal from the algorithm, leading to fewer people watching.

Astroturfing can swing in both advantageous and disadvantageous directions depending on how it is used. Someone unaware of botting will be led to believe that

people, ideas, or content are either popular or hated and will be swayed in their reception of that content. A user may also feel like they are part of a larger community than they are and that potentially extreme ideas or reservations may seem commonplace. Astroturfing causes users to overlook minor issues they might typically have, as social conformity leads them to conform to the crowd when they do not encounter pushback against those ideas. Over time, astroturfing can lead to the creation of genuine communities of radicalized members by creating an initial gathering point for more extreme ideas and promoting increasingly radical rhetoric.

## **Scapegoating**

Scapegoating is one of the oldest ideas of humankind, appearing both within and well before the Bible. In modern times, scapegoating is a practice of not putting all of the sins on a goat and sending it out into the desert, but instead putting all of the negative attention in a society on a single group, typically a socially disadvantaged one, due to preexisting negative associations, or the group's existence as being relatively small, visual, isolated, and unprotected. Examples exist throughout history; often, groups like the Jews or Roma have been the target of scapegoating in Europe, while in America, it has been African Americans, Communists, Irish, Mormons, or Muslims.

In its most modern iteration, the primary scapegoats have been immigrants and transgender people. The focus by the Republicans has been on immigrants by singling out criminal or perceived culturally dissimilar elements and making them the scapegoats for crimes and economic job insecurities. Alternatively, transgender people have been a target through the process of making the entire community the representative scapegoats for the "woke-mindvirus." The identification and targeting of these groups allowed the Republicans to pile on all perceived societal issues onto them and to make prescriptive policies that seem to make all of the problems go away if they deal with these groups.

## **Dog Whistling**

Dog Whistling is a relatively new term, but its use as a strategy by Republicans dates back to at least the Southern Strategy. The idea is that specific terms become impermissible to say, so instead, coded language is used that allows the speaker to convey something the general audience will be able to stomach while simultaneously addressing a specific group about more particular issues.

"Lee Atwater explains how Republicans can win the vote of racists without sounding racist themselves:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... "We want to cut this," is

much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than “Nigger, nigger.”

” (Perlstein 2012)

The language of Dog Whistling changes often as more of the general population catches on to how some terms are being loaded. Lee Atwater was one of the few to succinctly elucidate the strategy and expose that the Republican Party’s strategy was fundamentally in bad faith. By recentering the conversation about economics, they could promote racist policies that are directly intended to benefit a select group within society while worsening conditions for the racial out-group.

Today, the republican party continues the tradition while also utilizing inflammatory dialogue to describe other groups that they also seek to undermine. One of the catchy terms of the Republican party in the most recent election was “illegal migrants.” Now, to the average voter, this implies criminals, people who have ties with organized crime or are committing illegal acts within the country. However, the reality is that the Republicans seek to target anyone who lacks the appropriate paperwork, and sometimes even that is not enough to be safe from persecution. We see, 6 months after Trump started his second term that the reality of his dog whistle was to attain carte blanche permission to target and detain whosoever he and his administration deem a target.

### **Targeted Advertising**

The targeted advertising utilized by the Trump Campaign took on two different forms. One was to target individuals, and based on data about them that detailed personality markers, they would feed them advertising that was crafted to appeal to their cognitive biases specifically and would elicit stronger responses from them. (Meril & Goldhill 2020) The other approach was to target advertisements towards specific communities, designed to appeal specifically to members of that community. While these practices may seem normal or clever on the surface, they have more serious aspects that cannot be dismissed.

In the first case, individual personality targeting, the practices implemented by Cambridge Analytica were a violation of Facebook’s 2011 agreement with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). (Scole 2018; Siddiqui 2018) Cambridge Analytica obtained the data for this project from a professor at Cambridge University, where the data was being used for research purposes. With this data, Cambridge Analytica was able to create more influential advertisements at the behest of the Trump 2016 campaign and specifically serve them to susceptible individuals. (Goldhill et al 2020) More recently,

In the second case, community targeting, the methods utilized create divisions within society by providing false or misleading information, thereby reducing the ability of these communities to communicate with others who have received similar advertising that is fundamentally incompatible with the information the other community received. (Koebler 2024)

The potential of targeted advertising is still in its infancy. Between increasingly advanced generative AI and the increasing number of datapoints available on each person in society, if the data and technology simultaneously fall into the hands of the wrong group, all semblance of democracy and truth is lost. Cambridge Analytica attempted this in 2016 for Trump's presidential campaign and was incredibly successful; that was 10 years ago, and AI wasn't available yet. Recently, Trump has given access to all of the data on US citizens across multiple agencies to the company Palantir. (Frenkel et al. 2025) Palantir is a dangerous company with ties to individuals, like Peter Thiel, who are supportive of creating a more controlled and monitored state. If Palantir is able to properly leverage the data that they get from the US government, the direction of the US political system is going to be fully under their control.

## **Negativity Bias**

Negativity Bias is a Cognitive Bias in humans that is thought to have evolved over time to ensure that we address things in our environment that have a negative impact on us. "[Negativity Bias] causes us to respond more strongly to negative than to positive or neutral stimuli. Thus, for the same absolute amount of positive and negative input, our response to the negative input is greater than that to the positive input." (Vaish et al. 2008) Regarding political messaging, this means that we will focus on information that we believe may have negative consequences for us if left unaddressed. Regarding content algorithms, the systems identify that content that catches our attention is more likely to keep us on the site or encourage us to return and thus promotes such content into our feeds, despite its ramifications or veracity.

Within political messaging, when presented with evidence that a government is doing its job correctly and there is nothing to worry about, our brains will naturally overlook that information since it is not relevant to our safety. However, when presented with accusations of mismanagement, corruption, or incompetence, our brains tend to focus on that negativity and finding solutions. When you are not sufficiently informed on how to meaningfully enact the requisite change, you become susceptible to counter-messaging that claims to possess the solutions you are looking for.

The Social Media space is often regarded as an attention economy. The primary two methods by which Social Media generates profit are through ads and data. What this means in practice is that a Social Media company's goal is to keep you on their platform for as long as possible. The more you use a service, the more ads you receive and the more data that can be collected about you. To that end, an algorithm will dictate what you see to keep you around as much as possible.

Since an algorithm wants to keep you around or coming back, it will recommend content to you based on the specifics of what you look for, what you stay focused on the most, and what other users also focus on. Tying this to what we know about Negativity Bias, it means that you and other users are more likely to watch content that evokes a negative reaction for longer than content that does not, even if you are not aware of it or do not want to be. An important point to note is that algorithms do not necessarily know

that they are pushing negative content; they may identify that exclusively promoting related content will cause individuals to burn out and stop using the service, so they instead promote it in between other content that will maintain a level of engagement or interest that will keep you online.

## **The Hegelian Dialectic**

The Hegelian Dialectic, as applied to modern politics, is viewed as a process through which change is brought about in a society. In simplistic terms, it is Thesis -> Antithesis -> Synthesis; what this means in practice is that there is a condition of society(Thesis), e.g. many immigrants committing crimes, an alternative(Antithesis), e.g. fewer immigrants committing crimes, and a solution(Synthesis), e.g. export all of the criminal immigrants from the country.

The Hegelian Dialectic is an oversimplification of the processes that underlie societal change; however, for the purposes of constructing convincing political messaging, it provides a valuable framework for persuading voters. By using oversimplified ideas, it is possible to convince a vulnerable electorate, who are uninformed on the nuances of policy development and the market, that you have the answers to all of their problems.

What has been seen in the 2024 US election campaigning is that concerns were often characterized in this limited, simplistic view that often amplified the issues and proposed solutions that were so simplistic that they framed the opposition as wholly inept or were outright illegal; now, with hindsight we can see that Trump has committed himself to both routes, taking every chance possible to disparage the previous administration and committing flagrant violations of the law and system to administer solutions.

The Trump Campaign also heavily relied on scapegoating. Any issue in politics, both global and domestic, was laid at the feet of Joe Biden, even when it was something that Trump did in his first term, such as the change from the North American Free Trade Agreement(NAFTA) to the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement(USMCA) which Trump has heavily criticized despite it being his work. Drug smuggling and the Fentanyl Epidemic have been frequently put at the feet of Canada and Mexico or Latin American gangs such as Tren de Aragua. These targets have become recurring characters in Trump's narrative that allow voters to identify and understand the problems and Trump's solutions easily. By perpetuating these scapegoats, the narrative can be clear and concise, allowing voters to follow along and more easily accept overly simplistic solutions. One of the other big targets for the Republicans was Trans Athletes; ignoring the disparity or politics involved with the subject, women were identified and smeared over international news just because they outperformed their opponents, such as Algerian Boxer Imane Khelif. (Brangham 2024)

## Chapter 2: US political culture

To assess the effectiveness of technologies and techniques on US voters, it is essential first to identify the trends in US political culture leading up to Trump's 2016 campaign and the changes that occurred throughout.

### Inherited Legacy

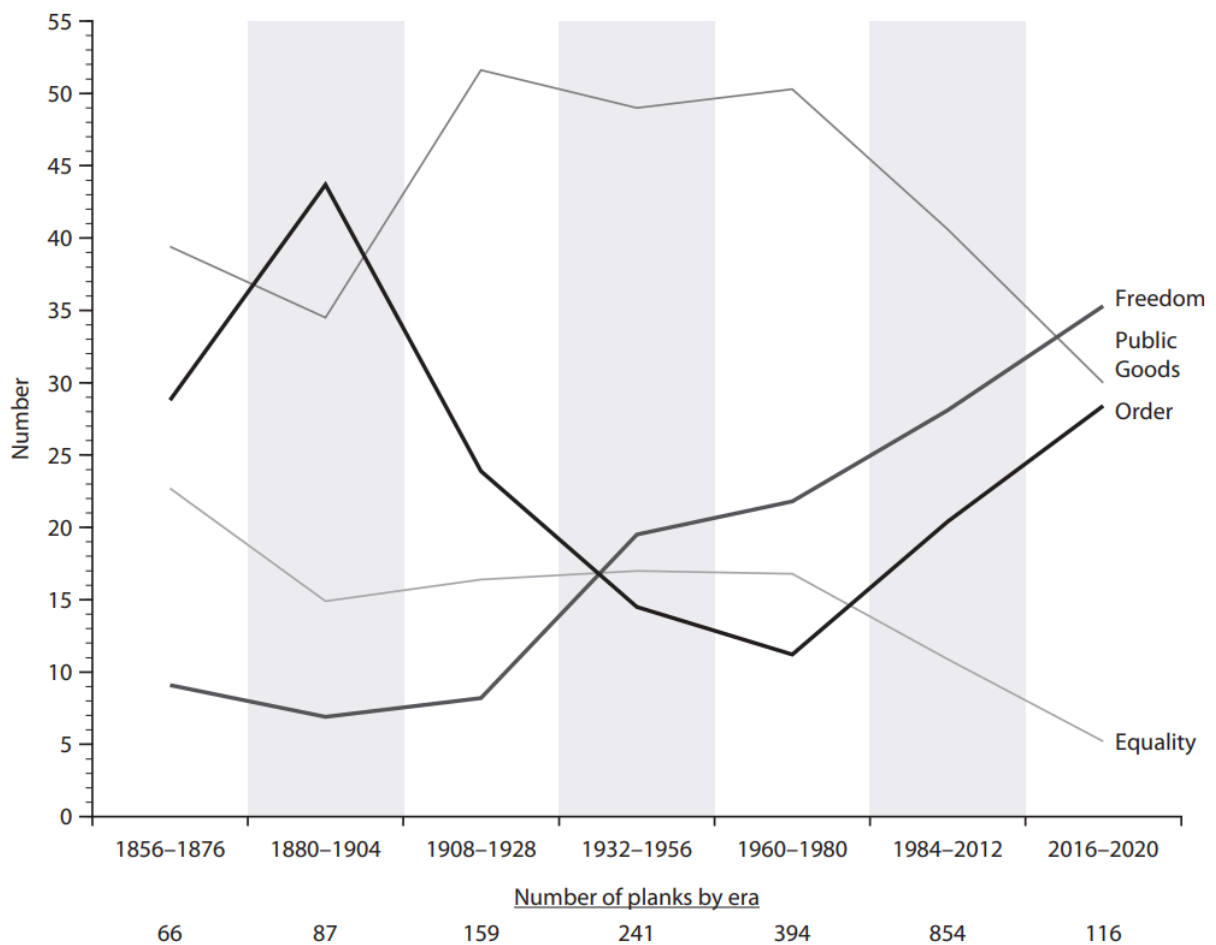
Trump's success in 2016 did not come out of nowhere; the Republican Party's strategy had been building towards a fervent and divisive groundwork for years. The Republican Party has been curating and modifying its strategy over the decades to attempt what Trump finally managed to latch onto.

The Republican strategy has undergone significant shifts over the years, making it challenging to pinpoint a specific timeline or identify when and where different aspects gained traction. The key points of their strategy revolve around their principles, target base, and communication. However, since the early 20th century and the "Southern Strategy," the Republican Party has increasingly leaned into reactionary sentiments, hoping to capture the votes of those who feel disenfranchised and overlooked by the Federal Government, namely "Christians" and "Whites."

Conversely, while the Republican Party has stood atop a platform that claims to represent "Christians" and "Whites," they are incentivized to focus on performative cultural issues while not improving the actual material conditions of their constituents. In practice, this presents itself in the form of stymying DEI initiatives or working to deny abortion rights while at the same time improving conditions for the economic elite. By continuing to represent their voters culturally and keeping them down economically, they can retain that voting base by directing their attention towards "issues" that are not defined by the Democratic Party or are anathema to those ideals and continuing to grease the palms of the moneyed interests that support them.

### Principles

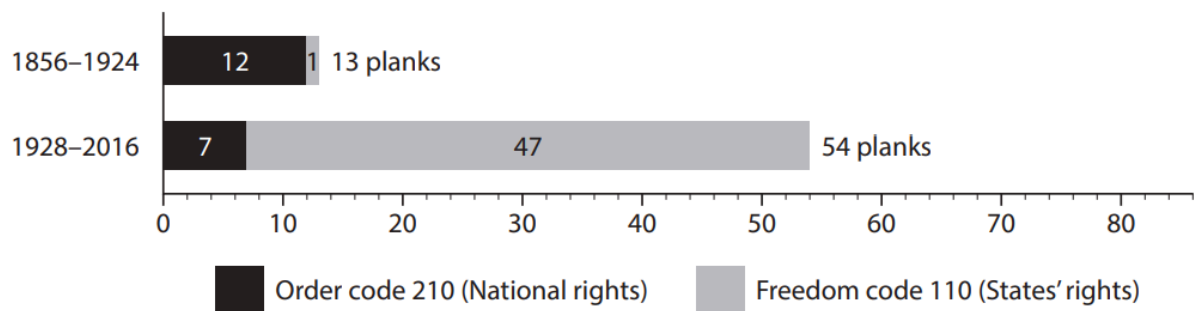
The Republican Party has undergone a profound shift in priorities throughout its history. From the days of President Abraham Lincoln, it is almost unbelievable that the party that was founded on the cessation of slavery and fought for the emancipation of African Americans is now the party that is running a mass deportation campaign and has strong ties with organizations like the KKK. Kenneth Janda, in his book *The Republican Evolution*, collects the platform priorities of the Republican Party over time, showing a notable shift in priorities. "The 'nationalism' epoch in Republican history lasted until 1924, during which, according to Gerring, Republican principles centred on 'order versus anarchy.' Its major themes were 'Protestantism, moral reform, mercantilism, free labor, social harmony, and statism.'" (Janda 2022, 148)



**FIGURE 5.3.** 1,917 Republican planks for seven eras and by four major types.

(Janda 2022, 65)

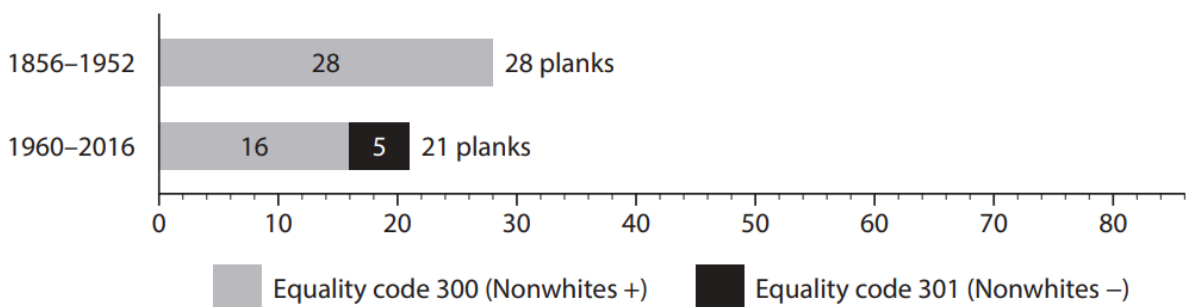
Following the 1928 presidential election, the Republicans initiated a gradual shift towards capturing more Southern voters. Up until that point, they had been the party of national power, but when they reoriented toward the South, they gradually increased a pro-states' Rights stance. The Republican Party we know today came about in the post-war era when they started the Southern Strategy and placed themselves in opposition to the Democrats, who were pushing for Civil Rights. By 2016, the Republican Party had become the party of states' rights and smaller government.



**FIGURE 6.1.** National rights and states' rights in sixty-seven planks, 1856–1924 vs. 1928–2016.

(Janda 2022, 76)

Despite “every Republican platform since 1960 boasted of being ‘the party of Lincoln’” (Janda 2022, 79), the party at that time openly opposed desegregation, in particular the practice of busing. The move towards attracting the Southern voters and the opposition of the Democrat-backed Civil Rights movement led the Republican Party towards increasingly opposing the equality of nonwhites and one of their core principles became ethnonationalism.



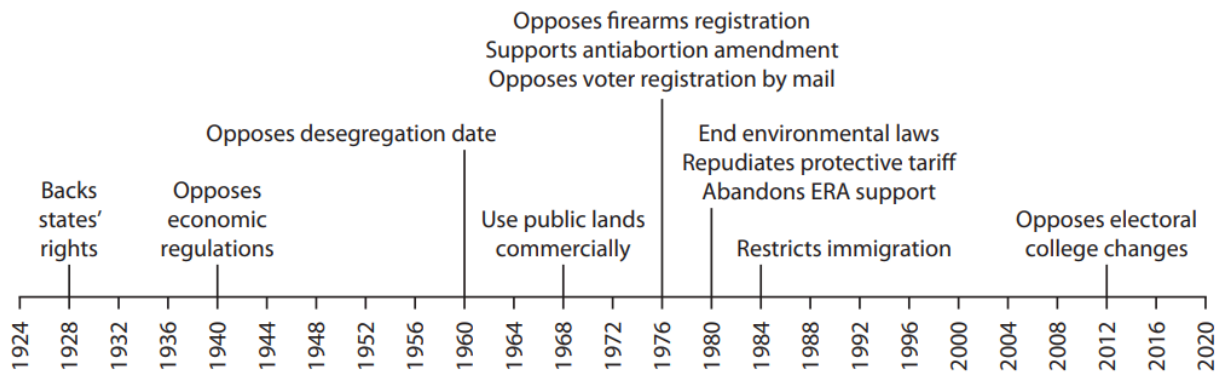
**FIGURE 6.2.** Positive and negative equality in forty-nine planks, 1856–1952 vs. 1960–2016.

(Janda 2022, 79)

“The party today moves in a different direction, sparked by presidential nominee Barry Goldwater and led by presidents Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump. It opposes government policies that would reduce income inequalities, lessen social inequalities, advance health care, improve the environment, and combat climate change, ostensibly because such policies might infringe on personal freedom.”

-Janda 2022, xv





**FIGURE 13.1.** Timeline of changes in Republican platforms since 1924.

(Janda 2022, 149)

The “neoliberal” era of the Republican Party, which began in 1928, has been characterized by “anti-statism, free market capitalism, right-wing populism, and individualism.” (Janda 2022, 149) This reimagined Republican Party has its principles no longer in the ideals of the past, but “in or about 1964, the party entered a new epoch ... called ethnocentrism. Its central dichotomy... became white Christians versus others. Ethnocentrism’s themes are social order, Christianity, anti-intellectualism, and antigovernment.” Ethnocentrism, born out of the 1960s, has become white nationalist and puts the protection and promotion of the ideals and beliefs of the more conservative voices in the US above anyone who represents a threat to those ideals.

### Target Base

“In the 1950s, people in small towns and rural areas, women, college-educated voters, and Blacks living in the South were more likely to identify as Republican than Democrat. Today those relationships are reversed. Then the South was solidly Democratic; today it is strongly Republican. The Republican Party—once closely identified with Wall Street—now considers its base to be blue-collar wage earners and white Christians outside New York.” (Janda 2022, 29)

Due to the shift towards ethnocentrism, the Republican Party has likewise shifted from their older voting bloc towards Whites who feel disadvantaged or unheard in the current system or who feel that their culture and values are under assault. In addition to this base, the Republicans have also courted communities that think that the Democratic Party is doing a poor job. However, much of that group is a byproduct of the Republicans’ messaging campaign, from stoking fears and promoting misinformation.

The Southern Strategy, in some sense, was a reaction to the New Deal. “Research directors, associate professors, social workers, educational consultants, urbanologists, development planners, journalists, brotherhood executives, foundation staffers, communications specialists, culture vendors, pornography merchants, poverty theorists, and so forth ... are numerically too few to elect a president in the near future.” (Janda 2022, 167) The beneficiaries of the New Deal were not the large number of

disenfranchised Americans left over from the Great Depression and WWII; they presented a sizable population of voters who were fearful about their place in America, especially in the Civil Rights era when discussions of benefits for African Americans were taking place while they were still in a rut from the economic instability of the previous decades. Capitalizing on historic racism and fears about their place in America moving forward, the Republican Party chose the fearful Whites as their new base.

## **Communication**

Trump's communication methods have been staples of his campaigning. Trump has held rallies across the US, ensuring that his base feels heard and seen in a period of political history where the average voter often has to rely on a government that seems distant and condescending. Trump's strategy of connecting with his base face-to-face bridges that distance, letting his supporters know that he sees them and their problems and is committed to fighting to ensure that their voices are heard in government.

In addition to Trump's rallies, his social media presence has been an unending stream of consciousness for almost ten years. Trump's online postings, while traditionally ill-advised for most politicians or at least managed or proofread, have been a positive for his supporters, as they feel like Trump is a real and relatable person rather than a crafted caricature that only shows them what they intend to show them.

Trump has carried on the legacy of the Republican Party by continuing the Southern Strategy in a broader "anti-woke/DEI" campaign. The "progressive" movement has gained traction and has aligned itself with the Democratic Party. However, in 2014, the tension between "progressive" socio-political movements and the average White disenfranchised voter started to boil over, and the online environment became a breeding ground for anti-woke sentiment. Several right-wing think tanks and sponsors saw what was happening and strategically put money and talking points in certain places to incite radicalization and support a new route to bring people into their sphere.

## Chapter 3: The Alt-Right Pipeline

Shortly before Trump's 2016 Republican campaign, the stage started to be set up for a large-scale influence campaign fueled by misinformation and reactionary rhetoric. Right-Wing personalities online developed an ecosystem that was, in many ways, similar to the Southern Strategy, ready to capture the disenfranchised and unrepresented; the solution was not to advocate for meaningful improvements to their material conditions; however, it was to give a voice to outrage and perceived unfairness while radicalizing people online towards more ethnocentric ideas and values. The Alt-Right Pipeline had fallen into place.

### **Progression and Structure of the Pipeline**

In much the same way that the Republican Party rode the wave of rejection against the Civil Rights movement with the Southern Strategy, right-wing commentators were ready to reach out to people who were questioning the mainstream narratives surrounding Feminism and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. When GamerGate broke in the Summer of 2014, rumblings of resentment and distaste for gaming journalism's perceived liberal biases became a firestorm of rejection and hate. While there were many moderate or even liberal and leftist commentators opining on the topic, it quickly devolved into an us vs them fight for supporters of the attacked journalists, and on the other side was everyone from those who were ambivalent to those who were actively misogynistic to those that wanted a bit more nuance to the discussion. In practice, this meant that if you weren't mindlessly in support of Feminism and DEI, then you were already somewhere in the Alt-Right Pipeline.

The Alt-Right Pipeline was an informal organization of political commentators, influencers, pseudo-intellectuals, and extremists who were only tied together by their rejection of dominant socio-political narratives. For many, their journey in the Pipeline started not by them seeking these ideas out but by their hobbies and interests being attacked and them being attacked by journalists and activists for being misogynists or bigots. While communities of misogynists and bigots actually existed and were perpetrating hate campaigns against the aforementioned journalists and activists, the average person who was now being shunted into the discussion had no interest or understanding of what was going on and only knew that they were now being called names. No matter where you landed on the political spectrum, if you were in one of these online communities and had reservations about the politicization of your interest, you were now inserted into a process that would gradually radicalize you towards the Alt-Right.

As an example, if you liked Star Wars, you may have found that the quality of the newest show or game seemed to be lower than you were hoping for. Now, when your favourite YouTuber is reviewing it, he says it's because a lot of the older staff were replaced. When you decide to look into it further, another YouTuber says that the writers were all feminists who weren't fans of Star Wars and just got the job because Disney wanted to appear more socially progressive. Now your favourite content is not only

political but also worse; journalists are writing about how fans of the older Star Wars content are misogynists, and if an interpretation of the newest story on a forum is to be believed, the new curators of Star Wars content hate you. You didn't ask for this. You didn't want this. Alas, now you are under attack in your space and fandom. When you look more, more content creators are talking about it, and you are free to go down the rabbit hole as far as you can stomach.

When someone begins their journey into the Right-Wing information ecosystem, they will find themselves navigating between different communities until they find one that aligns with their disposition and level of exposure. These groups can range from fan communities that have begun discussing issues related to modern socio-political discourse and are increasingly defensive about their passions to political commentators who justify right-wing policies, all the way up to alt-right forums and conspiracy boards, such as QAnon and parts of 4chan or becoming involved with groups like Groypers or The Nationalist Front.

The gradual process of the alt-right Pipeline works only through a combination of the various techniques highlighted in Chapter 1, ultimately arriving at the development of jaded and hateful people who have large communities of like-minded people beside them. While not everyone falls all the way down the rabbit hole, enough do that many communities have arisen or expanded over the last decade, maintaining a significant online presence that makes them a substantial part of online political discourse.

Groups like those that attended the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017, the Young Republicans, or Turning Point USA (TPUSA) have made waves outside of the online space. TPUSA, led by Charlie Kirk, worked to bring online discussions into the real world by hosting debates on campuses across the USA, which they would record and post highlights of online. The Young Republicans, with its national movement and local chapters, worked to turn many from alienating online communities into real-life communities that regularly hosted events and speakers, allowing people to solidify their newfound beliefs with others in their communities.

## **Role of Algorithms and Platforms**

Online platforms utilize algorithms that prioritize attention and engagement, thus using any means possible to keep users online and coming back as much as possible; this is known as the Attention Economy. In the performance of algorithms, there is a complicated game of trying to get into users' feeds or recommended content for other channels' videos. One of the best ways for users to achieve this is to collaborate with other users so that their name and channel become mutually shared within the content of a user's feed. In 2014, #GamerGate became the unifying content source, where many channels that were previously dedicated exclusively to gaming or geek culture content began to address socio-political issues and interact with other, more politically oriented channels that covered related topics. This new mainstream topic naturally favoured the Right-Wing perspective due to its tacit rejection of Progressive politics.

Right-Wing content creators and Republican political commentators finally had an in for reaching moderates and Democrats who weren't invested in Progressive politics.

"The Pipeline often works through a progression of influencers:

1. Mainstream figures like Rogan serve as gateway content, encouraging viewers to question conventional narratives.
2. Self-help and masculinity influencers like Jordan Peterson offer pseudo-intellectual frameworks for understanding social issues.
3. More overtly political commentators begin introducing explicit ideological content.
4. Figures like Tate present radical views packaged with lifestyle aspirations.
5. Finally, viewers may encounter explicit extremist content and engage with extremist communities.

This progression is particularly compelling because each level feels like a natural extension of the previous one. A young man might start by watching Rogan's interviews with comedians or athletes, begin exploring his more controversial political content, find himself drawn to guests like Peterson, and gradually move toward more extreme voices. The algorithm facilitates this journey by recommending slightly more radical content based on viewing patterns." (Guzman 2024)

Once you're in the Pipeline, it is hard to get out of. Confirmation Bias will allow you to see all these large communities that are experiencing the same thing. Many of the content creators were actively collaborating with others who shared similar ideological views. It created a daisy chain, where you would be able to naturally progress from one to the next without ever feeling like you had to take an enormous leap in logic or significantly change your ideals. Also, suppose you settled into one of these communities that were originally nominally liberal or centrist. In that case, some of those creators were suddenly getting lots of money and viewers, and the most active people in their community dragged them down the Pipeline with them.

Once one finds oneself in any of these spaces, the process of radicalization begins as they are introduced to increasingly reactionary content and ideas. What would have once made them scoff at the ridiculousness of such ideas becomes commonplace and easily rationalized within their new worldview. The algorithms play a key role in this process by recommending increasingly radical content based on user engagement. This process thus never feels overt or like the ideas are too extreme since they are gradually built upon the backs of other ideas that have already been internalized.

## **Tactics of Indoctrination**

The process of indoctrination in the Alt-Right pipeline involved the use of a multitude of strategies and methods, some of which have already been covered earlier and some of which are specific to the strategy of indoctrination.

One of the primary keys to success for the more extreme elements of the Alt-Right was the use of irony and humour. By utilizing irony and “edgy” humour, individuals who found themselves in these spheres would become increasingly desensitized to bigotry and hateful ideas, making extremist content appear more palatable and socially acceptable. Memes were widely used to spread and normalize extremist narratives, serving as both recruitment tools and a form of “memetic warfare” against perceived enemies. As a knock-on effect of the humour utilized by the Alt-Right, individuals who internalized this humour would become increasingly ostracized by their real-world associates as their sense of humour became more socially unacceptable, leading them further down the Pipeline.

By leveraging the algorithms on sites such as YouTube and TikTok, influencers and talking heads in alternative right spaces can promote increasingly radical content and guide users down a “rabbit hole,” which feeds them information and ideas that incrementally extreme, this process of gradual exposure ensures that individuals aren’t overwhelmed or put off by the content during the process and readily accept these ideas as natural extensions of their own beliefs. The “Alternate Influence Network” of interconnected right-wing commentators cross-promote content, facilitating smooth transitions from moderate to extreme content. This is also the basis for initialization, as viewing moderate content that addresses concerns an individual may hold enters them into the Pipeline. The algorithm then recommends content produced by more moderate right-wing figures who cover the same topics.

Influencers, pseudo-intellectuals, and political commentators all work at constructing and reinforcing their political identity as a “Brand.” Since the initial introduction to the Pipeline for many is a rejection of more extreme aspects of Social Justice Initiatives and progressivism, these figures curate a solution to these issues on the individual level by reinforcing traditionally Republican values, commonly referred to as “traditional values,” such as family, faith, and “masculinity.” These values appeal to individuals who feel alienated by society, offering them concrete goals and role models to emulate. For many young men, the role models and values they grew up seeing in the 1990s and 2000s seem incongruous with contemporary society, especially the aspirations of progressives.

By tying their Brand to their political identity, influencers can attract more people to their side by offering solutions in the form of their political agenda to alienated youths. Suppose the Brand becomes conflated with the political interests. In that case, it is possible to trap individuals into feeling like their values are fundamentally incompatible with Democratic policies despite their values being perfectly normal within the Democratic Party.

Recruitment for many of the groups in the Alt-Right focuses their attention on vulnerable groups who might be at least sympathetic to their ideas, especially young men experiencing loneliness or seeking belonging. The communities offered by these groups provide a solution to the most pressing concerns of young men by having a community of like-minded people who are at a similar point in their lives and can bond over commonalities. Online forums, gaming communities, and encrypted apps like Discord or Telegram provide spaces that are full of potential recruits and can be used for direct outreach or deeper engagement without requiring the potential recruits to initially make significant adjustments to their habits or come to their own conclusions through personal exploration. A guided tour through the ideas of the Alt-Right is going to be more impactful than stumbling upon them on your own.

To radicalize new members of the community and alienate them from those who could potentially hinder the radicalization process, the more established members of the community or leaders will orchestrate deliberate campaigns aimed at sowing discord and forcing binary worldviews that push moderates to choose sides. Additionally, disinformation and psychological operations are used to manipulate public discourse and mainstream discussions. Notable examples of this include “in 2017, the “okay” hand gesture acquired a new and different significance thanks to a hoax by members of the website 4chan to falsely promote the gesture as a hate symbol” (ADL 2025) or the phrase “believe all women” was coopted by Right-Wing as an ontological trap. (Hesse 2020) The use of Strategic Polarization and Disinformation leads people to become more skeptical about the truthfulness of news and information that might provide reasonable counter-arguments to Right-Wing ideas and promote division within society.

“Redpilling,” a reference to the movie *The Matrix* (1999), in which the protagonist Neo is given the option to either take a blue pill, which will allow him to go back into *The Matrix* and forget that everything happened or to take the red pill and escape *The Matrix* and learn the truth of the world, is a term that has been utilized to refer to indoctrinating people into the Alt-Right. “Redpilled” likewise refers to someone who is already within the Alt-Right and “awake to the truth of the world.” In addition to the allusion to the Red Pill, there is also the Black Pill, which tends to be a more ironic expression and denotes someone who, instead of accepting the ideas of the popular Alt-Right, has become nihilistic and considers all political paradigms to be absurd; individuals who’ve been “Blackpilled” are either extremist members of the Alt-Right or entirely remove themselves from the discourse.

Strategy guides for “redpilling” have been developed and circulated within Alt-Right networks to expand recruitment efforts. The step-by-step instructions and tutorials provided within these communities enable even the rank-and-file to participate in the indoctrination strategy and the movement to access new, untapped markets where these lower members might exist as higher members elsewhere.

By exploiting common grievances of individuals, such as job loss, relationship issues, or resentment over political correctness, the Alt-Right has an entry point for radicalization. In the current economy, various circumstances have led to limited work

opportunities. While the Alt-Right doesn't have direct solutions to these issues of joblessness, it can still capitalize on the anger and alienation. While not as prevalent a talking point in the 2016 electoral season, in the 2024 election season, relationships have become a much larger talking point. Incel (Involuntarily celibate) communities have much larger, and the "Manosphere" has become a central talking point that has captured young men in particular. Loneliness and lack of a romantic partner have become one of the largest avenues for radicalization. They are treated with extreme hostility by the popular progressive community, leading to increased radicalization. One of the common criticisms of the Democrats after the 2024 campaigns was the adherence to progressive or "woke" politics, be it the defence of Transgender people, Feminism, or LGBTQ+; many view progressive politics negatively. A lot of the negativity for progressive politics has come from the Alt-Right. Still, it has also been a significant point for the Republican Party, which has used progressives as targets that are directly associated with the Democrats.

The Alt-Right has worked hard over the last decade to make itself as visible as possible. The attention and visibility that the Alt-Right receives, whether positive or negative, have given them a significant presence in the general public consciousness. By being a known and identifiable presence, these communities are able to attract disaffected individuals and bring them into the fold. The visibility takes several different forms, either through pseudo-academic popular content, such as Turning Point USA's campus debates and events, or more radical gatherings, like the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville. The Alt-Right are firm adherents to "no publicity is bad publicity."

## **Psychological and Social Impacts**

Involvement with the Alt-Right carries a variety of Psychological and Social impacts that further the investment and inability to leave of the individuals that find themselves in its clutches. By emotionally investing their members in the political and social framework of Alt-Right ideas, the Alt-Right can create devoted followers that are extremely difficult to deradicalize, and even if they get out, they will find themselves burdened with ideas and beliefs that may negatively impact their psyche.

Immersion in Alt-Right content often heightens feelings of anxiety, frustration, and anger. Many of the core ideas and beliefs of the Alt-Right are fundamentally antagonistic to contemporary society and radicalize followers by heightening feelings of alienation and dissociation. Furthermore, exposure to conspiracy theories and extremist rhetoric exacerbates emotional distress. Many of the core beliefs come out of antisemitic or misogynistic conspiracy theories that present reality and society in negative ways that are insurmountable within the existing paradigm.

A hallmark of the Alt-Right is the development of black-and-white thinking (sometimes literally) and intolerance toward opposing views. Cognitive rigidity and dogmatic intolerance of the out-group, often minorities such as immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, or ethnic minorities, allow for the Alt-Right to create loyalists. The dehumanization of the out-groups becomes normalized and sets them up as



scapegoats for societal woes. Additionally, promoting a high need for cognitive closure makes individuals susceptible to extremist ideologies in the often irrational pursuit of answers in a complex world that rarely has straightforward solutions.

The extremist narratives that are promoted by the Alt-Right lead to an increased susceptibility to conspiracy theories. By creating or promoting racist, antisemitic, or bigoted conspiracies about the out-group, it is easier for the Alt-Right to present the persecution of these groups as a solution to the woes and concerns that initially attracted individuals to the Alt-Right. The use of conspiracy theories negatively impacts the members of the Alt-Right by increasing distrust and paranoia, further alienating them from society and making it harder for them to exist within established societal frameworks.

Engagement with Alt-Right communities, by increasing distrust and paranoia, further leads to withdrawal from mainstream social networks. Even if individuals continue to use mainstream social networks, they will likely move into online echo chambers within those networks that reinforce segregation and reduce exposure to diverse perspectives, except for platforming the most radical expressions of progressive politics, which further fuel the distrust and alienation being cultivated.

In the alienation and estrangement from society that individuals undergo in their progression through the Alt-Right pipeline, the alt-Right communities offer solace by providing identity and belonging in an in-group that carries the same criticisms and woes as they do. The Pipeline exploits loneliness and social exclusion by providing a sense of purpose and community. Strong in-group cohesion fosters robust social validation and connection, but it also increases alienation and estrangement from the broader society.

With all of the built-up alienation, anger, resentment, and paranoia, de-radicalization is challenging. Attempts to leave Alt-Right communities can cause trauma and “de-radicalization burnout.” By disengaging from these communities, individuals often experience a loss of social identity and support, increasing risks of mood disorders, addiction, and suicide. Usually, deprogramming completely can be impossible, with some ideas and resentments becoming ingrained in one’s core identity. Even if they rationalize away, they will still exist in the back of their minds. This means that distrust of women or racial minorities may likely persist against their interests and intentions.

The constant exposure to the normalization of extremist ideas shifts perceptions of social acceptability, making hateful and violent attitudes appear legitimate. This normalization can contribute to offline harm, including hate crimes and political violence. By dehumanizing their opposition, they create a permission structure through which anything is acceptable as long as it promotes the interests of the in-group or provides resistance against the oppressive societal structures that have been deemed the sources of pain and alienation.

The broader societal consequences of these psychological and social impacts are that divisions are reinforced and social cohesion is undermined. These also challenge democratic norms by promoting authoritarian and exclusionary worldviews. We can see the impacts now in 2025 with how fascist projects like dragnetting or masked apprehension of legal residents, as ICE is currently utilizing, would have most likely received more non-partisan resistance and condemnation.

## **Support and Backing**

Within the Alt-Right Pipeline, there are various forms through which monetary Support and Backing are obtained. Many influencers in this space generate income from their community's support, either through subscription models, such as with The Daily Wire, or through traditional influencer methods, including Patreon or donations during streams. Pseudo-intellectuals such as Jordan Peterson received much of their funding through book deals, sales, and touring to give speeches. In his case, he was also hired at one point to work for the Daily Wire. Lifestyle Gurus obtained funding through advertisement deals and by selling courses online.

At some point, conservative donors entered the picture, but it's hard to pinpoint when. Still, initially, there were conservative news outlets or shows in this space that helped connect the Pipeline and enticed centrist creators to take more conservative positions. Breitbart News, The Daily Wire, and Steven Crowder were all established conservative content providers that played a role in normalizing the radicalization that the Pipeline was doing. Dave Rubin and Tim Pool were liberal/centrist content creators who are now solidly in the conservative sphere and receive money from right-wing organizations and Russia ((US DOJ 2024) (The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder 2024) & (Arieh Kovler [@ariehkovler] 2024)).

## **Countermeasures and Resistance**

Online resistance to the Alt-Right takes several forms, primarily from progressive or leftist creators who convey an alternative worldview, as well as from centrist or moderate creators who promote tolerance and highlight the flaws of both the left and right sides of the political spectrum. The online resistance to the Alt-Right pipeline often suffers from a lack of strategy and interconnectedness. There is no functioning Alt-Left pipeline, but rather a variety of personalities and perspectives that can be challenging to sort through to find what works best for you.

The progressive and leftist creators on YouTube, commonly known as BreadTube online, present a diverse range of interests, positions, and strategies. While there are numerous options in the online Left, they are not as networked as the online Right and are often prone to infighting and hostility over various topics. Some notable members of this space include Hasan Piker, Vaush, and ContraPoints. While all of these influencers represent leftist positions, some are often openly hostile toward one another, similar to the political Left.

While centrists/moderates can often be the entry point into the Alt-Right Pipeline, many of them have since distanced themselves from any right-wing creators and are often openly critical of them. The early days of the Alt-Right Pipeline saw centrists aligning with some right-wing creators due to their criticism of the perceived overreach of Social Justice movements. Still, they later saw the insidious indoctrination strategies and more radical ideas, upon which they cut ties and distanced themselves.

Some of the most effective interventions to counter radicalization include preventive education, early intervention, trauma-informed rehabilitation, and efforts to address the root causes of radicalization, such as a lack of opportunities and social isolation. Educating people on the tools of radicalization and how to identify them, as well as other valuable life skills such as effective communication and forming meaningful friendships as an adult, would help immensely in addressing the vulnerability of individuals to radicalization. Helping family and friends recognize the signs that a loved one is falling into the rabbit hole would also assist in intervening earlier in the process and prevent long-term repercussions. Providing rehabilitation that understands the issues and struggles would allow people who want to leave a method to have an opportunity to reorient their lives. However, it is essential to address the root causes that lead individuals down this path. Ensuring that in bringing everyone rights and freedoms, it is vital that no one gets left behind or overlooked, especially when it's the largest voting demographic in society or else they can be easily primed to undermine those initiatives. (Nagaiah 2024)

The best defence against this process is also potentially the worst exacerbator, real-life community. When someone finds themselves in communities like these online, having people around who can talk them out of the radical ideas they are now embracing can help promote self-awareness and reflection on the realities of the ideas they hold. Someone who is being bombarded about the "migrant crime" online will probably be best served by meeting migrants in their community and understanding them while developing empathy for their situation. However, suppose someone is in a group of other people who have also found themselves in the same online environment, such as classmates with similar interests and viewing patterns. In that case, this instead reinforces the ideas they encounter online when they also have people repeating these ideas in the real world. The Netflix British crime drama "Adolescents" portrayed this idea very well by showing the kind of environment that children in middle school or high school are in and how "manosphere" content, alongside experiences in the real world, leads to boys having negative views of women.

### **Summary Table: Stages and Influences in the Alt-Right Pipeline**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Typical Content/Influencers</b>	<b>Mechanism of Progression</b>	<b>User Experience/Impact</b>
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Gateway/ Mainstream	Rogan, “alt-lite” commentators	Questioning mainstream narratives	Curiosity, seeking answers
Pseudo-Intellectual	Jordan Peterson, self-help figures	Frameworks for social issues	Sense of explanation/validation
Ideological Introduction	Political commentators, Pool, Shapiro	Explicit ideological content	Identity formation
Lifestyle Radicalization	Andrew Tate, “manosphere” figures	Radical views with lifestyle appeal	Belonging, aspiration
Extremist Engagement	Groyppers, Alt-right communities, forums	Overt hate/extremist content	Dehumanization, isolation

The Alt-Right Pipeline created an online media ecosystem that was filled with people who felt disenfranchised and like the Democrats didn't want them, and in 2016, Trump came in and brought them all under his banner. Trump was flagrantly anti-woke and represented a threat to the established progressive movements. For the people who felt like progressive movements were ruining their passions and were treating them like criminals, it was perfect to have someone like Trump, who eschewed propriety and actively talked down about the progressive agendas.

## Chapter 4: The Data Defends

In this chapter, I examine several empirical studies and their key takeaways. The rest of this thesis is backed up and reinforced by the findings of these studies. The conditions created by increased social media engagement and private interests in those spaces have developed a breeding ground for fear-mongering and distrust in existing systems of governance.

### **"The spread of true and false news online" by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018):**

This study analyzed the spread of rumours and misinformation on Twitter from 2006 to 2017, "involving roughly 3 million people and over 4.5 million tweets." The results found that fake news spread "significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly" when compared to accurate/verifiable news in every category.

It was found that fake news garnered significantly more interest and attention, with the top 1% of fake stories reaching 1,000 to 100,000 people, compared to the truth, which rarely reached more than 1,000 people. When compared to my points, these results confirm that sensationalized misinformation has a particularly dangerous ability to gain traction due to its heightened emotional engagement. "False news was 70% more likely to be retweeted than true news." By creating sensationalized stories that are relevant to the larger social discourse, individuals are more likely to latch onto this information due to confirmation bias, thus leading them to be less likely to investigate the veracity of the information.

Fake news is often novel; however, it also reinforces preconceptions, making it more likely to spread. If someone encounters information that isn't novel, they are unlikely to share it, as they will expect others to be already familiar with it.

The emotional response to stories tends to have one of the most significant impacts on the virality of a story. "False stories tend to inspire fear, disgust, and surprise, while true stories evoke anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust." This aspect is dictated by the innate Negativity Bias in humans, where we tend to focus on addressing issues that elicit a negative response while being quick to overlook things that evoke positive feelings or are beyond our control.

The findings of this study highlight the psychological and social dynamics of information sharing, reinforcing the concerns about Confirmation Bias and Negativity Bias. Additionally, the nature of novelty information tied with emotionally charged content leads to increased propagation of fake news. These points underscore the challenges that fake news poses for democracy, public safety, and societal trust.

### **"Deciphering shadows: A study on disinformation, its digital proliferation, and effects on organizational integrity" by Suad AalThani and Tatiana Palei (2024):**

This study examines the dissemination of fake news, misinformation, and propaganda, with a specific focus on the field of digital marketing. The authors found

that digital marketing is significantly more effective at spreading disinformation than traditional media or word-of-mouth.

Emphasizes the complexity and changing nature of disinformation. Digital marketing plays a critical role in the dissemination of disinformation and requires multifaceted approaches that combine technological, educational, and ethical interventions to manage the spread. Successful prevention strategies should include improving public education on digital platform use, enhancing fact-checking systems, and establishing stronger ethical codes in digital marketing practices. The study suggests that making these changes is not only crucial for society in general but also beneficial to companies, as they avoid losing trust and reliability in the long term. If people over time associate your platform with misinformation, you will ultimately lose market share and advertising. The research highlights the importance of organizations being proactive in monitoring and countering disinformation, thereby safeguarding their reputation and preserving trust.

### **"Disinformation in the Digital Age: Impacts on Democracy and Strategies for Mitigation" by Thierry Warin:**

This study examines the threat posed to democratic institutions and societal stability by disinformation, intensified by the proliferation of social media and digital ecosystems. One of the key ideas is that traditional gatekeeping, which was once performed by mainstream media, has diminished and, in many cases, has been entirely circumvented. Instead, information has become widespread and rapid on social media, where traditional checks and balances are often absent.

The speed and breadth of information dissemination have been facilitated by social media algorithms that prioritize engagement and sensationalized content, resulting in amplified falsehoods that distort public discourse and electoral outcomes. The spread of misinformation is also amplified by the limitations of social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), where character limits mean that people often judge news entirely on the title and a brief abstract rather than reading the entire article, which may provide more nuance or reveal itself to be false. Individuals are using the titles of news articles and developing their own story that fits in with their worldview.

This paper finds that online disinformation erodes public trust in democratic processes and institutions, thereby contributing to polarization and skepticism among the public. Social media ecosystems facilitate the rapid, peer-to-peer transmission of information with minimal or no mediation, creating an environment where misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation can spread quickly and easily.

By using a Bayesian game-theoretic model, this study explains that misinformation persists because "high costs of truthful content production and algorithmic amplification incentivize spreading falsehoods." In practice, this means that it's faster, cheaper, and easier to create lies that serve your political interests than it is to find and write about real stories that support your ideals. Thus, "disinformation

campaigns exploit the low reputational cost due to difficulty in attribution and limited critical awareness among audiences.” Even if a story or headline is false or misleading, the information is already ingrained in the general consciousness of potentially hundreds of thousands of people who will not bother verifying the truth before any intervention can be meaningfully orchestrated. Corrections or rejections are unlikely to be seen by the same audience.

The author suggests that effective mitigation strategies should include enhancing digital literacy, increasing transparency of information sources, implementing AI-driven detection tools, and establishing regulatory frameworks for social media accountability. By ensuring that information includes sources, it is possible to hold individuals accountable for misinformation, whereas the current model allows anonymous users to disseminate unsubstantiated information without repercussions. Additionally, AI-driven detection tools may enable platforms to stay ahead of the spread by requiring posts that are flagged for approval to be reviewed before being disseminated. A regulatory framework will enable governments and individuals to hold social media platforms accountable, and this accountability will subsequently pressure the companies to make the necessary adjustments to their platforms, or they may face significant penalties.

“International cooperation and multi-dimensional approaches combining technology, education, policy, and ethical interventions are essential to safeguard democratic integrity.” If there is a desire to maintain democracy as a functioning system of governance, adjustments must be made to ensure that not only social media platforms are held accountable for what they allow on their platforms, but also that the public is more aware of how they consume information and what to look out for.

**"Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide" by Jon Bateman and Dean Jackson (Carnegie Endowment, 2024):**

This report is a piece-by-piece policy guide on how to address the complex nature of the intersection between technology and democratic discourse. The authors highlight the highly complex nature of the interactions, noting that the commonly held beliefs and understandings of the systems at play are woefully inadequate, and emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding to develop policies and programs capable of making a meaningful impact on the increasingly worrisome issues. This report effectively breaks down their findings into several key sections.

- **No single silver bullet:** No one policy intervention is well-studied, highly effective, and easy to scale; a diversified portfolio of strategies is necessary. Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of the problems, there will not be an easy solution in the form of a single policy that can address all the concerns.
- **Policy diversification:** Democracies should combine tactical platform-based actions (e.g., fact-checking, content takedowns) with broader societal reforms such as supporting local journalism and media literacy education. The key is to address both bad actors, improve journalistic practices and opportunities, and

educate users on social media usage to attack these problems from multiple angles, thereby preventing inroads through which further exploitation can occur.

- **Set realistic expectations:** Disinformation is a chronic, historically rooted problem with deep social, political, and economic causes; technocratic solutions alone are insufficient to address it. It's necessary not to eliminate the problems completely, but instead to bring them back down to manageable levels. Conspiracy theories, hearsay, and misinformation campaigns will always exist; the issue is that they have become the overwhelming norm.
- **Political complexity:** Countering disinformation involves wielding institutional power to define truth, which can lead to political overreach or backlash. It will be important not to fully clamp down on free speech and the public's capacity to air concerns and grievances, but instead to implement safeguards that restrict the capacity for misinformation to run rampant.
- **Research gaps:** Many interventions remain poorly understood due to their complexity and methodological challenges; progress requires long-term investment in research. The abuse of online platforms to promote misinformation is a new issue that requires in-depth study and analysis to develop the means to create functioning, effective legislation properly.
- **Role of generative AI:** While AI can make false content more realistic and personalized, it is not necessarily the primary driver of belief in disinformation; AI tools might also help scale countermeasures. AI is both the sword and the shield now, and it will be crucial to develop the necessary tools capable of handling the complexities we now face. AI-driven tools will likely be the best solution for addressing AI-driven weapons.
- **Platforms and technology are not enough:** Influence from traditional media, political rhetoric, and trusted community voices also shapes beliefs and behaviours; countermeasures must address these broader contexts. While a lot has occurred within the online ecosystem, the legitimacy of coverage by traditional outlets, the lack of counter-messaging, and the use of disinformation in political rhetoric by candidates create permission structures that allow for the implied validation of misinformation.
- **Effective interventions include:**
  - Supporting local journalism to rebuild civic trust and provide reliable information.
  - Promoting media literacy education to equip individuals with critical skills.
  - Adjusting platform algorithms and limiting microtargeting to reduce the formation of echo chambers.



- Implementing transparent fact-checking that empowers audiences without policing beliefs.
- Developing counter-messaging campaigns using trusted local voices to challenge false narratives authentically.
- **“Do no harm” approach:** Policies must strike a balance between countering disinformation and protecting freedom of expression and democratic governance. Policies implemented to address these issues can just as easily be used to exacerbate the issue or clamp down on expression if implemented incorrectly and placed in the wrong hands.

**“Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal” by Sara Atske (Pew Research Center, 2019)**

This study analyzed how Americans’ views have changed from 2016, when Donald Trump was first elected president, to 2019. The author found that across almost every metric, the divisions within American society have increased. While both Republicans and Democrats have shown increased negative feelings towards members of the opposite party, “for the most part, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to ascribe negative characteristics to people in the opposing party.”

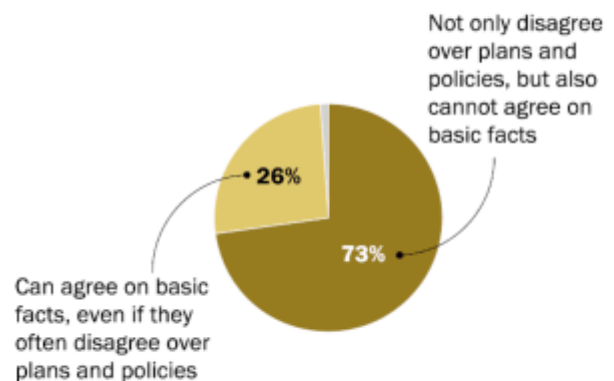
It is a common sentiment in both parties that the other party is “too extreme” in its positions. The majority of both parties believe that societal divisions along political lines are increasing, and half of each party finds this trend concerning. There is widespread agreement across the political spectrum that voters on both sides not only disagree on policies but also struggle to agree on basic facts.

Partisan hostility extends beyond politics; majorities in both parties say those in the opposing party do not share their nonpolitical values and goals, and fewer than half in each party believes the other side shares many of their values. These hostilities extend to other aspects of life, with people being less likely to consider being friends or dating individuals with different political beliefs.

The findings in this study illustrate the deepening emotional polarization and mutual distrust between Republican and Democratic voters in the US as of 2019, with significant concerns about the implications for political discourse and national unity.

**Republicans and Democrats say they can’t agree on ‘basic facts’**

*On important issues facing the country, most Republican voters and Democratic voters ... (%)*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 3-15, 2019.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

## **“How America Changed During Donald Trump’s Presidency” by Michael Dimock and John Gramlich (Pew Research Center, 2021)**

This study examines the evolution of the US political culture during the first term of the Donald Trump presidency. The authors found that Trump’s first term revealed and deepened extraordinary societal fissures in the US, marked by intense political polarization and cultural divisions. Trump oversaw the erosion of many of the commonalities that bind the American people.

Trump was the first US president without prior government or military experience, and he brought an unconventional style, which included the frequent use of Twitter to communicate directly and provocatively. This approach ultimately led to his permanent ban from the platform after his presidency. Donald Trump’s first tenure in the Whitehouse was characterized by relentless political conflict rather than attempts at national unity, often attacking perceived adversaries, including the media, politicians from both parties, and foreign leaders. Trump carried this style forward into his 2024 presidential campaign and now into his second term in the Whitehouse, often blaming Joe Biden or anyone who wasn’t directly aligned with his ideals or subservient to him; Trump’s politicization of the wildfires in California and now the protests against ICE enforcement are notable examples where he frequently uses his platform to bully his political opponents into subservience or capitulation.

In his first term, Trump achieved significant conservative policy victories, including the largest corporate tax cuts in history, deregulation, reshaping the federal judiciary, immigration restrictions, withdrawal from multilateral agreements, and a confrontational trade stance toward China. While these were victories for the Republican party, the voter base of Donald Trump continued to suffer and received a pyrrhic victory in the form of the Republicans overturning *Roe v. Wade*. Under Trump, the partisan divide on core issues increased significantly, reflecting growing polarization on topics such as the government’s role, environmental concerns, and national security.

Public opinion changed during Trump’s first term; Democrats showed larger shifts on issues like race and gender, influenced by movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, while Republicans grew more negative toward institutions such as higher education. Racial Tensions intensified, highlighted by events such as the 2017 Charlottesville rally and the 2020 George Floyd killing by police officers in Minneapolis. The subsequent protests and increased public awareness of racial inequality represented major cornerstones in US culture, the counter movement of All Lives Matter representing a spit in the eye for many Black Americans.

Trump further amplified political divisions with his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The seriousness of the virus and public health measures led to economic disruption and a spike in unemployment in the US. Trump’s politicization of the pandemic led to an increase in misinformation and made it more difficult for healthcare workers to do their jobs.

Many Americans experienced personal and social strain related to Trump's presidency, including reluctance to discuss politics or Trump with acquaintances and significant numbers of Democrats and Republicans unwilling to form close relationships with someone who supported the opposing candidate in 2016.

The report underscores that Trump's first term as president accelerated existing trends of polarization, mistrust, and cultural conflict in American society, leaving a complex and contested legacy that continues to influence political and social dynamics.

### **“Election Interference: How tech, race, and disinformation can influence the U.S Election” by Bozkurt, Li, and Townes (2024)**

In this study, the authors examine how digital technology has profoundly altered the US media ecosystem, enabling political influencers, foreign agents, and automated accounts to disseminate disinformation and exacerbate social and racial divisions, particularly during election cycles. Organized disinformation campaigns were often aimed at marginalized communities, such as immigrants and transgender. By using racist or bigoted themes alongside violent rhetoric, campaigns could potentially suppress voter turnout and undermine confidence in the electoral process.

The online strategies of various actors underwent rapid evolution, which was highly responsive, meaning that tactics and disinformation frequently outpaced fact-checking and counter-messaging efforts, making it extremely difficult for organizations and researchers to develop effective methods of containing their impact. Foreign and domestic actors would exploit the speed and reach of digital platforms to amplify discord, thus influencing voter behaviour and negatively impacting public trust in democratic institutions.

The scale and sophistication of these campaigns raise questions about the resilience of US democracy and the ability of the electoral system to uphold its foundational promises in the face of technological manipulation. Any developed countermeasures will need to be capable of adapting to changing conditions and strategies in real time or have predictive models that can effectively preempt strategies before they are implemented.

### **“AI-Enabled Influence Operations: Safeguarding Future Elections” By Stockwell et al. (2024)**

This study finds that AI-generated disinformation amplified harmful narratives during the 2024 US election, contributing to increased political polarization and influencing public discourse. However, it did not conclusively alter election outcomes. While there is substantial evidence that AI-generated content is influencing socio-political discourse, it is challenging to quantify its actual impact in a meaningful way.

To counter threats from AI-generated content, the authors suggest a four-pronged framework:

1. Curtail generation: Strengthen digital content authenticity by providing embedded data that makes sources traceable (e.g., embedding provenance records in government-produced material).
2. Constrain dissemination: Develop government benchmarks for deepfake detection tools and enforce an Ofcom Code of Conduct on disinformation.
3. Counteract engagement: Update media guidelines (e.g., IPSO standards) to address viral disinformation during major incidents.
4. Empower society: Boost digital literacy and invest in public broadcasting to build resilience against disinformation.

Improving these aspects will provide the necessary tools to make progress in the fight against misinformation. Two of the most significant factors in reducing public susceptibility to disinformation were low political polarization and digital literacy. Individuals who were highly digitally literate and/or were politically open-minded were markedly less likely to fall victim to disinformation campaigns.

One of the most significant impacts of AI on the political messaging space is that it has lowered barriers to the creation of disinformation. This allows both foreign actors and domestic groups and individuals to produce realistic, more persuasive artificial content at a faster pace than ever before. The confusion of voters posed by AI-generated content risks undermining trust in electoral integrity, even when direct manipulation is absent.

The role of AI is dual-use; while AI is the source of much of the disinformation now, it is also the key to effectively identifying and countering disinformation. It is essential that investments are made in developing the necessary tools capable of addressing issues before they can spread.

### **“How digital media drive affective polarization through partisan sorting” by Petter Törnberg (2022)**

This paper finds that “affective polarization, defined as intense negative feelings between partisan groups, has rapidly increased in recent years,” and the resulting polarization poses a serious societal risk. Threats to democratic institutions and the impairment of collective responses to significant challenges, such as climate change and pandemics, are inevitable.

The paper identifies a causal mechanism linking digital media to affective polarization by showing how digital platforms drive a sorting process where individuals increasingly segregate into ideologically homogeneous groups. These groups become insulated and develop increasing radicalization, leading to increased belief in conspiracy theories and violence. This partisan sorting facilitated by digital media directly contributes to the breakdown of social cohesion and intensifies affective polarization.

The study also suggests that the design of digital media platforms plays a crucial role in the process of affective polarization, proposing that redesigning these platforms could help mitigate their negative societal consequences. The findings highlight the need to understand digital media not just as neutral communication tools but as active agents that shape social and political identities, thereby fueling polarization.

**“Extremist ideology as a complex contagion: the spread of far-right radicalization in the United States between 2005 and 2017” by Mason Youngblood (2020)**

This study explores how Far-Right radicalization in the US spreads through a complex contagion process, meaning multiple exposures and reinforcement are required for individuals to adopt extremist ideologies. The multitude of exposures and reinforcements often take the form of memes or irony, which can lead to desensitization and an impression that individuals are part of an in-group or community, as they understand the lingo and references.

Both social media usage and physical group membership significantly enhance the spread of far-right extremist ideology, highlighting the importance of online and offline organizing in recruitment. While a lot of the process is online, groups like the “Proud Boys” or the “Young Republicans” provide users with the ability to connect with others who are undergoing the same radicalization process in their area.

The environmental or endemic factors, such as poverty or loneliness, increase the likelihood of radicalization in specific regions, indicating that socioeconomic conditions play a role in vulnerability to extremist influence. The socioeconomic conditions and the concept of “broken promises” play a significant role in attracting individuals to recruitment by the far-right. The study uses “epidemiological modelling (two-component spatio-temporal intensity modelling) on data from 416 far-right extremists” to support these findings.

Effective interventions, such as online counter-narratives to extremist propaganda or deradicalization, are suggested as necessary to mitigate the spread of far-right extremism in the United States. The far-right mustn’t be the only loud voice in the online ecosystem that claims acknowledgment or solutions for the alienation and poor socioeconomic conditions that victims are encountering. This research highlights the importance of addressing both social reinforcement mechanisms and regional endemic factors in combating radicalization. In order to effectively combat the spread of extremism, it is essential to provide meaningful alternatives to these spaces that allow individuals to form a community and improve their socioeconomic conditions.

**“A systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy” by Philipp Lorenz-Spreen, Lisa Oswald, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ralph Hertwig (2023)**

This review analyzed 496–498 studies worldwide on the relationship between digital media use and various political variables, employing both causal and

correlational methods. This review seeks to find “whether the global uptake of digital media is causally related to a decline in democracy.”

The study found that digital media is linked to increased political participation and information consumption, effects that are generally beneficial for democracy and more commonly observed in autocracies and emerging democracies. Conversely, digital media use is also associated with declining political trust, rising populism, and growing political polarization, trends that tend to be more pronounced and detrimental in established democracies.

The impact of digital media on democracy is complex and varies depending on the political variable considered and the type of political system, showing both positive and negative associations. The evidence calls for ongoing research, as well as vigilance and regulatory efforts by governments and civil society, to better understand, design, and manage the interplay between digital media and democratic processes.

This review highlights the need for nuanced approaches that consider the different effects of digital media across diverse political contexts and variables, rather than assuming uniform impacts. Such research may help to establish the necessary precautions and policies that would be capable of curbing democratic backsliding in the West.

**"The Awareness Paradox: Why Better Knowledge of Digital Marketing Boosts Appreciation Without Reducing Skepticism" by Shrestha, Limbu, Shrestha, and Basnet (2025)**

“This research examines how digital marketing awareness influences individuals’ perceptions, focusing on its positive and negative effects, gender-based differences, and general opinions.” The authors find that higher awareness and knowledge of digital marketing correlate moderately with more favorable or positive perceptions of digital marketing practices.

This study finds that despite increased appreciation, greater awareness does not significantly reduce skepticism or negative perceptions about digital marketing’s potential harms. Additionally, gender does not significantly influence awareness levels, positive or negative perceptions, or overall opinions toward digital marketing.

They found that general opinions about digital marketing are shaped by factors beyond awareness alone, indicating a complex interplay of influences on consumer attitudes. The study suggests that while informed consumers may appreciate digital marketing more, they remain cautious and critical, reflecting a paradoxical coexistence of appreciation and skepticism.

The authors recommendations include emphasizing transparency, consumer education, and ethical digital marketing practices to build trust and engagement. Policymakers are encouraged to consider regulations addressing privacy and ethical concerns without hindering digital growth.

This research provides localized empirical insights from Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, contributing to understanding digital marketing perceptions in rapidly digitizing, underrepresented regions. While this research isn't about the United States of America, it has potential insights into the impacts of digital interactions and ideas that can assist in the development of effective policy.

## **Summary**

All the data points to the same conclusion: the misinformation of the last decade has had a significant impact on the US political culture and is increasing divisions within the population. To effectively address this issue, it is essential that progress is made in policy, research, and education.

The polarization that has been experienced over the last decade can be, in part, directly attributed to the promotion and dissemination of misinformation by social media algorithms. The communities that have emerged from this process of division go on to reinforce their own beliefs and spread through processes similar to those of viruses. As with a virus, one of the most essential actions that can be taken is inoculation in the form of education initiatives that improve digital literacy and inform people about the tactics that radicalized communities employ and how to identify their symptoms.

# Conclusion

The transformation of American electoral politics in the digital age has been both profound and unsettling. This thesis has examined how the Right, particularly the Republican Party and its allied online movements, has adeptly harnessed technology to capture voters, shape political discourse, and deepen societal divisions. By focusing on the 2016 and 2024 campaigns of Donald Trump, this study has illuminated the ways in which digital platforms, data analytics, and coordinated online strategies have been deployed not only to mobilize supporters but also to radicalize segments of the electorate and exacerbate polarization.

The analysis began with an exploration of the technological innovations and strategic approaches that have defined modern Right-Wing campaigning. These tools, ranging from micro-targeted advertisements to viral social media content, have enabled the Right to bypass traditional gatekeepers in the Traditional Media, directly influence public opinion, and foster echo chambers that reinforce ideological conformity.

A historical perspective on the Republican Party revealed a trajectory toward ethnocentrism and elite-driven policy, often at odds with the material interests of its broader voter base. This ideological shift has been both mirrored and magnified by the rise of the "Alt-Right Pipeline," where online communities and algorithms have facilitated the spread of reactionary and exclusionary ideologies, particularly among younger demographics.

The empirical evidence presented underscores the tangible impacts of these digital strategies: heightened social tensions, increased distrust in democratic institutions, and the radicalization of political discourse. The data not only affirms the effectiveness of the Right's digital playbook but also highlights the urgent need for interventions to mitigate the corrosive effects of online manipulation.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the intersection of technology and Right-Wing strategy has fundamentally altered the landscape of American democracy. The ability of the Right to leverage digital tools for political gain has contributed to a more divided and volatile society, raising critical questions about the future of electoral integrity and social cohesion. Addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort from policymakers, technology companies, and civil society to promote transparency, foster digital literacy, and develop robust safeguards against manipulation.

As the digital frontier continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of its implications for democracy. Only by recognizing and confronting the strategies that have enabled the Right to capture voters can we hope to restore a more inclusive, informed, and resilient political culture in the United States and abroad.



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Utilized Grammarly for grammar and spell checking and [perplexity.ai](https://www.perplexity.ai) for research and sourcing.

***"On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorised assistance on it."***