

FROM PLATFORM TO PARANOIA

How the lunatic fringe took over the GOP

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THERE has always been a conspiratorial and authoritarian element within the ranks of the right. In 1958, Robert W. Welch Jr. created the John Birch Society (JBS)—a wildly conspiratorial group founded on the belief that there was a communist conspiracy within the government that “was much deeper, and far broader than even Joseph McCarthy had imagined” (Continetti 2022, 150). The JBS grew rapidly, drawing support from the latent anti-establishment and anti-elitist energies in the postwar United States. Those who felt unrepresented by JFK Democrats and Nixon Republicans flocked to the JBS, whose membership reached roughly 100,000 by 1966 (Trickey 2021). The Society often promoted anti-semitic messaging, with one of Welch’s lieutenants endorsing the abhorrent Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Continetti 2022, 152). By 1964, there was a growing distaste for the JBS across the political spectrum. Bob Dylan mocked the organization with his song “Talkin’ John Birch Paranoid Blues.” Meanwhile, Republicans like Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan worried about the JBS’s influence on their electability (Trickey 2021). To combat this, Republican elites began to denounce the group. Reagan describe them as a “lunatic fringe” (Trickey 2021). The head of the conservative editorial magazine National Review, William F. Buckley, Jr., shot out a series of columns denouncing the group’s toxic influence on Movement Conservatism. Through the combined efforts of conservative elites, the JBS was effectively excommunicated from the right.

For decades, conservative elites were able to keep the authoritarian populists outside of the

political mainstream. When this element began to creep into electoral success, Republican party elites could usually battle it back. Yet slowly, the elites have lost their power. No longer can it be denied that violent extremists have taken over the GOP. The forces of January 6th tore away the façade of normalcy in American politics. The violence and terror of the riot were met with an almost apathetic shrug by the Republican electorate. Sixty-one percent of Republicans still believe Biden didn't win fair and square in 2020 (Murray 2022), and most Republican elites, who undoubtedly understand its falsehood, refuse to stand up to Donald Trump's big lie.

The project of right-wing elites has always been a difficult one. How does a party that represents the interests of the wealthy win a majority in a democratic system? Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, two leading political scientists, argue there are only three ways for GOP elites to resolve this. They could change the agenda towards something more economically populist, they could change the focus from economic issues to culture war issues, or they could change the system from a democratic to an autocratic one (Klein 2020). Republican elites have sought to contain their party's extreme tendencies by adopting a "plutocratic populism" agenda, combining the economic interests of the moneyed elite with cultural backlash. However, this alliance has been overwhelmed by a shift that is increasingly driven by polarization and revanchism. As parties have weakened, more extreme candidates have gained more control, and social media has only added fuel to the fire. The result is an apparent end to party control by responsible elites and a transformation of the GOP into a violent, conspiratorial, and anti-democratic force.

During the period when the John Birch Society rose to power, the Republican party represented the center of American politics. The New Deal Democratic Party brought together an odd coalition of Northern liberals and Southern segregationists, spanning from the left and the far right. However, as Democrats embraced a civil rights agenda, the "Dixiecrats" — Southern segregationist Democrats — shifted their allegiance to the Republican Party. This began the ideological sorting of the American electorate. Over the next decades, the correlation between the majority ideology of a state's population, and the party they voted for would dramatically increase (Abramowitz 2018, 81)

Subsequently, this movement towards increased ideological segregation has been accompanied by shifts in the demographic makeup of each party. Democrats are seen to represent an urban, mostly college-educated, and multi-racial coalition. At the same time, Republicans have come to represent white, rural, and Christian voters (Abramowitz 2018, 16). This identity sorting has transformed partisanship into a “meta-identity” whose defense also serves to affirm other identities held by individuals (Klein 2020, 158). Identity polarization carries with it identity conflict, which is inherently zero-sum.

During the same period, the United States experienced a transformation in voting behavior and public political discourse. This shift, dubbed the “silent revolution” by the comparative political scientist Pippa Norris, is a result of a gradual but profound realignment of the political priorities of the left and the right. Instead of categories based on taxation, spending, or overall economic policy, we increasingly see voting behavior and political discussion revolve around issues like reproductive rights, public welfare policies, and social justice (Norris 2022). This realignment is all the more remarkable considering it was, in part, natural and—at least in appearance—gradual. As older generations who may have had more progressive economic views died out, and their children took their place, social values slowly and subtly shifted away from a largely economy-focused cleavage based on parties like socialists, social democrats, and labor parties towards one centered predominately around social and cultural issues (Norris 2022).

To older generations, these changes have happened at a bewildering speed. Every decade, technological progress remakes the world, and social progress remakes the culture. Conservatives feel that the world is being changed against their will, that they are losing power, and they don’t have the ability to speak out against it (Klein 2022). Feeling backed against a wall, conservatives are becoming more radicalized, and more authoritarian in their attempts to preserve their power. Given this context, it’s no surprise someone like Donald Trump won the 2016 Republican primary nomination. His nostalgic slogan, “Make America Great Again” appeals to the large portion of the American electorate who feel left behind and want to return to a less confusing world.

In the past, GOP party middlemen would have been able to gatekeep someone like Trump from taking office. These middlemen are the career politicians and party members who allow political parties to function (Raush 2016). Middlemen create order in politics by incentivizing cooperation, coordination, and mutual accountability (Raush 2016). The power these party elites hold is certainly not democratic, but it enables a democratic system to work without falling into disorganization and demagoguery. Through a series of reforms aimed at introducing more transparency and democracy, party elites have successively lost their gatekeeping power. Middlemen formerly decided a party's presidential nomination. For example, in 1923, the anti-semitic industrialist Henry Ford was thinking of running for president as a Republican. Republican elites were able to gatekeep him from political power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Reform efforts like the McGovern-Fraser Commission democratized the nomination process and thus weakened the power of party elites in selecting quality candidates.

The threat posed to democracy by social media is far-reaching, exacerbating all three trends in conservatism. It all comes down to the relationship between democracy and media: for a democracy to function properly, citizens must base their decisions on a shared, agreed-upon reality. Marshall McLuhan famously argued that “the medium is the message” — that how an idea is presented shapes how it will be perceived and accepted (Illing 2022). Before the internet, newspapers and television exerted strong control over what Americans were exposed to. This conversation was managed and maintained by a relatively small group of highly-educated elites. Social media has upended all of this. Social media has an extremely low barrier to entry, allowing anyone with any belief to join the conversation with their own facts and narratives. By decentralizing epistemic authority, it has made it easier for more varied, but oftentimes misinformed, perspectives to enter into the public discourse. Rather than citizens arriving at largely similar conclusions through mutually understood facts, now multiple disparate “truths” can compete and blur the lines between fiction and reality (Gershberg and Illing 2022). No longer could media elites restrict democratic discussions to generally true and relevant information. Even worse, blatantly false is often compelling and exciting. Social media algorithms

elevate contentious and polarizing media while creating echo chambers that further sort the electorate where mere geographic sorting couldn't. Social media algorithms also tend to show people content that highlights the ways in which the world is changing, fueling cultural backlash (Klein 2022).

In an era of democratic backsliding, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that two essential but unwritten norms are necessary for maintaining a functional democracy: mutual toleration and forbearance. Mutual toleration means that political actors must accept their opposition as legitimate, while forbearance mandates self-restraint in exercising power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). If these norms are not upheld vigilantly, there is an increased risk of democratic decline, political violence, and even civil war. The GOP is no longer controlled by elites who have a vested interest in maintaining these critical norms. Instead, the newly empowered violent and authoritarian populists have begun undermining the core of our democratic system. Donald Trump has repeatedly falsely claimed there was significant voter fraud in the 2020 election. Meanwhile, Republicans are threatening violence and intimidation to election officials who don't go along with their false narratives (Hasen 2022). Whether American democracy can survive the threat is yet to be determined.

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