# Persuasion, Strategy, and the Microdynamics of Right-Wing Mainstreaming in the U.S.

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**Abstract**

In the U.S., as in many countries in Western Europe and elsewhere, far-right political actors and movements have developed stronger relationships with the political mainstream over time. What explains a seemingly electorally counterproductive alliance between far-right provocateurs and institutional elites? We investigate the relationship between extremist media figures and Republican Party elites in the United States using time-stamped corpora of far-right podcast transcripts and congressional floor speeches, exploring *whether*, *how*, and *when* the rhetorical content of the far-right shapes elite discourse, or whether the reverse may be true. Through topic modeling and time-series analysis, we identify patterns of thematic convergence and directionality of influence across these two domains. We argue that far-right actors build relationships with the political mainstream by slowly and systematically developing a library of shared rhetoric and a framework of common language, a pattern that can be seen particularly in issue areas that involve either new events or previously taboo subjects such that the mainstream did not have a readily available political narrative. In these areas, the far right does the labor of work-shopping new messages, which are then shared with the mainstream — strengthening relationships and mainstreaming the far right in the process.

On Alex Jones's InfoWars network, the weekend of May 31st, 2024, was even more dramatic and eventful than it was on more mainstream news networks. Friday's coverage focused to some extent on Donald Trump's felony convictions in New York state court, with guests including cryptocurrency celebrity Mario Nawfal; journalist with ties to Fox News, NewsMax, and OAN, Nick Sortor; and overt white supremacist, Hitler enthusiast, Catholic authoritarian, and Donald Trump dinner companion Nick Fuentes. Each guest was encouraged to defend Trump in conspiratorial terms, and in each segment provocative language suggested that the U.S. currently lives under authoritarian governance:

> The Republican establishment stabbed Trump in the back. 100%. And so the January Six thing, and everything that happened since, including the censorship, including, you know, that dragnet everybody got caught up in, it was about disabling and paralyzing any kind of activism. And that is the thing that they don't want people to do. They want people to, you know, watch the show, buy the shirt, back to the regularly scheduled programming. They do not want people to get involved. That's why they called the school board parents terrorists. That's why they arrested the January Sixers. And fundamentally, that is why they're going after Trump.

The following day, Jones and his employees returned to the InfoWars studio for a pair of "emergency broadcasts", in which they announced that the "globalist" conspiracy intended to seize control of the corporation and change the locks on the doors as part of ongoing bankruptcy proceedings in the wake of libel lawsuits regarding statements made by Jones and InfoWars about parents of victims killed at an elementary school mass shooting. On that subsequent broadcast, Jones was joined by extremist guests like the infamous QAnon shaman of January 6th fame, but also by high-profile Trump administration insiders such as Steve Bannon, General Michael Flynn, and Roger Stone.

Why are political insiders, with careers connected to powerful figures in the mainstream of a major U.S. party, willing to share a broadcast with figures from the insurgent right—neo-Nazis, QAnon promoters, and participants in the January 6th insurrection? What motivates a seemingly electorally counterproductive alliance between far-right provocateurs and institutional elites?

The episode illustrates a key puzzle: *How does fringe content migrate into the political mainstream?* In recent years, ideas and rhetoric once confined to the outermost edges of political discourse have increasingly appeared in the speeches of elected officials, the platforms of major parties, and the agendas of policymaking institutions in the United States and beyond. This raises questions not only about *directionality*—does influence flow primarily from the fringe to the mainstream or vice versa?—but also about the *mechanisms* by which such influence operates. Is there a direct pipeline, or do ideas, and the underlying relationships for which they serve as a proxy, diffuse through a more complex ecosystem of actors in the broader right-wing media and political sphere?

This paper investigates those questions by examining the relationship between extremist media figures and Republican Party elites in the United States. Using time-stamped corpora of far-right podcast transcripts and congressional floor speeches, we explore *whether* and *how* the rhetorical content of the far-right shapes elite discourse, or whether the reverse may be true. Through topic modeling and time-series analysis, we identify patterns of thematic convergence and directionality of influence across these two domains.

While this inquiry centers on the U.S., the dynamics it captures are far from unique. Across liberal democracies, observers have noted a growing convergence between radical right discourse and the rhetoric of mainstream political actors. Much of the existing literature has sought to explain the rise of the far-right by focusing either on individual-level political behavior—such as why voters support far-right parties—or on institutional dynamics like party competition, media incentives, or electoral systems. These explanations have generated important insights into the conditions under which far-right movements thrive.

However, they often leave underexplored the puzzling persistence and diffusion of more *extreme or fringe ideas* within mainstream right-wing discourse, that is ideas that are not merely electorally unpopular, but seemingly self-sabotaging in their extremity. If far-right success is to be explained in instrumental or strategic terms, what explains the recurring incorporation of content that appears to endanger that very success?

We argue that such a development can only be understood by shifting analytical attention to a more intermediate, or *meso-level*, perspective: the information and discourse environment in which right-wing actors operate. Rather than focusing solely on electoral behavior or formal institutions, we examine how actors within the right-wing ecosystem encounter, circulate, and potentially amplify ideas from the fringe—shaping the boundaries of what is politically thinkable, sayable, and eventually actionable. This process helps the far right build the relationships with the mainstream that are politically necessary for broader success; as such, tracking shared ideas can serve as a way of examining the development of cross-stream right-of-center elite political relationships.

This perspective also offers a novel lens on political polarization. Polarization in the United States is typically understood in terms of partisan alignment, affective hostility, or ideological divergence. But one crucial dimension is the *radicalization* of political actors, especially when one party shifts not only away from the center but toward positions once considered far outside the bounds of liberal democratic consensus. In this sense, the increasing mainstreaming of fringe content within the GOP may not only be a consequence of polarization, but also a driver of it.

In what follows, we examine this process empirically. Our goal is twofold: first, to test whether and in which direction rhetorical influence flows between far-right media and institutional Republican actors; and second, to contribute a theoretical account of how and why such flows occur. In doing so, we aim to clarify the mechanisms by which fringe actors build relationships with institutional power—and to highlight the importance of the information ecosystem in understanding contemporary democratic backsliding.

## Polarization and Extremism

Virtually all major developments in 21$^{st}$-century American politics have unfolded within the broader context of increasing partisan polarization. The dynamics of right-wing political discourse and coalition-building are no exception. As such, polarization is a crucial theoretical category for understanding not only the structure of partisan competition but also the ideological evolution of the mainstream American right.

Political polarization, broadly defined, refers to the growing ideological distance and affective hostility between partisans, often accompanied by increased alignment between party identity and social, cultural, and

demographic cleavages. Two classic scholars in this area, Fiorina and Abrams, identify the ideological aspect of polarization: "most scholars hold an intuitive notion of polarization as a bimodal distribution of observations" (Fiorina and Abrams 2008) in an opinion dimension. The other dimension of hostility reflects a now well-established but nonetheless more recent line of research: "Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party's members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines, or even to partner with opponents in a variety of other activities. This phenomenon of animosity between the parties is known as affective polarization" (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, and Westwood 2019).

The causes and consequences of polarization have been extensively studied in political science. Research has examined institutional drivers including primary elections, rules about money in politics, and congressional rules (Barber and McCarty 2015), as well as broader societal factors such as media fragmentation, Internet use and social media, changes in elite messaging, economic inequality, dynamics of mass negative stereotyping, and identity-based sorting as mechanisms that contribute to partisan division (Druckman and Levy 2022).

For our purposes, what matters most is the link between polarization and the ideological positioning of the mainstream right. Research suggests that polarization is not merely symmetrical drift but has been significantly driven by a rightward ideological shift within the Republican Party (McCarty 2015; Hacker and Pierson 2015; Broockman and Skovron 2018).

This literature has shown how ideological extremity and partisan identity reinforce one another, producing increasingly stark policy platforms and rhetorical styles. In the case of the Republican Party, polarization has coincided with a rightward ideological shift which has brought once-marginal ideas and rhetoric into the party's mainstream.

The direction of this relationship, however, remains theoretically and empirically contested. On one hand, ideological radicalization might alienate moderate voters, posing risks to electoral competitiveness. On the other, high levels of partisan polarization may blunt those risks by insulating parties from electoral backlash, hardening partisan loyalty and reducing the costs of extremity. In this way, polarization may not only coexist with radicalization but actively enable it.

## Mainstreaming and Extremism in Liberal Democracies

While polarization plays a particularly central role in the evolution of right-wing politics in the United States, driven by its two-party system and unusually high levels of partisan division, this does not make the broader phenomenon of far-right mainstreaming uniquely American. In fact, several key features of the U.S. case parallel developments across a wide range of liberal democracies, particularly in Europe.

Multiparty systems have seen the rise of challenger parties on the radical right which have achieved mainstream status by securing electoral success, resulting in coalition bargaining power as well as formal government or opposition leadership. Rather than an established party adopting formerly non-mainstream ideologies as in the U.S., European far-right movements have more often built institutional legitimacy primarily through challenges at the ballot box. This has prompted a large body of scholarship seeking to explain when and why the far right succeeds.

Explanations are typically divided into demand- and supply-side accounts. On the demand side, one major theme concerns whether globalization, and in particular its local labor market consequences, have increased receptivity to far-right appeals. Several studies in Europe and the United States have shown that adverse labor market shocks linked to globalization are positively associated with far-right vote shares (Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Autor et al., 2020; Rodrik, 2021; Dippel et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2024). Relatedly, economic crises may create openings for the far-right (Funke et al., 2016; Ahlquist et al., 2020; Gyöngyösi & Verner, 2022), though similar effects have been documented for left-wing populist movements, notably in Latin America (Levitsky, 2011). Unemployment (Arzheimer, 2009; Chen, 2024) and economic inequality (Arzheimer, 2018) have also been found to boost far-right support, consistent with the notion that there are "losers" of globalization who are more susceptible to its appeals. However, it is important to note that these factors alone appear to be unable to explain why disaffected voters turn to the far right rather than the left.

Other demand-side explanations emphasize immigration, though it is important to distinguish between atti-

tudes toward immigration and actual immigration levels. At the individual level, anti-immigration attitudes are among the most consistent and powerful predictors of far-right support, often outweighing economic variables in their explanatory power (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Mudde, 2016; Mudde, 2019; Valentino et al., 2019). These attitudes may be shaped by a variety of factors, including media framing, elite discourse, and broader cultural narratives, but they do not necessarily track changes in immigration flows themselves.

By contrast, the effects of actual immigration levels on far-right success are more difficult to assess. Nonetheless, several studies using quasi-experimental or instrumental-variable approaches have found that increases in immigration, particularly in specific regions or over short time horizons, can lead to higher vote shares for far-right parties or candidates (Dinas et al., 2019; Edo et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2019).

Finally, some scholars have advanced a "cultural backlash" thesis, arguing that rapid cultural change provokes a reaction among socially conservative voters (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Yet empirical evidence for this mechanism remains contested, with some studies finding little or no support and others pointing to contradictory patterns (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020).

On the supply side, one of the most influential findings is that parties or candidates can actively shape the political agenda to their advantage by determining the salience and framing of issues they "own" (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Druckman et al., 2013; Dennison, 2020; Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). By foregrounding issues like immigration, national identity, or crime, the far-right can shift public debate onto terrain where they enjoy a perceived advantage, even if the underlying public opinion on those issues is not uniformly favorable to their positions.

This process is often facilitated by other actors. First, centrist parties may contribute to the far-right's mainstreaming by accommodating it, i.e. adopting its issues, rhetoric, or policy positions in an attempt to capture its voters (Dahlström & Sundell, 2012; Spoon & Klüver, 2020; Krause et al., 2023; Valentim et al., 2023). Such convergence can lend legitimacy to previously marginal positions and further elevate their salience. Second, the media can amplify far-right issue ownership by disproportionately covering or framing political debate around the topics the far right prioritizes (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Hemmer, 2016; Haynes et al., 2016; Grossman et al., 2022; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024).

More recently, scholars have emphasized the role of shifting social norms in enabling these dynamics. The electoral and rhetorical gains of the far right have been facilitated by an erosion of the informal norms that once rendered it "taboo" (Valentim, 2024). As these constraints weaken, far-right actors find it easier to enter coalition negotiations, dominate news cycles, and exert lasting influence on public discourse and institutional politics.

While these accounts help explain how the far right achieves electoral relevance and institutional footholds, they say less about the kinds of ideas and narratives that take hold once these parties enter the mainstream, particularly the persistence of rhetoric drawn from the outermost fringes of the political spectrum. Perhaps the most prominent and illustrative example of such extremist rhetoric entering mainstream political discourse is the so-called ***Great Replacement*** theory. Coined by French writer Renaud Camus in 2011, this conspiracy claims that a left-wing, globalist elite is systematically orchestrating the replacement of native European populations with non-white immigrants. Originally confined to fringe identitarian circles, the concept has since migrated into mainstream far-right party platforms across Europe, as party leaders now in positions of power or political relevance have publicly endorsed or echoed its themes, including prominent figures like Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, and Matteo Salvini.

Existing scholarship often treats far-right positions as fixed, deriving directly from an underlying ideology, or explains them as products of party competition (Meguid, 2005; De Lange, 2007; Meguid, 2008; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020) and they indeed shift toward more popular positions when necessary Halikiopoulou et al., 2013; Ivaldi, 2015; Enggist & Pinggera, 2022). Yet we lack a systematic understanding of how specific topics, narratives, and frames originate, and of how and when they enter institutional politics. This specificity matters because these concrete iterations of far-right ideology are the vehicles through which actors mobilize supporters, persuade the undecided, and shape public discourse.

Take for example the claim circulated in online neo-Nazi spaces in September 2024, alleging that Haitian

immigrants in Ohio were eating their neighbors' pet cats (Yousef 2024). Within weeks, the allegation was repeated by then–vice presidential candidate J.D. Vance and his running mate, Donald Trump, on the campaign trail. In this case, hostility toward immigrants was already an established position of the Republican ticket; what was novel was the adoption of a highly specific, inflammatory, and false narrative originating in extremist online subcultures, illustrating how ideas first articulated in fringe spaces are adapted in mainstream electoral politics.

We argue that this diffusion of extreme discourse is shaped by a shared media ecosystem, often transnational in character, where ideas circulate through podcasts, encrypted messaging platforms, video content, and alternative media channels. These channels allow extremist discourse to flourish outside formal political institutions, yet exert influence on institutional politics through individual actors within it, shaping the agenda and language of the far-right.

## Communication Flows, Influence, and the Microdynamics of Extremist Mainstreaming

As we have seen, existing literature on the mainstreaming of far-right politics often focuses on macro-level outcomes, explaining the movement of candidates and parties from exclusion to positions of acceptance, electoral success, or political power. But as the far-right seeks to initially interact with mainstream conservatives from a position of disadvantage, the process involves persuasion, influence, communication, and many of the general microdynamics of outsider social movements in general (Downing, Ford, Gil, and Stein 2000). As the far-right becomes a more established player and an ally of establishment conservatives, communication will become more routinized, reciprocal, and public, as what were once two sides of a complex negotiation become instead coalition partners in political campaigns and governance.

We hypothesize that this process of far-right mainstreaming involves an over-time change in the way that ideas flow between actors in far-right social movements and media spaces ön the outsideänd mainstream conservatives ön the inside". Before this process begins, mainstream conservatives likely engage with far-right ideas, language, and issue framing mostly in order to distance themselves from it.[1] When mainstream conservatives and the far-right are talking about issues in disconnected ways, we characterize this as a situation of **independent** streams of discourse.

As a project of mainstreaming begins, far-right actors will seek to develop ways of discussing issues that potentially appeal to the mainstream. This can sometimes involve introducing new ways of discussing established issues, but it is often easier and more productive for far-right media voices and movement leaders to entrepreneurially develop new issues for which mainstream conservatives lack — or have suppressed — existing frameworks (Kallis 2013: 227-33). This makes borrowing from far-right voices, who have growing audience reach among conservative electorates, attractive for at least some mainstream conservative politicians. This mainstreaming communication strategy may be direct, in which conservative politicians or their staff members are directly exposed to, and proceed to make use of, language and ideas used by far-right media figures.

Alternatively, an indirect communication pathway may sometimes have strategic advantages in terms of obfuscating connections: far-right media voices may influence the way that mainstream conservative media figures discuss issues and ideas, and mainstream conservative politicians or their staff may take cues from mainstream conservative media even when the messages there are borrowed from more extreme sources. We refer to these communication pathways as **direct** or **indirect** mainstreaming, in which ideas and language from the far-right makes its way into mainstream discourse.

Messaging flowing in the opposite direction can represent a communications service provided by the far right to conservatives. If conservative messaging on an issue is subsequently picked up and repeated in far-right media and social-movement spaces, it can access audiences and be heard with an emotional intensity that may be unreachable for mainstream conservatives. Thus, when mainstream, electoral conservatives' ideas,

[1] As Walsh (2020) narrates in analyzing the history of the relationship between the far right and conservatives through the 20th century, this idea of the far right and mainstream conservatives as distant was not a permanent fact throughout all of history. Prior to about 1955, the two movements had a close working relationship, but the distancing described in the text developed in part as a way of managing the poor public image of far-right movements like the John Birch Society and related anti-Semitic and conspiratorial actors.

framing, and language influences that of the non-electoral far-right, we refer to that as (direct or indirect) **amplification**. During the process of mainstreaming, amplification is a useful strategy for the far-right to prove its political worth to mainstream conservatives and to thereby bargain for further inclusion.

As the far right becomes more accepted by mainstream electoral conservatives, we expect these one-sided communications profiles to be replaced by two-sided conversations, in which far-right media figures attend and respond to politicians' words and ideas, but politicians and their staffs likewise listen attentively to innovations in framing generated by the far-right media. This reciprocal flow among established political allies we characterize as two-way dialogue. Thus, tracking change in the flow of ideas becomes, we hypothesize, a powerful tool for studying the development of relationships between the far right and the conservative mainstream.

## Methods and Data

Because the hypotheses of interest involve the direction and intensity of influence over time among various corpora of conservative- and far-right political speech, the objective is to identify features of the texts that can be analyzed in a vector autoregression (VAR; see Freeman, Williams, and Lin 1989). In pursuit of that goal, we proceed by collecting two main textual sources—far-right podcast transcripts and speeches from the U.S. House of Representatives—and modeling their topical content over time.

### Corpus Collection and Topic Modeling With BERTopic

For the podcast corpus, we extract full transcripts from far-right and conspiratorial media outlets. We use the WhisperAI transcription model (Radford et al., 2023) to produce text transcripts of podcasts produced by Alex Jones's InfoWars network, the Proud Boys, and Ben Shapiro. For the congressional corpus, we use transcripts of members' speeches. We apply BERTopic separately to each corpus, identifying a set of latent topics and assigning probabilistic topic distributions to every time-stamped document. BERTopic combines a transformer-based document embedding model (here, SBERT: all-mpnet-base-v2) with UMAP-based dimensionality reduction, HDBSCAN clustering, and class-based TF–IDF (c-TF–IDF) to generate interpretable topic representations. For each document, we obtain a vector of topic probabilities indicating the relative prominence of each theme.

To enable meaningful cross-corpus comparison, we adopt a strategy in which the topic model is fit on one corpus and then applied to the other. Our primary analysis fits the topic model to the podcast corpus, allowing us to define topics rooted in far-right discourse. We then transform the GOP speech corpus using this model, yielding topic probabilities that reflect the salience of podcast-derived themes within elite congressional speech. This ensures that both corpora are represented in a shared topic space, making their thematic content directly comparable over time. As a robustness check, we also conduct the reverse procedure, that is we fit the topic model on GOP speeches and transform the podcast corpus to confirm that our findings are not artifacts of the initial topic definition. After fitting and transforming, we aggregate topic probabilities at the weekly level for each corpus. This results in two parallel multivariate time series that track the salience of a common set of topics in far-right podcasts and congressional speech, respectively.

A critical feature of our approach is the use of a transformer-based sentence embedding model, specifically all-mpnet-base-v2, part of the Sentence-BERT (SBERT) family. Unlike the original BERT, which was designed primarily for token-level prediction tasks, SBERT adapts the architecture to produce high-quality, fixed-length sentence embeddings that preserve semantic relationships between texts. all-mpnet-base-v2 builds on MPNet (Song et al., 2020), which improves upon BERT and RoBERTa by capturing richer contextual dependencies through permuted language modeling and a more efficient attention mechanism. These embeddings serve as the foundation for BERTopic, enabling it to cluster documents based on nuanced thematic content rather than surface-level lexical overlap. This is especially important in our setting, where political language is often figurative, strategic, and highly contextual. Recent applications such as the GBERT fine-tuning for populism detection by (Erhard et al., 2025), highlight the advantages of these methods even in relatively low-resource settings. Leveraging SBERT embeddings and BERTopic's structure-preserving clustering, we enhance both the thematic precision and temporal resolution of our analysis across two corpora that differ markedly in tone, formality, and discursive register. Our approach produces two multivariate time series, one for the podcast corpus and one for GOP congressional speech, in which each variable represents the weekly average salience of a given topic. The dimensions of each time series correspond to a shared set of

topics, defined in the fitted BERTopic model. This structure allows us to observe how the prominence of specific themes rises and falls over time within and across corpora.

**Time Series and Vector Autoregression**

Once appropriate themes have been identified within each corpus, the focus turns to whether there are relationships of influence between the different actors behind the collections of texts in terms of when and how they use each theme. As an approach to this question, we consider whether there is a time ordering in the use of words that constitute each theme. If one actor's use of the collection of words that make up a particular theme can predict another actor's use of those same words in time, then we will interpret that as provisional evidence of influence from the first actor to the second with respect to this particular theme.

We regard the evidence as provisional because it is always possible that some third source is influencing both actors in our study, and that the observed time ordering is a result of that third source influencing one actor earlier or more strongly than the other. Our approach attempts to mitigate this possibility by using topics that are as specific as possible, increasing the likelihood of influence by the specific actors under analysis, and by employing relatively fine-grained time periods to reduce the scope for confounding. Nonetheless, it will be important to bear in mind that the results cannot be the final word in proving a relationship of influence (see discussion in Shojaie and Fox 2022).

Our approach is to analyze the collection of time series for each theme as a set. We look at the relationships across the various time series, asking for each about the predictive value of the past history of the entire set of time series for that theme. Our methodological approach here is vector autoregression, which involves regressing each time series on its past history as well as the past histories of all the other time series (up to a fixed number of lags). Then, we explore the impulse-response function (IRF), which shows the long-term dynamic within the model when there is a one-time shock to one time-series. If the various time series are all stationary and otherwise meet the standard conditions for time-series analysis, the IRF can help show whether or not there is the kind of predictive relationship we are treating as evidence of influence: if the IRF is not meaningfully different from zero, then there is no evidence of influence, whereas a significant positive IRF is evidence in support of some amount of influence.

To ensure comparability in time frames across data sources, we aggregate time-series data about the prevalence of each theme to the weekly level. In order to achieve stationarity across the majority of our themes, we include 52 weekly lags in most models; for some models, noted specifically, we instead include 20 lags as a trade-off between mostly achieving stationarity and still having sufficient statistical power. We also include linear time trends. In calculating IRFs, we project forward 20 weeks from an intervention, carrying out significance tests for each difference. Because of the large number of significance tests involved, it would not be surprising to have one significant result by chance. Hence, when classifying patterns by theme below, we typically pay attention only to themes that have two or more significant results.

## Results

In order to first give a clear sense of the models and substantive patterns at work in these data, we begin with mixed-method case studies of three themes, selected both for substantive interest and to demonstrate the range of patterns apparent in the data as a whole. We will look closely at the time-series models and substantive politics behind conversations about election fraud and election denial, about discourse regarding genetically-modified organisms in agriculture and agribusiness conspiracies, and about conspiracy theories regarding COVID as a bioweapon and hypothesized sinister motives for public health measures. These three topics remain major themes in the U.S. and global conservative populist and far-right to date, and they also illustrate three divergent patterns of persuasive dynamics, each of which allow far-right actors to play a different role in conservative politics.

Let us begin with election denial and claims of fraud (Arceneaux and Truex 2023). This issue area has become a major focus of American politics over the last decade, with commissions established to search for voter fraud after the 2016 election, allegations of theft leading to lawsuits and an insurrection in 2020, and arguments about future fraud serving as the basis for a renewed push to eliminate voting by mail and other efforts to increase turnout during Trump's second presidential term. Which actors were responsible for propagating these ideas?

It is well known that Donald Trump himself was a major source of the narrative that U.S. elections are fraudulent and unreliable (Axelrod 2022). He advanced this idea occasionally during the 2016 Republican primaries, and also made similar remarks about Democratic primary election outcomes that did not favor Bernie Sanders. During the final weeks of the 2016 general election, he also described the election as untrustworthy and refused to commit himself to respect the outcome unless he won. After the election, he claimed that he would have won the popular vote if not for the massive voter fraud that he hypothesized. He made scattered comments of a similar nature relating to the 2018 midterm elections, and reintroduced this theme in October of 2020 as his reelection campaign appeared troubled.

While Trump has returned to this topic repeatedly throughout his political life, the 2020 version of his election-fraud narrative was different (Craig and Gainous 2024). It was widely amplified by elites and media actors, led to massive social movement activity, and ultimately has been politically consequential in a way that none of his other iterations of this idea ever were. What was different compared to past cycles? Obviously, one may point to the outcome, although Trump's party also lost important ground in 2018 as well.

Our data show that, for this especially consequential round of election denial, Trump's attacks were not in fact taking the rhetorical lead to the same extent as in the past. Instead, election denial discourse had already been taken over by other actors and seeded in conservative conversations for him. Our data show fifteen weeks between 2016 and the 2020 election in which election fraud and election denial topics made up at least one percent of the content of our far-right media corpus. There are also three weeks each during that time period in which these topics make up at least one percent of the content of our congressional and mainstream conservative text collections. Before Trump raised this theme in 2020, other actors had done the work to make election fraud resonate with conservative elites and audiences.

Were these far-right messages influential or irrelevant? We can explore this with vector autoregression by using the time series for far-right podcasts, conservative podcasts, and Republican Congressional speeches to predict each other. The results show a positive and statistically significant relationship from far-right discussions of electoral fraud to Congressional speeches on the same topic, after a lead time of one to two months. As seen in Figure 1, there are three separate time intervals where a shock to right-wing podcast discourse statistically significantly predicts an increase in election-denial discourse among Congressional Republicans, and there is an overall positive trend that falls short of significance which lasts for more than a month. There is, however, no evidence that mainstream conservative discourse follows far-right messaging at all, and at the margins it may even move in the opposite direction.

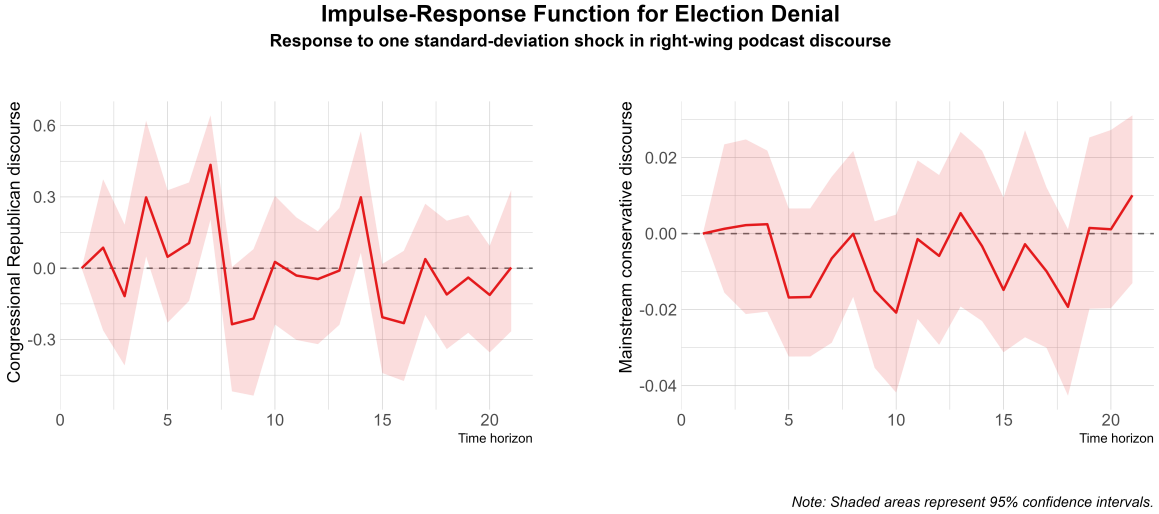


Figure 1: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to right-wing podcast discourse about election denial.

Congressional Republican discourse about election denial is not equally influential on far-right conversations, as seen in Figure 2. There is one statistically significant positive spike which stands as a deviation in a trend

that is otherwise statistically insignificant and close to zero. Whether this means that far-right voices follow the lead of Congress on this theme after a respectful waiting period of two months, or alternatively that the one significant spike is a coincidence, is difficult to work out. However, the overall picture is clearly one in which Congress is not very influential overall on far-right discourse, whereas as seen previously far-right conversations show repeated and persistent evidence of influence on Congressional ways of talking about this issue. This asymmetry suggests a dynamic in which Congressional Republicans are reacting to far-right frames, rather than a two-way dialogue, especially given the timing in which far-right voices started talking about this topic in the 2020 cycle before other prominent actors.

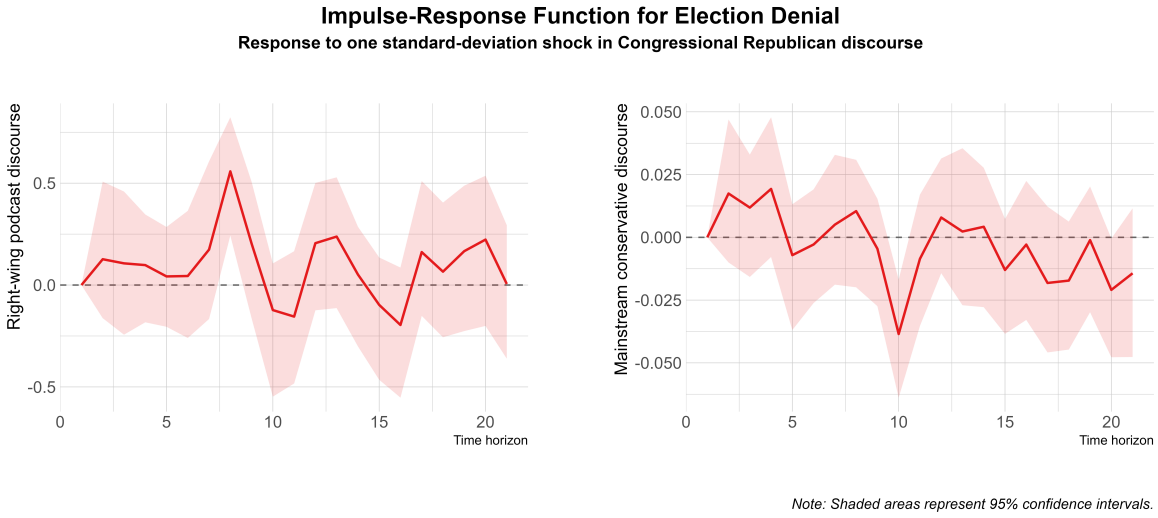


Figure 2: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to Congressional Republican discourse about election denial.

Figure 2 also shows that mainstream conservatives were apparently not especially affected by Republican Congressional discussion on the topic of election fraud and election denial. Generally impulse response function values here are close to zero, with the exception of one moderately large and statistically significant negative effect at the two-and-a-half month mark. Once again, it is hard to know how seriously to take this one departure from a pattern that is otherwise very close to zero. Overall, the data suggest that Congressional Republicans were followers, not innovators, with respect to election denial.

Likewise, as seen in Figure 3, there is broadly little evidence of a connection in either direction between mainstream conservative discourse about election fraud and election denial and far-right discussion on this topic. Both impulse-response functions have a single moment that has a positive, barely significant value, but in both cases the overall shape of the function is generally close to zero and marked by instability.

Taken as a whole, these results together with the information from above about timing present a picture in which far-right voices started the 2020 political cycle spreading discourse about the ultimately highly consequential theme of election fraud and election denial before mainstream conservatives or Congressional Republicans — and even before Donald Trump. Furthermore, statistical analysis of timing provides compelling evidence to suggest that Republicans in Congress were influenced in when and how they spoke on this issue by the far right, far more than the opposite. On this topic, we see an example of a dynamic in which the far right appears to influence conservative electoral politics but there is little or no evidence of an influence in the opposite direction; this is an empirical example of what we have characterized as mainstreaming, in this instance direct mainstreaming.

In contrast, some issue areas show little evidence of influence in any direction among any of the actors examined in our study. For one example of such a topic, where substantial amounts of discussion happen in all three of our text collections and where high-profile political maneuvers continue up to the time of writing, consider the domain of conspiracy theories regarding GMOs and global agribusiness. From globalist conspiracies to poison our food supply, through supplement sales, and up to the Make America Healthy Again

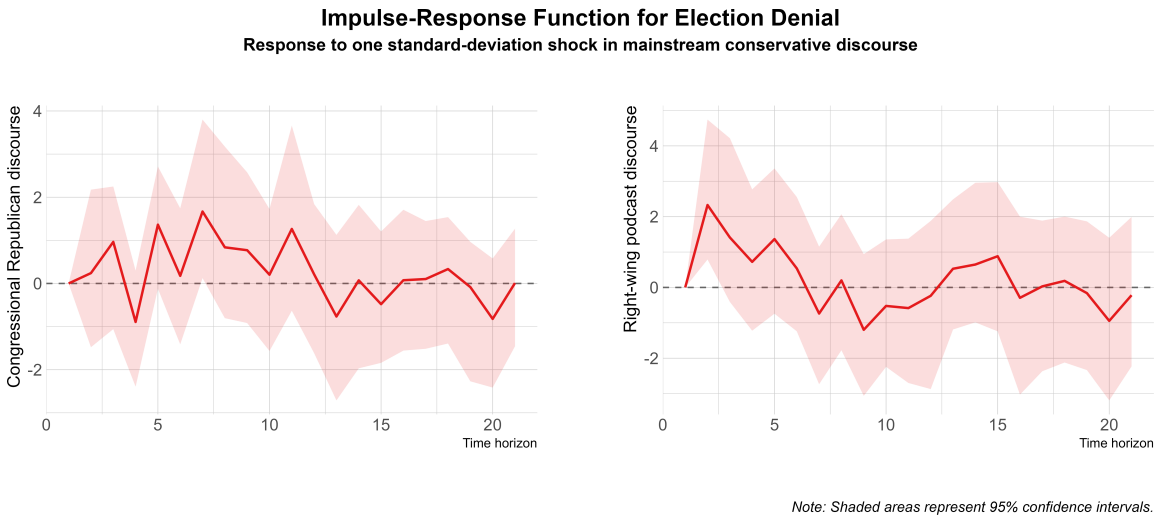


Figure 3: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to mainstream conservative discourse about election denial.

agenda of the second Trump administration, GMO-related theories and conspiratorial discourse about the food supply have long been, and remain, staple narratives across the spectrum of American conservative politics (Butler 2021).

Nevertheless, while all of our various actors discuss these topics, there is little evidence in our data that these groups are paying attention to each other on the timing or content of what they say regarding GMOs and other food- related conspiracies. As Table 4 shows, discussion of these topics on right-wing podcasts has little consistent effect on the subsequent discourse among mainstream conservatives or Congressional Republicans, with no statistically significant effects showing up at all when the outcome is Congressional speech and two effects that are just over the line (one positive and one negative) for mainstream conservative discussions. Taken as a whole, the impression the data give is generally more of no effect than of a consistent directionality.


Figure 4: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to right-wing podcast discourse about GMO and agribusiness Theories.

The results for a shock to Congressional Republican discourse in Figure 5 are exceptionally similar. As

before, there are a few borderline significant results in both positive and negative directions. Further, it appears that an increase in Congressional Republican discussion about GMOs and related food conspiracies may be meaningfully negatively associated with a decreased probability of right-wing discussion of this topic about three months later, for whatever reason. However, the general impression is of unstable results that are either very close to zero or bounce around it unpredictably. All of this once again suggests very limited or no relationships of influence.

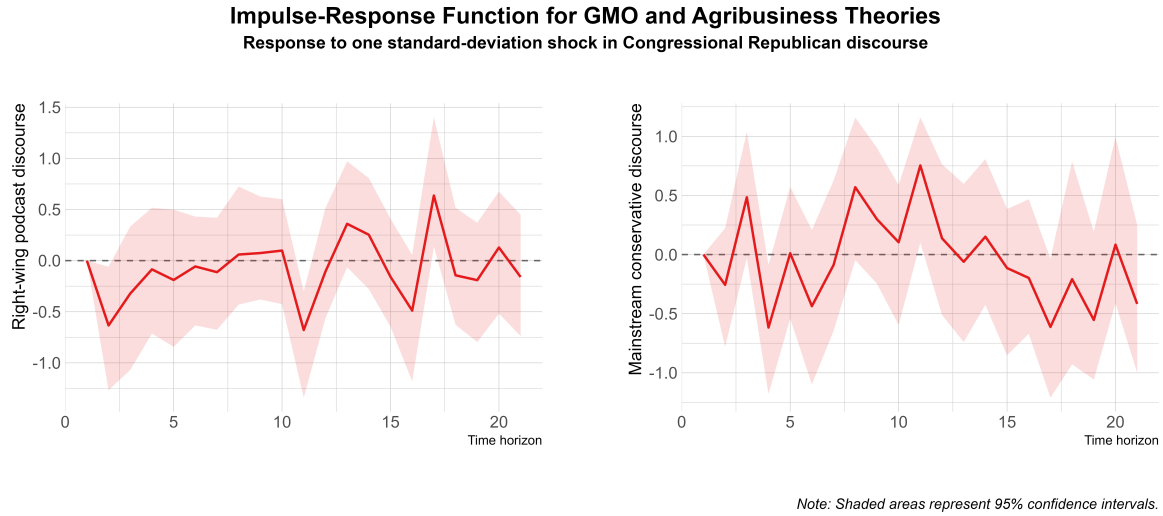


Figure 5: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to Congressional Republican discourse about GMO and agribusiness Theories.

The same can certainly be said for the pattern involving shocks to mainstream conservative discussion on this topic, shown in Figure 6. Here, nothing is significant, and the results as a whole require little interpretation. There is just not much going on.

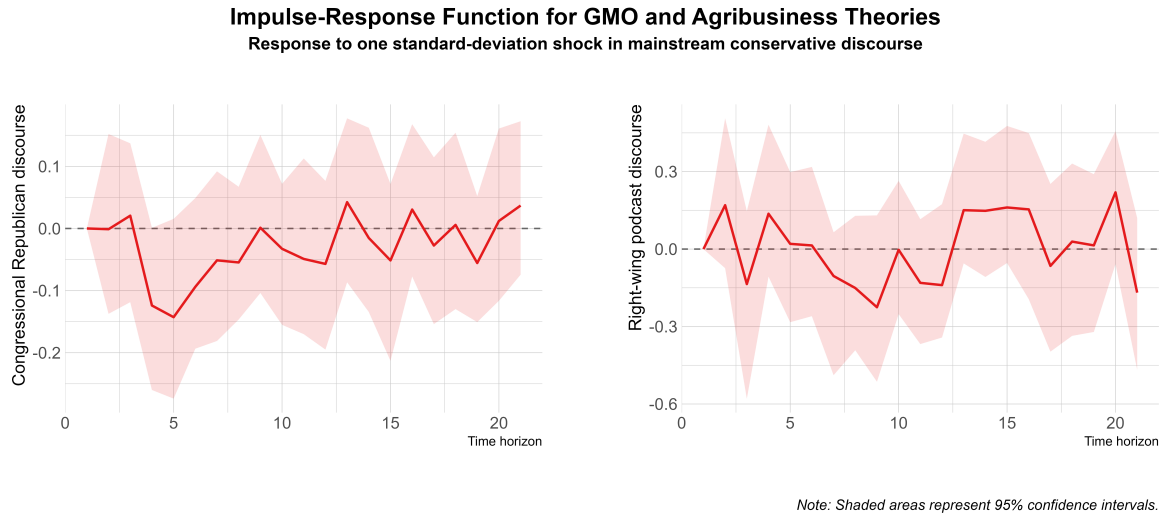


Figure 6: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to mainstream conservative discourse about GMO and agribusiness Theories.

Across these sets of findings, we have a scenario in which Congressional Republicans, mainstream conservatives, and right-wing voices all speak about GMOs and other food-related conspiracies. These topics take on new framings and details all the time, as supplements cycle through the market and trends in the al-

ternative health community come and go. However, the core themes remain consistent and ubiquitous in this space: the need for purity, authenticity, virtue, trust, local ties, responsibility, personal authority over health decisions, tradition and hidden wisdom over science, etc. When each actor in our study pursues a topic without direct influence from the others, we refer to this as an example of a discourse dominated by *independent streams*.

This independent streams dynamic is what we expect to see in time periods and/or issue areas where right-wing mainstreaming is weak or incomplete. When professional conservative politicians see themselves as having distinct interests, audiences, and ideology in comparison with right-wing media voices on a particular issue, politicians are unlikely to either listen to the messaging of the right wing on this issue or speak about the issue in ways intended for right-wing consumption. Instead, politicians can be expected to pursue messaging that reflects their beliefs and their electorate, while the right wing does the same regarding their own, as yet separate sphere.

Finally, for some topic areas, influence flows from Congressional Republican discourse toward the right wing. For a relatively extreme example, consider discussion of the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 originated as a human-constructed bioweapon which was perhaps deliberately released as an act or war or terrorism (Lebernegg, Partheymuller, and Boomgaarden 2025). In conjunction with discussion of more mainstream theories of COVID's origin, each of our three actors discussed the bioweapon theory — and, it turns out, every time any of them mentions this theory, all of the others tend to react.

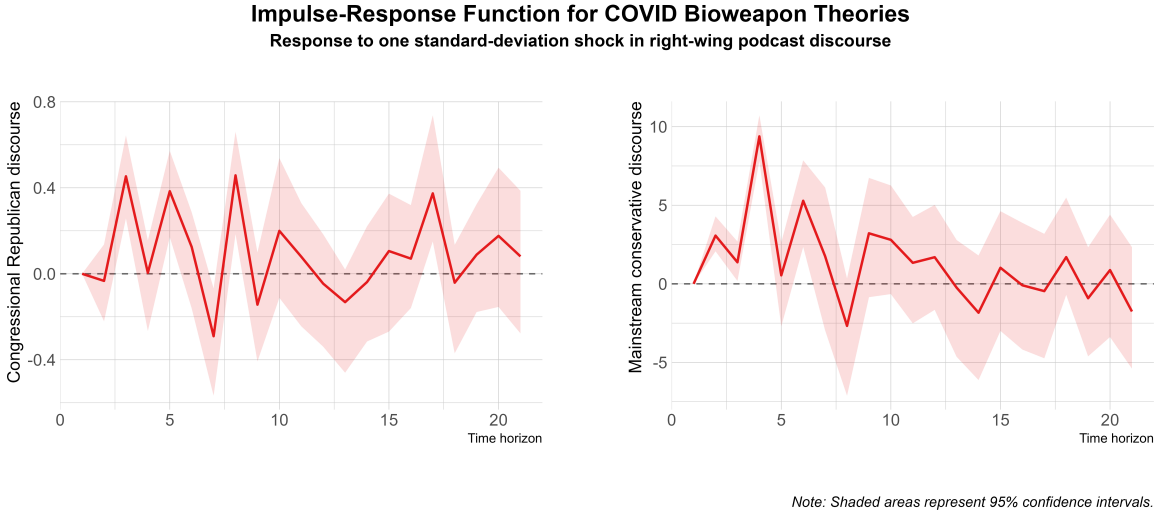


Figure 7: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to right-wing podcast discourse about COVID bioweapon theories.

As Figure 7 shows, right-wing podcast discourse about COVID bioweapon theories has statistically powerful positive effects on subsequent discussion of this topic by both Congressional Republicans and mainstream conservatives, with statistically significant effects lasting for months. The effect sizes are also quite large, with the mainstream conservative effect in particular being the single largest estimated impact in the entire project.

Right-wing discussion of COVID as a bioweapon may be especially provocative, but Figure 8 shows that other actors' speech on this topic also has strong effects. When Congressional Republicans raise the idea, it has a modest short-term positive effect on right-wing podcast speech and a larger effect a few months later. Several of the impacts are statistical significant, and nearly the entire plot is positive, suggesting clear overall evidence of a meaningful directional impact.

Congressional Republican's initial impact on mainstream conservative speach about COVID as a bioweapon is somewhat more ambiguous, with some negative spikes to go with a generally positive and often statistically significant trend. Nevertheless, the initial impact is relatively large and strongly significant, and there is

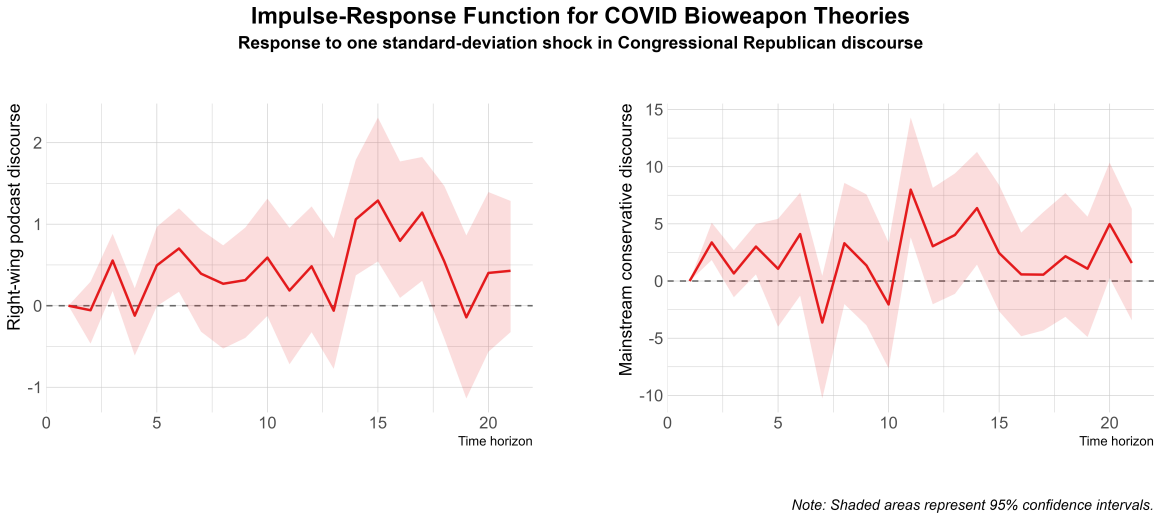


Figure 8: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to Congressional Republican discourse about COVID bioweapon theories.

also a period of very large and clearly significant impact after about three months. Overall, given that the function is usually positive, has several moments of statistical significance, and never falls significantly below zero, the overall impression is once again of a meaningful if perhaps a bit less consistent directional impact.

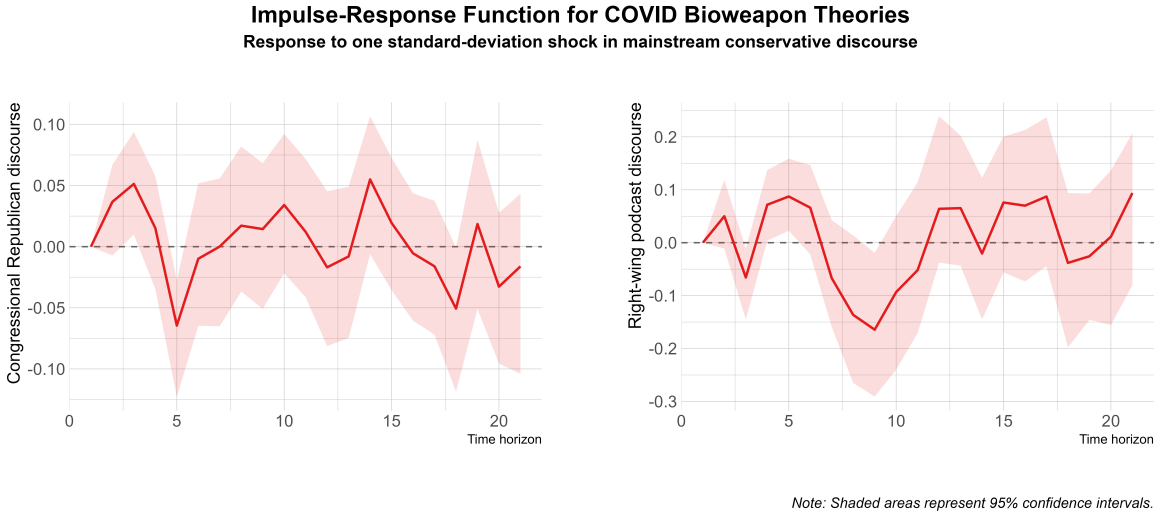


Figure 9: Impulse-response functions involving shocks to mainstream conservative discourse about COVID bioweapon theories.

Finally, as Figure 9 shows, mainstream conservative discussion of COVID bioweapon theories is at least weakly influential on the other two groups in the short term. While the long term impact functions here are far more inconsistent than the previous two sets, both the left and right plot show moments of short-term impact that are positive, statistically somewhat significant, and at least modest in size. While this is inarguably the weakest pair of links of the collection, it nonetheless shows some degree of short-term influence.

In other words, COVID bioweapon theories show a very different conversational dynamic than the first two topics. When Congressional Republicans speak about this topic, right-wing podcast voices pick up their message and run with it (as do mainstream conservatives). If this is a one-directional pattern, in which

the right wing is echoing politicians as a service, perhaps to help Congressional Republicans reach a new audience and simultaneously to prove that right-wing voices have political value, we refer to the topic as characterized by *amplification*. We see amplification, like mainstreaming, is a strategy for the right wing to build mainstreaming; it is not the pattern to be expected when the right wing is totally shunned, but nor is it the pattern we expect when the right wing is established as a standard political actor. Instead, it is a tool for traversing the ambiguous space between those two extremes.

However, with respect to COVID bioweapon theories, conversation flows in both directions. The right wing listens to and amplifies Congressional Republicans — but they also listen to and reiterate right-wing messages. This kind of flowing rhetorical dynamic we classify as *two-way dialogue*. For issue areas and/or actors in which right-wing mainstreaming is particularly ripe, two-way dialogue is to be expected. This is the behavior of a mainstream politician who sees little distinction between her constituency, ideology, values, and tactics, and those of the right wing.

Having introduced these categories of relationships, the major analytical question is how common each category is overall in the data. Our data include a time period from 2003 to 2024, a historical trajectory during which the American right wing moved from a substantially marginal position into a quite close relationship with mainstream electoral conservatives (Fording and Schram 2020). Thus, analyzing this period as a whole and considering the different character of the movements in question, we expect to find a mix of relationships.

It should be true that the predominant relationship involves independent streams; after all, for a substantial period of the analysis, the right wing was not mainstream. Hence, we expect to see significant numbers of topics — especially those that were dominant early in this historical window — where Congressional Republicans and right-wing media voices show little direct influence on each others' speech patterns.

Starting with the Ron Paul presidential runs in 2008 and 2012, the Tea Party movement that went broad in 2009, and escalating with Donald Trump's presidential campaign starting in 2015, right-wing voices in the U.S. made a sustained and ultimately successful effort to connect with and win influence within mainstream politics. We expect this period of time to have left a substantial mark on the data in the form of a meaningful number of topics where there should be relationships of amplification and direct or indirect mainstreaming.

Furthermore, we expect mainstreaming to be especially prevalent in issue areas where mainstream Republicans have less established ideological messaging. This can be new events such as emergent international conflicts, but it can also be spaces of messaging that were previous off limits or seen as politically damaging, such as conspiracy theories and racist messaging. On these kinds of topics, there is weak existing messaging on the part of mainstream Republicans, whether because the issue is historically novel or because it has been deliberately avoided by past generations of Republicans. As a result, right-wing actors do not have to contest established mainstream stances in order to introduce their own perspectives. This is strategically helpful when they are trying to introduce themselves as viable political partners to the movement.

We expect amplification, in contrast, to focus particularly on the kind of news-cycle-driven messaging that is core to mainstream Republican messaging. Right-wing actors can easily pick up the cyclical news stories that Republicans push to attack their political adversaries, attach a conspiratorial spin to them, and sell them to their audience — thereby demonstrating their value to their potential partners while creating low-effort content for their own broadcasts. These kinds of topics are easy to amplify because they generally contain little ideological content, and as such they can reinforce partnership between mainstream electoral Republicans and the right wing without stressing either side's priorities.

Finally, we anticipate that two-way dialogue is the signature relationship of contexts in which mainstreaming is well underway or has substantially already occurred. In the data under analysis here, we expect this to be visible particularly for issues that dominate the Trump era from 2017 forward: immigration, executive power and overreach, law enforcement and crime, COVID, the far right, crackdowns on LGBTQ+ rights, and conflicts over race.

To analyze these expectations, we classify every topic in the data (128 in total) into one of five categories: amplification, direct mainstreaming, indirect mainstreaming, or two-way dialogue. To classify topics, we run a vector autoregression like those above, with 52 lags and a linear trend. We then look at the levels of

significance in the impulse-response functions. If there are at least two significant effects at the 0.05 level connecting right-wing media voices to Congressional Republicans but not more than one significant effect flowing in the opposite direction, we classify that topic as characterized by direct mainstreaming. If there are at least two significant effects connecting right-wing media with mainstream conservative media, and also at least two effects connecting mainstream conservative media with Congressional Republicans, but not more than one in the opposite direction, we classify the topic as indirect mainstreaming.

If there is evidence of an equivalent effect (direct or indirect) in the opposite direction only, we classify the topic as amplification. For this analysis, we have not differentiated between direct and indirect amplification, although this may be of interest in future work. When there are two or more statistically significant effects flowing in both directions — from Republicans in Congress toward far-right media figures and also back — we classify the topic as marked by two-way dialogue. Finally, when the topic does not meet any of the criteria described so far, it falls into the category of independent streams.

Table 1: Overall Classification of Topics by Communication Relationship

| Communication Relationship | Number of Topics |
|---|---|
| Amplification | 13 |
| Direct Mainstreaming | 9 |
| Indirect Mainstreaming | 3 |
| Independent Streams | 68 |
| Two-Way Dialogue | 36 |

Table 1 presents the overall classification of topics according to these criteria. The results fit expectations. The predominant category is indeed independent streams, at 68 out of 128 topics, or about 53% of the topic list as a whole.[2] Direct mainstreaming is present in a notable minority of topics: 9, or about 7% of the topic list. Indirect mainstreaming occurs three times, which is about 2% of the list. In combination, we find that one or another form of mainstreaming takes place in 9% of the topics in the data, a rate that is notable if far from the majority. Amplification occurs at about the same rate; 13 topics, or about 10% of the list. Finally, two-way dialogue is relatively common although substantially less frequent than independent streams at 36 topics, or 28% of the list.

These results broadly fit the expectations outlined earlier. They appear to reflect the proportions expected if the data capture a time period in which the right wing transitioned from a position of marginalization through a strategy of mainstreaming and into a new stance of established partnership with the mainstream Republican party. In addition to this, it is important to note the raw prevalence of mainstreaming as a strategy; we wish to emphasize the ability of this method to detect right-wing actors' use of communication flows that fit the model of persuasively reshaping communication in order to inject their own ideas and messages.

Alongside the overall percentages, our theoretical expectations regarding the historical trajectory of mainstreaming can also be productively tested by examining the actual topics that fall within each category. In listing topics, we will provide names that the researchers assigned to each topic based on in-depth reading of multiple high-scoring examples of each prior to carrying out the time-series analysis.

Table 2 lists the topics that are classified as involving either direct or indirect mainstreaming. We had hypothesized that these would involve either novel historical events where the Republican party had weak preexisting narratives or extremist and conspiratorial ideological content that the Republican party may have deliberately avoided during its era of attempting to contain right-wing actors. The results in the table support these hypotheses. The predominant themes are conspiracy theories connected to long-standing far-right narratives (alleged persecution of Christians in the U.S. and worldwide, fear of Communism, discourses in which minority groups threaten the standing of white Americans, etc.) or newer narratives about

[2]Topics are of course not equally weighted in the various text collections, so this percentage metric should be treated as a rough guide.

Table 2: Topics Involved in Mainstreaming

| Topic | Estimated Relationship |
|---|---|
| Christian Persecution | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Post-Election Legal Theories | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Russian Discourse about Ukraine | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Election Fraud and Election Denial | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Chinese Communist Threat | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Racial Minorities and Threats to Sovereignty | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Great Replacement Theory | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Anti-Establishment, Anti-Globalist, Anti-Satanist | Direct Mainstreaming |
| Bernie Sanders | Direct Mainstreaming |
| One-World Government Conspiracies | Indirect Mainstreaming |
| Covid Vaccine Conspiracies | Indirect Mainstreaming |
| Alex Jones Legal Issues | Indirect Mainstreaming |

recent historical events (the 2020 election, Russia and Ukraine, Bernie Sanders and socialism, COVID, and deplatforming vis-a-vis Alex Jones).

Table 3: Topics Involved in Amplification

| Topic | Estimated Relationship |
|---|---|
| Hunter Biden Scandals | Amplification |
| Ron Paul Big Government Conspiracies | Amplification |
| Ron Paul Economic Theories | Amplification |
| High School Students Should Be Protected from Wokeness and Covid Restrictions | Amplification |
| Epstein Conspiracies | Amplification |
| Abortion and Pro-Life | Amplification |
| Ferguson Protests | Amplification |
| Fukushima Nuclear Incident | Amplification |
| Brett Kavanaugh Allegations | Amplification |
| MyPillowGuy | Amplification |
| Monsanto | Amplification |
| Joe Biden and Tara Reid | Amplification |
| Democratic Treason | Amplification |

We had expected that amplification patterns would be most common in news stories that involve ongoing events that fit into existing Republican party frameworks for attacking Democrats. Table 3 shows the topics where an amplification relationship exists.

Two involve topics related to Ron Paul's ideas. These fit the amplification template for a different reason than we had anticipated. Rather than involving current events that slot neatly into pre-established partisan divides, they instead appear here because Ron Paul was a Republican member of Congress. Hence, it is natural that his ideas would originate in Congressional speeches; the fact that they then appealed to far-right media figures works as an example of amplification in the definitional sense. However, Ron Paul was not an especially mainstream member of the Republican establishment at that time, and right-wing amplification of his messaging may have played a different role than other periods when the right wing is reiterating messaging from figures close to the president or the speaker of the House of Representatives.

Most of the rest of the topics neatly fit the expectations. Many involve political scandals, which obviously fit into clean messages about partisan divides. Most others involve news events that can easily serve to reemphasize established Republican messages about environmental, social, medical, or racial politics.

One topic stands out as potentially in need of clarification. The topic labeled "MyPillowGuy" might strike readers as anomalous in this list, and might seem as if it is either an error or potentially a topic that is about advertisements and promotional content. However, it is in fact about Mike Lindell, a CEO and political activist who has spent years involved in litigation and other forms of communication attempting to overturn both the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the U.S. way of holding elections. Mr. Lindell is called the MyPillowGuy, by Donald Trump among many others, because he rose to prominence through his self-founded pillow company, My Pillow, before his turn to election activism. The topic in the model is about his election activism, however, rather than his business or broader life experiences.

Finally, the set of topics characterized by two-way dialogue is too large for convenient presentation in a table. As expected, however, it is dominated by topics from the Trump era, such as "Executive Privilege and Trump Investigations," "Covid Microchips," and "Antifa and Defund Police."

A final test of our expectations can be performed by dividing the Republican members of Congress into groups based on whether they entered before or after the period in time when we hypothesize that the mainstreaming process consolidated. It seems both convenient and plausible to date that consolidation with Trump's presidential election in 2016; thus, we can split the Congressional sample into those member of Congress who were elected before Trump and those who were elected in 2016 or later. For the before-Trump sample, the analysis will include the full range of dates described above, although members will start to fall out of the data set over time. For the post-Trump sample, by definition, the data do not exist until the year 2017 and therefore cannot include earlier periods.

Having split the data in these ways, we analyze them in the same framework as before. Our goal is to see if the process of mainstreaming is observably further along with the post-Trump cohort of Congressional Republicans than with the pre-Trump groups. Specifically, we expect to see more instances of mainstreaming (direct and indirect) in the pre-Trump cohort, with which far-right actors are working harder to establish as-yet relatively fragile and uncertain relationships. We also expect to see fewer two-way dialogues in this cohort for the same reason, and more independent streams. In the post-Trump cohorts, we expect to see much less effort at mainstreaming, as the far right can assume an established relationship. Instead, we expect to see a lower level of independent streams and a much higher level of two-way dialogues.

Table 4: Pre-Trump Classification of Topics by Communication Relationship

| Communication Relationship | Number of Topics |
|---|---|
| Amplification | 9 |
| Direct Mainstreaming | 11 |
| Indirect Mainstreaming | 3 |
| Independent Streams | 70 |
| Two-Way Dialogue | 37 |

Table 4 shows the classification of topics for Republican members of Congress elected before Donald Trump's presidential victory in 2016 (but covering all years in our data, up to 2024). In fact, this group shows a slightly higher incidence of mainstreaming than the pooled data, with 14 topics overall classified as one or the other kind of mainstreaming as compared with 12 in the pooled data. The rate of two-way dialogue is about the same as in the pooled data (37 here, compared with 36), as is the overall picture related to independent streams (70 here versus 68 for the pooled data).

While the pre-Trump cohorts do not differ substantially from the pooled data, the post-Trump cohorts represent a distinctive pattern as seen in Table 5. Among these Republican members of Congress, mainstreaming relationships are quite rare (only three total topics). Independent streams are also somewhat reduced, at just 50 topics. Most remarkably, two-way dialogues have roughly doubled compared to either the pre-Trump cohorts or the pooled data, with 66 topics showing this relationship in comparison to 37 in the pre-Trump cohorts and 36 in the pooled data. This suggests a situation in which Republicans elected during Trump's administrations are in a communication environment where right-wing actors are already mainstream dialogue partners. Mainstreaming strategies are no longer necessary, because both parties take each other for

Table 5: Post-Trump Classification of Topics by Communication Relationship

| Communication Relationship | Number of Topics |
|---|---|
| Amplification | 10 |
| Direct Mainstreaming | 2 |
| Indirect Mainstreaming | 1 |
| Independent Streams | 50 |
| Two-Way Dialogue | 66 |

granted as conversational peers.

In summary, our data show a pattern of communication relationships between far-right actors and Congressional Republicans that appear to serve the goal of strengthening a connection between these two groups: media figures connected with the far right frame their messages in ways that involve both patterns of amplification, in which broadcasters repeat Congressional Republican messages in subsequent weeks, and mainstreaming, in which Republicans adopt far-right frames and messages. These strategies are eventually replaced, as the connection between the far right and Congressional Republicans matures, with a dynamic of more egalitarian two-way dialogue, in which both sides straightforwardly adopt and share messages immediately, conversing directly about the important topics of the day. The patterns also fall along the expected lines in terms of the topics involved, with mainstreaming dynamics in particular focusing on issue areas that are novel and relatively unoccupied by existing political messaging.

These results fit well with a model of strategic communication and relationship-building over time from the perspective of far-right actors. We will discuss implications for literatures on far-right mainstreaming and normalization, party politics, and democratic backsliding in the next section.

## Discussion

We have demonstrated that rhetorical linkages between far-right media and Republican elites are structured, not random: some topics display independent streams, others exhibit amplification from congressional speech into media, still others reflect direct or indirect mainstreaming from far-right media into Congress, and a sizeable subset now looks like two-way dialogue. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that diffusion hinges not simply on a "fringe-to-mainstream pipeline" but on the micro-institutions that translate, sanitize, and route messages through the contemporary right-wing information ecosystem.

A natural locus for these micro-institutions is congressional staff. Prior work identifies three features that are directly relevant to our patterns. First, senior staff often misread constituency opinion and overweight signals from organized interests, which can bias the selection and framing of content that reaches members (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019). Second, comparative evidence describes political staff as high-intensity party activists rather than neutral bureaucrats, suggesting that staff bring programmatic commitments into the office (Moens, 2022). Third, staff networks have measurable effects on members' roll calls and legislative effectiveness, which implies that staff carry frames and heuristics across offices and can shape the behavior of the principals they serve (Montgomery and Nyhan, 2017).

Taken together, these findings offer a staff-centered interpretation of the dynamics we document. Direct mainstreaming is consistent with staff who monitor ideologically proximate media, translate emergent frames into floor and committee speech, and prioritize them when party scripts are thin. Amplification is consistent with staff routines that package member remarks for allied outlets and influencers, producing observable House-to-media responses in the short run. Two-way dialogue fits offices embedded in dense staff networks, where the same personnel both ingest and distribute content, shortening lags on both sides and increasing persistence.

This interpretation also aligns with the cohort split. Post-2016 offices that were built and staffed in the current information environment plausibly display more symmetric responsiveness because staff hiring, experience, and interoffice ties were formed under these routines. Our design does not identify staff effects directly, but the staff literature indicates a mechanism that is coherent with the timing, asymmetries, and

topic profiles in our VAR and IRF results. The role of staff in structuring these diffusion dynamics remains an important area for further research.

The patterns we document are consistent with a new media landscape where production costs are low, editorial gatekeeping is weak, and distribution is rapid. In that setting, podcasts and similar formats can originate highly specific or norm-violating frames that travel quickly into elite discourse when party scripts are thin, matching our direct mainstreaming cases. The short-run House $\rightarrow$ media effects on scandal and partisan conflict topics align with routinized repackaging of member remarks by allied outlets, which we classify as amplification. The prevalence of two-way dialogue among post-2016 members fits a context in which alternative outlets have become routine venues for agenda setting and reciprocal exchange, yielding shorter lags and greater persistence on both sides.

A further implication is strategic use of the far right by party elites of various kinds, potentially involving contexts of social-movement mobilization and coalition-building beyond the textual data used in the body of this analysis. The amplification patterns we document permit an interpretation in which institutional actors leverage right-wing activists as a force multiplier while preserving some degree of arm's length deniability. Outsourcing transgressive rhetoric and action to ideologically proximate outlets can test frames, impose agenda costs on opponents, and energize core supporters, after which selected messages and agendas re-enter the conservative mainstream once their utility is apparent.

January 6 illustrates the hazards and logic of this strategy. During the interval between the election and January 6th, the movement contesting the election pursued two fundamentally different and separate tracks. First, there was an institutional track, involving legal actions, attempts to generate alternative slates of electors and alternative counts in states such as Georgia, and ultimately efforts to overturn the election in Congress (Warf 2023a). This track included direct participation by a wide range of individuals with close ties to Donald Trump, as well as some direct participation by Trump himself.

Second, there was a public demonstration track, involving rallies, petitions, and protest actions. This track was led by figures such as Amy Kremer, a Tea Party organizer who reached a mass following with her Women for America First Facebook group (Hoffman, Leslie, and Ifeanyichukwu 2025); Ali Alexander, a far-right influencer who had built a platform on Periscope and Twitter and who organized a tour of Stop the Steal events (Salek 2023); and the Proud Boys, an internet-centric gang organized by online celebrity and podcaster Gavin McInness that participated heavily in the protest activity (Kenes 2021). While there is certainly no reason to believe that Trump did not support this more public track, and in fact his social media activity suggests that he did, there was substantially less direct involvement by him and his close allies than in the institutional track.

As the final vote sealing the 2020 presidential election approached on January 6th, 2021, Trump and his close allies realized that their institutional effort risked falling short, with the number of members of Congress committed to their effort below the necessary threshold and with the vice president rebuffing their persuasive calls (Warf 2023b). So Trump's proxy, Roger Stone, connected with members of the alt-right and others organizing public demonstrations in order to help coordinate an effort to increase pressure on Congress through demonstrations at the White House and on Capitol Hill (). During the event, messaging pivoted over time from institutional themes about vote counting that dominated during Trump's official rally near the White House toward far-right themes about the Q-Anon conspiracy, globalists, and the Deep State that were predominant during the event at Capitol Hill.

On the day of January 6th, these far-right demonstrators were not successful in their attempt to persuade members of Congress. The election vote was ultimately carried out as planned, and Trump did not persuade enough people to support him to disrupt the transition to the Biden administration. However, over a longer window of time, far-right persuasion around January 6th did succeed in some degree of persuasion vis-a-vis Republicans in Congress. By July 1, 2021, when the House of Representatives formed the January 6th Select Committee, only two Republicans were willing to serve, with others regarding the idea of investigating the event as a partisan maneuver. On February 4, 2022, the Republican National Committee officially censured both of the Republicans who did serve on that committee. Early in Donald Trump's second term as president, he pardoned all individuals convicted of crimes related to January 6th; Republican Senators blocked an attempted vote, sponsored by all Democrats in the chamber, condemning those pardons.

## Conclusions

The movement of far-right actors, organizations, and parties from the political periphery and toward the levers of power has been one of the central historical events of recent times across a wide range of countries. Whether this trajectory involves the creation of new parties, the capture of power by personalist leaders, or a transformation of existing parties and institutions from within, these changes have justly received a great deal of attention.

The textual time-series data examined here allows a more fine-grained picture of how and when some of the political relationships and alliances were constructed that facilitated these changes in the United States. The data show a long-term effort by voices on the far right to reach toward the mainstream by supplying ideas about novel events and once-taboo issue areas for which mainstream conservatives did not have off-the-shelf political frames to deploy, culminating in a new status quo where conservatives elected during the Trump era treat far-right media sources as reliable two-way interlocutors on a wide range of political issues. These data show important parts of the narrative of when and how the U.S. far right achieved political access, as well as helping identify key and often overlooked or minimized actors on both ends of the process.

More generally, this analysis provides a framework for thinking about far-right mainstreaming and normalization as processes of elite relationship-building and communication over time. Both the statistical tools used in this discussion and the conceptual framework of analyzing persuasion and communication relationships in terms of acts of mainstreaming, amplification, and two-way dialogue may have broader application — either to a wider set of far-right actors in the U.S. and elsewhere or to other political contexts. At a theoretical level, we invite readers to imagine large-scale elite transformations as series of events involving interactions among people with motives, strategies, and needs. As in this analysis, such a perspective can offer insights often otherwise missed.

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