Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy: Connective Action and the Rise of Illiberalism

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Democratic backsliding, the slow erosion of institutions, processes, and norms, has become more pronounced in many nations. Most scholars point to the role of parties, leaders, and institutional changes, along with the pursuit of voters through what Daniel Ziblatt has characterized as alliances with more extremist party surrogate organizations. Although insightful, the institutionalist literature offers little reflection about the growing role of social technologies in organizing and mobilizing extremist networks in ways that present many challenges to traditional party gatekeeping, institutional integrity, and other democratic principles. We present a more integrated framework that explains how digitally networked publics interact with more traditional party surrogates and electoral processes to bring once-scattered extremist factions into conservative parties. When increasingly reactionary parties gain power, they may push both institutions and communication processes in illiberal directions. We develop a model of communication as networked organization to explain how Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement rapidly transformed the Republican Party in the United States, and we point to parallel developments in other nations.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, communication and democracy, surrogate organization, misinformation, disinformation, connective action

Many democracies are under pressure from radical-right movements and parties that claim to address perceived threats to social and political identity. Their efforts are accompanied by nostalgic appeals to "Make America [or Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Finland, Italy, etc.] Great Again." These groups generally oppose immigration and social diversity, and promote nativist civic identities based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and other divisive cultural elements (Mudde 2019). These broad themes help to connect often-large online networks that can mobilize extremist voters and radicalize conservative parties, resulting in a pronounced trend toward illiberal politics in many democracies. The results have been bleak. In its 2023 report, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute in Sweden (Papada et al. 2023, 6) concluded that "[a]dvances in global levels of

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democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out," meaning that "the level of democracy enjoyed by the average world citizen in 2022 is down to 1986 levels." The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (2021; 2024) offered similarly pessimistic conclusions. In 2020, 116 of 167 countries recorded a decline in their total democracy scores compared with the previous year. The United States was rated a "flawed democracy" after 2016 when it lost its "full democracy" status. The health of liberal democracy in the United States is unlikely to improve following the reelection of Donald Trump in 2024.

What accounts for this crisis of liberal democracy? We address this question by drawing on two distinct yet ultimately complementary research literatures. One perspective focuses primarily on the growing roles of digital platforms in spreading disinformation and algorithmically amplifying extremist content. The other perspective is more familiar to political scientists, with its attention to the role of institutions and elites in restricting popular participation and drawing more extremist groups into formerly conservative parties. We refer to the first approach as the *technocentric paradigm* and the second as the *institutionalist paradigm*. Both literatures provide clues about why illiberal tendencies have developed among so many parties and voting publics on the Right in so many nations.

Our goals in this analysis are to (1) describe the logics of both the technocentric and institutionalist explanations, (2) identify the gaps found in each, and (3) sketch a synthesis. We propose a key link between these two largely separate approaches to democratic backsliding by explaining the role of "digitally networked organizations" that are more fluid and less hierarchical than more formal political organizations described in institutionalist approaches. As the case of Donald Trump and democratic instability in the United States illustrates, those networked publics can be mobilized strategically for a variety of activities, including taking over a political party, challenging election results, intimidating public officials, and mobilizing participation in, and public support for, the coup attempt following the 2020 presidential election (White et al. 2024). Integrating these processes of digitally organized extremism with more traditional institutional arguments offers a way to better understand democratic erosion in broader historical, social, economic, and comparative contexts.

A Brief Review and Critique of Technocentric Approaches to Democratic Erosion

Much of the focus on disruptive communication has centered on the political effects of poor-quality online information following the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the unexpected electoral victory of Donald Trump in the United States a few months later (Freelon and Wells 2020). Journalists and scholars quickly linked Trump's victory to online disinformation and conspiracy theories. Many Americans, it was claimed, were radicalized by algorithmically amplified lies, mendacity, and hate on their social media feeds. "It seemed possible," noted political scientist Yascha Mounk (2018), "that the rise of digital technology, and the concomitant spread of essentially costless communication, have set up a direct clash between two of our most cherished values: freedom of speech and the stability of our political system." Such claims mark a rapid reversal in earlier scholarly assessments that digital media were a kind of "liberation tech" responsible for a new wave of democracy sweeping the world (Arendt 2023; Diamond 2015; Diamond and Plattner 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013; O'Neil 1998; Rawnsley 2005; Seethaler and Melischek 2023; Voltmer 2013; Voltmer and Rawnsley 2019).

The growing volume of work on various forms of disruptive communication has been most notable in political communication scholarship, but similar trends have developed across the social sciences, as well as in medicine, public health, epidemiology, environmental science, and computer and data science (Navarro-Sierra, Magro-Vela, and Vinader-Segura 2024). The result has been a babel-esque eruption of terms, methods, and lines of parallel yet siloed research. Included among the many overlapping and poorly defined concepts are *fake news* (Grimm 2020; Lazer et al. 2018; Nielsen and Graves 2017; Tandoc et al. 2018; Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2018), *computational propaganda* (Murphy, Keane, and Power 2020; Woolley and Howard 2016; 2019), *rumors* (Berinsky 2023), *misperception* (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017), *conspiratorial thinking* (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 205; Uscinski et al. 2022), *disinformation* (Lewandowsky and Van der Linden 2021; Roozenbeek et al. 2022), *malinformation* (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), and the most popular catchall term *misinformation* (Southwell et al. 2019; Vraga and Bode 2020; West and Bergstrom 2021).

While there have been several noteworthy attempts to clarify and untangle these terms (see Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), distinctions remain blurred and unstable. For example, *disinformation* is often defined as the *intentional* creation and propagation of factually unsound content for the purpose of mobilizing disruptive political movements to undermine the established order (Bennett and Livingston 2018). In contrast, *misinformation* is usually understood as the intake or propagation of factually unsound information without the intent to cause harm or disruption. While perhaps theoretically helpful, such a distinction requires researchers to somehow decide the subjective intentions of the conveyer of factually unsound information. The task is made even more challenging by the mixed motives often behind the expression of fact claims or beliefs. One might, for example, give full-throated voice

to a dubious claim for the purpose of signaling group loyalty or antagonizing opponents without necessarily believing it.

Despite little success at reconciling these scattered concepts, several related hypotheses have quickly emerged to explain social media's role in democratic backsliding. First is the recognition that the priorities of the social media behemoths are shaped not by a sense of collective civic responsibility or regard for democratic principles, but by insatiable appetites for financial growth and market domination. This includes developing algorithms to engineer user behavior by recommending and amplifying often-extreme content (Zuboff 2019, 8). Second, such content is thought to *radicalize individual users* by pulling them into proverbial rabbit holes where their worst instincts and darkest prejudices are ignited and reinforced (Horwitz 2021). Put differently, algorithmically amplified content is thought to reinforce the tendency to uncritically embrace new information aligned with prior beliefs and reject information that is at odds with them, all irrespective of factual accuracy. This line of thinking has drawn on earlier work in cognitive psychology (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017; Fiske and Taylor 1991; Kruglanski and Webster 1996; Kunda 1987; 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). The idea that social media content *reinforces motivated reasoning* is the foundation upon which much of the technocentric explanation of democratic backsliding rests. Third, because of these cognitive tendencies, citizens are thought to grow more polarized and socially sorted (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2018; Rawlings 2022), from which a downward recursive spiral of democratic dysfunction emerges. Namely, polarization opens space for yet more disinformation, which further exacerbates polarization (Pennycook and Rand 2021; Thaler 2021). Finally, layered over this democratically dysfunctional dynamic is the disruptive influence of foreign adversaries using social media to exploit existing social and cultural conflicts to their political advantage (Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Hornung 2021; Jamieson 2020; Sanovich 2018).

This simple set of ideas—built upon the fuzzy collection of underlying concepts noted above—describes the logic of much of the contemporary debate about democratic erosion and digital technology (Tucker et al. 2018). We begin our argument by offering a critical assessment of this largely *individual-level information processing approach* to democratic erosion. We argue that institutions, history, and social and economic power structures are elided from view when democratic disruption is understood primarily as an individual-level media effect. Furthermore, the dominant research focus on individual effects misses the question of how scattered individuals become organized in ways that connect to movements, parties, elections, and other political processes. Later, we suggest another way of understanding the role of communication in democratic

erosion by showing how political operatives and leaders help to create networked organizations that enhance the voter ranks of parties. The mobilization of extremist networks often comes at the expense of traditional party organization, agendas, and gatekeeping capacities, and may even result in the capture of parties by more radical factions. First, we offer a critical reflection on the state of the technocentric model when based on individual-level cognitive effects.

Despite the conceptual ambiguities and methodological challenges, what are increasingly called "mis/disinformation studies" have skyrocketed. In broad terms, research has centered on three themes: (1) how information of dubious quality is created, targeted, spread, and amplified on digital platforms; (2) how erroneous information affects an individual's ability to build accurate and democratically functional representations of reality; and (3) how factually inaccurate representations of reality and other irreconcilable political stances can be prevented or corrected. To give the reader a sense of the scope of the technocentric explanation of backsliding, we offer noteworthy examples of work in each of these three research domains.

Algorithmic amplification of disinformation and misinformation, sometimes referred to as computational propaganda, has received considerable attention (Duan et al. 2022; Hindman 2018; Shin et al. 2022; Woolley and Howard 2016; 2019). It argues that automation of various types boosts the signal strength of poor-quality information, thus putting individual citizens at greater risk. In some instances, foreign states and domestic operators use trolls, bots, and sock puppets as super-spreaders of disinformation on social media platforms (Ahmad et al. 2019; Bradshaw and Howard 2019; Jamieson 2020; Keller et al. 2019; Linvill and Warren 2020; Weissmann et al. 2021; Woolley and Guilbeault 2017; Zannettou et al. 2019).

The lion's share of "mis/disinformation" research has been focused on the second and third research questions above: *How can individuals build more accurate representations of reality?* And *how can inaccurate understandings be prevented or corrected?* Discussions of public communication in liberal democracies often assume that the capacity to resolve (or at least tolerate) differences hinges on the capacity of individuals to update prior beliefs in the direction of greater openness to considering evidence and reason (Bennett and Kneuer 2024). Much of the research literature on public information quality has focused on testing techniques for discouraging confirmation bias or motivated reasoning. Inoculation strategies, media literacy initiatives, fact checking, and correction strategies are central to this effort (Bayes and Druckman 2021; Benegal and Scruggs 2018; Dwoskin 2021; Ecker et al. 2022; Jerit and Zhao 2020; Man-Pui et al. 2017; Tandoc et al. 2018; Walter and Tukachinsky 2020; Walter et al. 2020). For example, studies have tested

the effectiveness of "prebunking" factually unsound claims (Cook, Lewandowsky, and Ecker 2017; Guess et al. 2020; Roozenbeek et al. 2022). This is also referred to as inoculation theory, as the basic supposition is rooted in the metaphorical reference to a vaccine, an injection of a modulated strain of a pathogen to trigger a defense mechanism.

Considerable research attention has also been given to assessing the effectiveness of correcting factually unsound beliefs. The results of these approaches, however, have not always been encouraging. Correction effects, for example, are not only short-lived (Porter and Wood 2019), but they have even been found to trigger a "backfire effect": experimental attempts to correct factually unsound beliefs have led to a deepening of the subject's convictions (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013). Unsurprisingly, this finding was met with considerable alarm. If efforts to correct unsound beliefs lead to their entrenchment, what hope is there for democratic dialogue, debate, and compromise? Concerns were abated only after subsequent research failed to replicate a backfire effect (Porter and Wood 2019; Wood and Porter 2019). As it turns out, the perceived backfire effect was probably the result of a poorly worded correction treatment. But this episode points to another, and perhaps even more serious, concern.

Replication failures in social psychology and cognitive science, as we saw with the backfire effect, turn out to be uncomfortably common (Maxwell, Lau, and Howard 2015). According to findings published in *Science*, most of a sample of a hundred published findings in social and cognitive psychology failed to replicate (Open Science Collaboration 2015). Other studies have come up with similar findings (Camerer et al. 2018). Despite these concerns, individual-level cognitive science–inspired studies have flourished in the past decade. This might be explained by the generous flow of resources in support of misinformation studies. According to one estimate, between 2016 and 2021, over $70 million went to a handful of universities for the purpose of starting up new research centers and institutes that would, among other things, find ways to correct the factually unsound beliefs stemming from online sources (Livingston and Miller, forthcoming).[1] Funding at this scale has also attracted the attention of data and computer scientists, who often came to the topic without a grounding in social science theory. Even political communication research done by political scientists often reads like a subfield of computer and data science.

In this environment, questions of social and economic power, or the efforts of parties and leaders to advance illiberal agendas, typically recede into the background. Moreover, when treated as an irrational outcome of faulty information processing, "polarization" may be seen as an inherently unwelcome and aberrant condition in a democracy that can somehow be corrected with better

communication and civic education. Yet if one acknowledges systematic racism, gross wealth and income inequalities, and the chronic stresses they create, irreconcilable socioeconomic and cultural differences seem less a consequence of faulty cognitive processes than understandable emotional responses to lived conditions (Kreiss 2021; Kreiss and Reddi 2021; Marwick, Clancy, and Furl 2022).

We do not mean to suggest that the research literature we have just reviewed is without merit. It has certainly revealed important *individual-level effects* often associated with digital communication technologies. What it fails to do, however, is engage societal, institutional, and organizational-level processes and effects. Instead, politics is reduced to messages and brain functions, with little consideration of how individuals belonging to different political subcultures, movements, or parties may actually use "alternative facts" and communication logics to connect with one another and to challenge opponents. Indeed, the results of the 2024 US presidential election demonstrate that fact checking and correction have little effect on tempering even the most preposterous claims. When challenged on the claim that Haitian immigrants were eating the pets in Springfield, Ohio, Trump's running mate J. D. Vance admitted it was not true, yet it accomplished its goal of focusing media attention on their number one issue. And so, both Trump and Vance continued to invent claims of horrific societal breakdown across America, while all manner of media continued to spread those images, spun differently to reflect the competing communication preferences of political influencers and audiences.

Following our review of institutionalist approaches in the next section, we suggest a different way of thinking about the importance of digital technologies: as tools for connecting and organizing scattered and often extreme individuals and fringe groups and integrating them into movement, party, and election ecosystems. This picks up one promising thread from the technological analyses described above: the importance of digital platforms in organizing social and political networks (Klinger, Kreiss, and Mutsvairo 2023; Klinger et al. 2023). We expand current accounts of platforms and power to include a framework for understanding different types of digitally organized networks, along with an explanation of how networked organizations are managed by parties and movements. This moves the level of technological analysis from individuals to organizations and enables the integration of technological and institutional approaches. The result offers a better explanation of how existing conservative parties can make illiberal transitions so quickly, as well as explain how many new parties on the radical/illiberal Right have developed such impressive voting publics. As we argue below, institutionalist approaches have yet to account for these transformative effects of

digitally networked organization in accounts of democratic backsliding or erosion.

A Brief Review and Critique of Institutionalist Approaches to Democratic Erosion

Most democracy scholars have concluded that contemporary threats to liberal democracy do not come from a sudden military coup d'état or rapid institutional changes, but rather by way of a slow erosion of democratic norms, practices, and institutions (Bermeo 2016; Kneuer 2021). It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer an extensive review of this long-established and copious literature (for comprehensive reviews, see Grillo et al. 2023; Lust and Waldner 2015; Waldner and Lust 2018). However, it is important to be clear that our reference to "institutionalist" approaches includes a broad range of social, economic, and political organizational factors, with a focus in this analysis on conservative parties and how they manage (or fail to manage) their voter publics. We show how hybrid media systems and the politically managed construction of digital surrogates add explanatory power to institutionalist thinking about democratic erosion.

In explaining democratic backsliding, many institutionalist scholars have emphasized the effects of contingent decisions made by political elites (Capoccia 2005; Linz 1978). Related work argues that democratic stability is a function of the normative commitment to democracy by political leaders (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014). Other scholars contend that executives who are unconstrained by countervailing institutions or power centers are more likely to initiate backsliding (Fish 2001; Kneuer 2021; Van der Linden et al. 2017). There is also a long tradition of connecting qualities of civil society to democratic stability (Almond and Verba 1965; Verba, Brady, and Schlozman 1995). Others have examined democratic backsliding through a cultural lens. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) and Norris and Ingelhart (2019), for example, argue that stable democracy requires the transition from values defined by the pursuit of basic survival needs to more secular and self-actualizing values.

While various aspects of leadership, civil society, power, institutions, and political culture are important to understanding democratic stability or erosion, we prefer to start with the economic dilemmas facing conservative parties, particularly the problem of voter aversion to policies that may produce greater inequalities in wealth and income (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003). As Waldner and Lust (2018, 102) put it, "As income inequality rises, democracy's costs for the wealthy increase, lowering the probability of democratic transitions." But it would be too simplistic, they argue, for one to rely solely on a crass class analysis. A second, more "heterogeneous axis" involves identity-based divisions that fall "along religious, linguistic, racial, or other descent-based attributes" (103). Class

politics interact with these other sources of identity. They also note that "it is not accurate to claim that social divisions are first formed and then influence political processes and structures; *political structures and processes also influence group identity formation*. Political entrepreneurs, for example, might *deliberately facilitate certain forms of group formation and impede others*" (103, emphases added).

Ziblatt (2017) develops a detailed analysis of the ways in which conservative parties may become "political entrepreneurs" by disguising often-unpopular and class-biased economic programs with more visceral social packaging to expand their voter bases. He begins with a common dilemma faced by conservative parties, especially during times of growing material inequality: their most natural political alignment is with economic elites, yet the wealthy are few in number, and often not wildly popular. This creates what Ziblatt calls the conservative dilemma. In a time of growing inequality and broad voting rights, to remain competitive, conservative parties must find a way to build a cross-class coalition. Put differently, to resolve the dilemma, *conservative parties must focus elections on nonmaterial cultural and social issues*, or what Ziblatt calls *cross-cutting cleavage issues*. Issues of this sort can mobilize a cross-class coalition that gives the party a fighting chance at the ballot box.

Parties promote these issues with the assistance of "outside interest groups and civil society organizations" that he refers to as party *surrogate organizations* (Ziblatt 2017, 174). Hacker and Pierson (2020, 23) offer a detailed description of contemporary surrogate organizations: "What parties are not always equipped to do is generate intensity sufficient to motivate potential voters and convince them to put their economic concerns to the side. For these purposes, other kinds of organizations—single-issue groups, cultural institutions such as churches, and certain kinds of media outlets, for instance—are often more effective. These organizations can focus on building strong emotional bonds with citizens and tapping shared identities."

Though surrogate organizations can help to resolve the conservative party dilemma of how to expand voter appeal, they also present potential risks to party integrity. Surrogates can take extreme positions on highly emotive issues, and in the process pull the party along with it. Increasingly radicalized parties and their allied surrogate organizations can make unreasonable demands on the state or pull a party in illiberal or authoritarian directions. This concern is in keeping with long-standing concerns about the role of civil society organizations in a democracy (Almond and Verba 1965; O'Donnell 1988; Verba, Brady, and Schlozman 1995; for an overview, see Bermeo 2003, 10).

Ziblatt brings these concerns to his treatment of "surrogate organizations," particularly in cases where the interests of surrogates are not well aligned with party priorities.

For example, in a desire for better ratings, an aligned media organization might appeal to key audience demographics by taking extremist positions on divisive issues, or by promoting fringe politicians that spread destabilizing extremist rhetoric on immigration, minority gender identities, non-Christian religious sects, or "white replacement" theories. The sworn testimony provided by Fox News personalities, and Rupert Murdoch himself, in the Dominion Voting defamation case following the 2020 US election underscored that Fox News can be understood as a Republican Party surrogate organization. However, Fox shifted away from the party mainstream as it became more interested in preserving its market share among radical-right viewers. According to their private message exchanges, Fox prime-time hosts continued to promote Donald Trump's election fraud narrative despite their strongly stated private misgivings and internal tensions with the news division (Ellison and Gardner 2023). That position helped to consolidate the influence of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement in the Republican Party, which in turn expanded the flow of disruptive communication in mainstream media. Hacker and Pierson (2020, 24) summarized this dynamic in the following way: "In a worst-case scenario, the party falls into a spiral of weakening control over the most extreme elements of its coalition. Ultimately, conventional politicians who are cross pressured by competing demands may be outflanked, supplanted by demagogues who are happy to work with such elements and know how to do so. Reliance on surrogates can thus lead a party down the path to extremism."

What we add to this account of the conservative dilemma is the idea that formally organized surrogates such as Fox News or conservative Christian groups are increasingly joined by *organized grassroots online extremist factions.* These digitally networked organizations may compete with traditional surrogate groups for control of the party and its political agenda. And when digitally networked surrogates are successful (e.g., by electing representatives), they can disrupt surrounding democratic processes, such as party gatekeeping, election integrity, journalistic freedom, or judicial independence.

In addition to more conventional Republican Party surrogate organizations like the National Rifle Association, various Christian and family-values organizations, or the Koch donor network, dozens of influential factions of the MAGA movement can now be regarded as "digital surrogate organizations" of the Republican Party. Those digital surrogates include QAnon, the Boogaloo Bois, the Proud Boys, various white nationalist/supremacist organizations, wellness and anti-vaccine networks, local armed poll-watching groups, and hundreds of online media sites. Networking these radical factions not only brings more extreme voters and candidates into the party, but also creates a pull for more conventional party surrogates to become more extreme, as in the case of election denial conspiracies on Fox News, or the shifting center of gravity among Christian nationalist surrogates toward the creation of a religious state. As a result, party boundaries became far more "porous"—that is to say, the party is unable to maintain clear boundaries between it and its surrogates. Though William F. Buckley might have once distanced the conservative movement and the Republican Party from Robert Welch and the John Birch Society (Felzenberg 2017), it is more difficult to stop QAnon and other online conspiracy theory organizations from encroaching on today's Republican Party, particularly when prominent politicians from Trump to members of Congress begin echoing their positions (Trickey 2021).

The next section of this paper describes how digital media networks form and operate at the organizational level and link to movements, parties, and elections. This model of networked surrogate organization offers a useful bridge between technocentric and institutionalist explanations of democratic backsliding. Our framework operates at a level of analysis better suited to link media platforms and user networks to institutions. As shown earlier in our critique of the technocratic literature, the cognitive individual level of analysis largely examines democracy one citizen at a time, while failing to show how those mis/disinformed individuals become organized in ways that attach their emotional truths to political movements, parties, and leaders.

Understanding Digitally Networked Organizations

Rather than centering our analysis on individual-level cognitive effects, we focus on the ways in which managed and curated communication on digital platforms can alter the organizational landscape of politics (Chadwick 2013; Cooren et al. 2011; DeLanda 2006; Kreiss 2021; Putnam and Nicotera 2009; Putnam, Nicotera, and McPhee 2009). Our core assertion is that networked communication can, given the right conditions, constitute new organizational forms (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Mirbabaie et al. 2021; Suk et al. 2021; Vaast et al. 2017). Related to this, we also argue that these digitally constituted organizations on the Right are likely to deepen existing threats to democracy posed by more traditional civil society groups and partisan media organizations, or what we, following Ziblatt, have called party surrogate organizations.

The organizational challenge is that many extremist groups are typically scattered and poorly organized, and thus present more challenging problems to mobilize than traditional organizations such as churches. Organizations that exist partially or even entirely online are made possible by a variety of platform algorithms and "affordances"— capabilities inherent in the design of a technology, such as hashtags, subreddits, Facebook groups, or recommendation engines that create patterned relationships among

people (DeLanda 2006). But that is only part of the story. Understanding how algorithms and affordances help people to become organized for public action requires broadening the understanding of communication by recognizing that "communication is often much more than a means of exchanging information and forming impressions, or an instrument for sending updates and instructions to followers" (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 8). In some cases, highly active users, professional influencers, and political operatives link groups and resources across multiple platforms, with the result that these routinized communication patterns "become dynamic organizations in their own right" (8). The communication-as-organization perspective has been applied more broadly in the area of organization studies (Cooren et al. 2011). Our application involves how the relative ease of communicating with formerly marginalized fringe elements attracts opportunistic politicians, media sites, and political organizations with the aim of mobilizing them into voting blocks.

To capture these organizational dynamics, Bennett and Segerberg (2013, 46) array different organizational forms along a continuum that is anchored at one end by conventional hierarchical or "brokering organizations [that] carry the burden of facilitating cooperation and bridging differences when possible." The other end of the continuum is characterized by crowd-enabled networked organizations that emerge with little formal hierarchy by using technological affordances (e.g., links, hashtags, reposts, archiving) to do some things that characterize more formal organizations, such as distribute resources, set priorities, and coordinate action. These relatively horizontal crowd networks have appeared in various forms, from mass protests such as the "Arab Spring" and Occupy Wall Street to more sustained issue networks such as #MeToo, #FridaysForFuture, or #BlackLivesMatter. Technology-enabled networked organizations are often "subject to notable reconfiguring as subnetworks shift their activities and the crowd responds to external events" (46). In other words, they are nimble, fluid, and constantly evolving.

Found between these two poles are many now familiar hybrid forms of *organizationally enabled connective action* in which more conventional political organizations assist in networking scattered groups, but may not formally lead or direct them, and often do not even acknowledge their coordinating roles. These hybrid organizational networks are increasingly important to democratic civil societies, from loose coalitions of economic justice or climate change groups on the Left to extremist militia and conspiracy networks on the Right. For example, as discussed in the next section, the national network of "Stop the Steal" groups that led to the insurrection following the 2020 US election included many of the familiar MAGA digital surrogates that were enabled and repurposed by resources from Trump-aligned media sites such as *Breitbart* or

Gateway Pundit, and political operatives like Roger Stone. The result was the creation of broad public support for, and in some cases participation in, the 2021 coup attempt —inspired, in part, by a digital and social media tsunami that included more that twenty million views of #StopTheSteal videos on YouTube alone (Atlantic Council DFRLab 2021). The next section explores how Bennett and Segerberg's "communication as organization" model offers a constructive update to core political science models of democratic backsliding that emphasize the role of more conventional civil society and pressure groups.

The Political Dynamics of Illiberal "Digital Surrogate Organizations"

Much of the existing literature on what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) call "connective action" has focused on progressive or left-wing social movements. It is important to note that the kind of "asymmetrical polarization" (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) that distinguishes a fragmented Far Left from a more coherently networked Far Right in many democracies reflects the diversity of political issues and identities that have become characteristics of left-wing cultures based on direct action, participatory democracy, and aversion to more formal coalition and party organization (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2018). There have, of course, been impressive examples of massive mobilizations on the Left based largely on forms of technology-enabled organization. For example, the Occupy Wall Street protest networks in 2011–12 became importantly organized through processes of sharing memes that affirmed common identities (e.g., "We Are the 99 Percent"), with networked crowds circulating and curating various connective resources from protest tactics to advice on what to do when arrested. Those patterns of coordinated communication produced familiar organizational capacities, such as making and sharing agendas, planning and acting, and responding to external threats and opportunities (see Bennett, Segerberg, and Walker 2014). However, unlike the Far Right, those importantly networked protest organizations tended to dissolve back into their constituent parts due to lack of interest in forming more permanent coalitions, sharing common ideologies or narratives, or supporting common political parties, as explained in the next section.

Explaining the Institutional Differences between Left- and Right-Wing Extremism

Why are parties on the Right more likely than those on the Left to attract organized extremist networks? Though impressive in many ways, the digitally networked organizations operating outside the conventional bureaucratic Left of labor movements, pro-choice, or environmental NGOs tend to be fluid, relatively nonhierarchical, and difficult to sustain. The low success in forming stable

cross-issue movement and party coalitions on the Left has little to do with differences in technology capacities. The more important factor is that diverse issue and identity groups joining in occasional massive protests prefer to revert to their original forms rather than form more enduring (and necessarily hierarchical) movement or party coalitions.

Key factors contributing to the relative lack of stable movement and party formation on the technology-enabled Left include diminished confidence in parties and growing dissatisfaction with traditional movement organization based on ideology, collective identity, and conventional leadership. As a result, a continuing pattern of mobilization involves creative uses of technology to enable sometimes massive, but generally short-lived, protests and deliberative gatherings centered around principles of diversity, inclusion, and direct democracy. As a result of these factors, the fragmented Far Left in most nations has not been able to form or capture stable political parties, despite impressive uses of technology, including several parties organized largely through digital platforms (see Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2018).

The story is very different on the Right. Before their incorporation into the MAGA movement with its connection to the Republican Party, many fringe networks on the Far Right were also located at the "crowd-enabled" end of the Bennett and Segerberg organization continuum. The list of such organizations includes white nationalist and anti-immigrant groups, neo-Nazis, armed militias such as the Boogaloo Bois and the Proud Boys, wellness and anti-vaccination communities, patriarchal white male Christian identity organizations such as the Promise Keepers, various Tea Party remnants, conspiracy networks such as QAnon and the anti-globalists, and "Stop the Steal" activists, among other factions. A finer-grained look reveals hundreds of formerly scattered groups that have now become more connected to Republican Party politics. For example, a 2019 Southern Poverty Law Center report identified 576 extremist antigovernment organizations. By the fateful election of 2020, and the subsequent assault on the US Capitol and challenges to government officials certifying the election, the go-to organizational platforms for those groups involved a dynamic mix of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X, Reddit, Pinterest, Instagram, and Telegram, among others.

What accounts for this shift toward greater coherence in movement and party organization on the Far Right? In part, the smaller number of common core values on the Far Right, such as racism, nationalism, traditional gender and family values, religion, and social hierarchy, makes a common cause easier to create and frame in terms of "make our nation great again" myths. An equally important explanation for the rapid organization of right-wing extremism is that factions on the Right have received support from a variety of well-resourced political and

media organizations (Derysh 2021; Mac and Lerer 2022) creating hybrid forms of "organizationally enabled connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Put another way, the pressures created by the conservative dilemma that give rise to a reliance on conventional surrogate organizations extends to even more unstable and potentially dangerous digital surrogate organizations.

Explaining the Rise of Organizationally Enabled Movement-Party Networks on the Right

Beyond the availability of an ever-changing array of social media platforms (which are also available to the Left), the scale and stability of right-wing networked organizations has been enabled by a mix of (1) partisan political media sites and political influencers, (2) tax-exempt nonprofit political organizations and think tanks that produce content and campaigns, (3) political operatives who manage campaigns and networks, and (4) elected leaders—all of which promote (5) spreadable *memes*, *narratives*, and *disinformation* that connect different networks. In the sections below, we briefly examine how these networking mechanisms contribute to the increasingly illiberal stances of the MAGA Republicans, including support for the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol, which has been classified by some scholars as a coup attempt (see White et al. 2024). These and related ideas are developed further in Livingston and Miller (forthcoming). In the limited space here, we can only offer brief illustrations of each type of organizational networking mechanism.

Political Media Sites and Political Influencers

Media organizations and personalities have long been instrumental in channeling messaging to and from audiences affiliated with Republican Party surrogate organizations. In earlier years, talk radio and conservative television networks such as Fox News channeled communication to and from traditional Republican Party surrogates such as evangelical Christian churches, family-values NGOs, and gun rights groups. However, after Trump's victory in the 2016 election, Fox hosts helped to turn the network into a propaganda channel for the Trump presidency (Mayer 2019). With the continued growth of MAGA networks and elected politicians, Fox prime-time personalities promoted more extremist messages, from stolen election claims to "white replacement" narratives (Chait 2021). By the night of the 2024 election, even the Fox news desk had joined the propaganda corps (Aratani 2024).

Beyond prominent media organizations such as Fox, there are hundreds of other political (dis)information sites and at least 10 important social media channels that spread illiberal content to large user communities, connecting diverse networks to various institutional actors and processes. Yang (2025) shows how these often dense networks are organized in different situations, sometimes moving

fringe conspiracies and disinformation into the mainstream, and sometimes spreading more top-down content from party and movement leaders.

Important to these networks are political influencers such as Jack Posobiec, who has cultivated millions of users on diverse platforms by spreading conspiracy theories about child sex trafficking among Democrats or the stolen election of 2020. During the first Trump presidency, he also became a correspondent for One America News Network and received press credentials for the White House. Later, he coauthored a book titled *Unhumans* that branded the Left as subhuman communist revolutionaries, and proposed Franco-style authoritarianism to develop the true will of the people. Published during the 2024 election campaign, the book was endorsed by J. D. Vance (Goldberg 2024).

Tax-Exempt Political Nonprofits

Organizations funded by wealthy reactionaries also contribute resources, infrastructure, and direction to the radical fringe. For example, former US education secretary Betsy DeVos's family funds the Michigan Freedom Fund and other far-right organizations in the Michigan Conservative Coalition (Wilson 2020). Those political organizations helped scattered local groups to organize against the stay-at-home order in Michigan during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting "Unlock Michigan" protests brought the far-right Proud Boys hate group together with Confederate-flag-waving activists to the Michigan State House, where some militia members entered the Capitol carrying semiautomatic weapons. There were even calls to kidnap and assassinate Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan. The FBI uncovered a plot to kidnap and execute her following a show trial. Although the far-right militia members involved in the plot were given long prison sentences (Smith 2022), the Michigan occupation was seen by some observers as a dress rehearsal for the January 6 insurrection (Gray 2021). DeVos family members were also principal contributors to the Koch network of earlier Republican surrogate organizations (Mayer 2016, 205). By the 2024 election, DeVos, Koch, and Mercer money had moved farther to the right by supporting the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, the Teneo Network, and the Rockbridge Network (cofounded by J. D. Vance and backed by several Silicon Valley investors, including Peter Thiel).

The failure of the January 6 coup spurred more concerted efforts to capture the American state, as evidenced in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. The planning and detailed public documentation involved hundreds of partisan organizations, think tanks, and political operatives in a sweeping plan to reorganize the American state following a Trump reelection. Plans included politicizing the federal bureaucracy, eliminating "deep state" organizations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, terminating the departments of Education and Commerce, ending the independence of the Federal Reserve, and more (Dans and Groves 2024).

Political Operatives

The "inside game" to overturn the 2020 election and install Trump as president was headed up by a coterie of Trump operatives and advisors who gathered in what they termed a "command center" at the Willard Hotel in the heart of Washington and communicated with White House officials, including the president (Alemany et al. 2021). Those operatives included Trump advisor and former *Breitbart* executive chairman Steve Bannon; Rudy Giuliani, Trump's personal lawyer and tireless advocate for overturning the election; and attorney John Eastman, who developed a legal theory that Vice President Mike Pence could stop the congressional certification of state electoral votes and either invite key states to select new slates of electors favorable to Trump, or remand the decision to the House of Representatives. (Under the provisions of the Twelfth Amendment the House would hold a vote by state delegations to choose the president—a vote Trump could expect to win, as his party controlled a majority of state governments at the time).

Another member of the Willard command center group was longtime Republican "dirty trickster" and Trump advisor, Roger Stone, who was involved in staging the so-called Brooks Brothers riot when well-dressed Republican staffers disrupted the vote recount in Miami-Dade County, Florida, during the 2000 presidential election. The resulting chaos stopped the recount and left the outcome to a narrow Supreme Court ruling that effectively made George W. Bush the winner. Stone later coined the "Stop the Steal" meme ahead of the 2016 election, based on his assumption that Trump would lose and that the election would be challenged. Stone's rallying meme was finally activated in 2020 and used by other political operatives and organizations to mobilize state-level protests, along with being featured in calls by Bannon, Trump, and others to come to Washington and stop the certification of Joe Biden's victory.

Cueing and Recognition by Elected Leaders

Consider the improbable rise of QAnon to national and international prominence. A mysterious "Q," who claimed to be a high government official with "Q-level" security clearance, alerted followers on the 4chan website that a ring of Democratic politicians and Hollywood elites were engaging in Satanic rites of child sex trafficking and cannibalism. Q also prophesized that Donald Trump would save the children with a massive sting operation called "The Storm." Posts from Q appeared in late 2017, initially expanding upon the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory

from the 2016 election claiming that Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, and other top Democratic Party officials were conducting a demonic child sex trafficking operation from the (nonexistent) basement of a Washington pizza restaurant.

The updated pronouncements of Q were reposted on different platforms, and followers with Q signs and paraphernalia began showing up at Republican election rallies in 2018. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Trump recognized the movement and retweeted at least 90 posts from 49 different QAnon conspiracy accounts. At the same time, the Federal Bureau of Investigation warned that the network was "a potential source of domestic terrorism after several people radicalized by QAnon had been charged with crimes, ranging from attempted kidnapping to murder, all inspired by the conspiracy theory" (Nguyen 2020). Yet, with high levels of social media engagement, traditional media attention, and recognition from politicians, the movement grew, and adherents were even elected to the US House of Representatives (Breland 2020). Q signs soon appeared at right-wing rallies in Europe.

Memes, Narrative Elements, and Disinformation as Networking Mechanisms

With the help of these various network organizers, once-isolated extremist groups began to join the ranks of more traditional Republican Party surrogates. Connections among new and old surrogates were helped by high-level themes of patriotism, lost national greatness, and white Christian nationalism (Du Mez 2020; Gorski and Perry 2022; Stewart 2020). In addition, a collection of now familiar memes ("Stop the Steal," "Make America Great Again," "Build the Wall," "Lock Her/Him Up") served as rallying cries that traveled across network boundaries to create common emotional bonds that united a large and volatile MAGA movement.

As noted above, the biggest and most effective of the many lies and deceptions of the Trump era was the claim that the 2020 election was stolen. A study by the Just Security forum at New York University found that between September 1, 2020, and February 2, 2021, there were over 8,200 online articles containing variations on the "Stop the Steal" meme: "Those articles garnered more than 70,000,000 engagements on different platforms; more than 43.5 million of those engagements were registered in December 2020 alone. More than 83 percent (58.5 million) of total engagements were registered on YouTube videos, which appeared on multiple platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Reddit. YouTube videos containing 'Stop the Steal' or '#StopTheSteal' garnered 21,267,165 views, 863,151 likes, and 34,091 dislikes in the time period analyzed" (Atlantic Council DFRLab 2021).

The widespread belief in the theft of the election, spurred by the mobilization of the "Stop the Steal" movement, would not have happened without the above elements working together to spread the disinformation, coordinate various action networks, and bring even more extreme surrogates into the Republican Party. Despite mounting evidence that the election was not stolen, the continuous circulation of the meme resulted in increased popular belief in the stolen election over time: by 2024, only 61% of the US adult population believed that Biden's victory was legitimate, down from 69% in 2021, and just 31% of Republicans accepted Biden's win, compared to 39% in 2021 (Pengelly 2024). Beyond connecting and radicalizing voter networks, the stolen election meme also became the justification for many state-level efforts to further limit voter participation, including attempts to grant control over election certification to Republican-controlled state legislatures. These feedback loops enabled the now radicalized party to limit voter participation and alter election rules well beyond earlier institutional corruption efforts outlined by Hacker and Pierson and others.

The Fate of American Democracy and the Future of the Republican Party

The Republican Party has been transformed by the networked organization of diverse MAGA groups linking grassroots citizens with media hubs, political organizations, and elected officials—all joined in sharing convenient myths and disinformation. As a result, a collection of once-isolated extremist factions has taken its place alongside traditional surrogate organizations to impact the identity and electoral future of the Republican Party. As Sidney Tarrow (2021) has observed, when extremism develops into organized movements, those movements can take over parties, and in the case of the MAGA movement, push a conservative party into illiberal territory. This observation is aligned with the logic of Ziblatt's conservative dilemma model.

The unfortunate outcomes of the conservative dilemma in the United States can be thought of as failures of institutional gatekeeping. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 36) argue, "[P]rotection against would-be authoritarians has not been [found in] Americans' firm commitment to democracy but, rather, [in] the gatekeepers—our political parties." The scale of the Republican Party gatekeeping failure beggars the oft-heard explanation in political science circles that the democratization of candidate selection processes after the civil unrest of the 1960s somehow later opened the door to Trump. That conventional wisdom is ironic in the sense that it blames too much democracy for the failures of Republicans. More importantly, it does not account for the long list of corrosive institutional actions and the related spread of disinformation over decades by Republican elites. Though party leaders and some of their

backers, such as surrogates in the "Kochtopus" network (Mayer 2016), may not have endorsed Trump in 2016, their own legacy of disinformation and eroded institutional trust left them in no position to stop him or his insurgency once it took hold of the party.

This does not mean that the new Republican Party is one happy family, or that its course, much less that of the nation's, is clear. Nearly everywhere one looks in the collection of Republican Party surrogates, one sees instability and boundary problems. For example, where are armed militia groups like the Proud Boys, the Boogaloo Bois, or the Patriot Prayer group taking party boundaries? What should we make of the evidence that local police departments and the US military have been infiltrated by far-right white supremacist militias (Burris 2020; Kennedy 2020; Levine 2020; Montgomery 2017)? As party boundaries are changing, the old strategies of "legalized voter suppression" are being supplemented by calls for violence, including threats and attacks on elected Republican officials and election workers who do not cleave to the new, more radical order.

Indeed, the embrace of violence by party operatives is itself a key warning sign of democracy's threatened collapse. As Nancy Bermeo (2003, 234) put it: "Even profound polarization … is never, in itself, a sufficient condition for regime collapse. Democracies will only collapse if actors *deliberately disassemble them* and *the key actors in this disassembling process are political elites*" (emphases added). Beyond those who condone violence in defense of their version of white nationalist democracy, many elected representatives have intensified efforts to dismantle voting rights and replace secure election provisions with partisan control. This combination of accelerated institutional corruption and the failure of many Republican representatives to condemn and punish threats and violence against state institutions and opponents signals what Bermeo (238) refers to as a failure of the party's "distancing capacity" to separate itself and its members from acts of violence and lawlessness. Such distancing involves condemning and prosecuting all those who engage in violence, even when they present themselves as current or potential party allies. The act of distancing serves as an antidote to the contagion of polarization. If parties can muster this sort of organizational control, they show themselves to be solutions to the problem of disorder and not contributing factors.

Trump and his enablers in the Republican Party have not just failed to distance themselves from violence; they have at times actively promoted it. During many political rallies, Trump called on his supporters to act violently against protesters and journalists (Cineas 2021; Sullivan 2019). In May 2020, one report found 54 cases of violence linked to Trump's rhetoric that were captured in court documents and police statements (Levine 2020), including his invitation to those attending his January 6 rally in the Ellipse Park near the White House to go to the Capitol and "fight like hell." A study of Trump's rhetoric between 2015 and 2024 showed a dramatic increase in violent language aimed at immigrants, political opponents, journalists, and others (Savin and Treisman 2024). Of course, we will never know the incidence of civil strife that might have occurred had Trump lost the 2024 election.

Toward a Comparative Framework for Communication and Democratic Erosion

There are, of course, important cross-national differences in forms and degrees of democratic erosion, from how different electoral systems constrain parties on the radical Right, to the reach of mainstream and partisan media systems, among other factors. At the same time, there are many indicators that illiberalism is on the rise in many nations, with similar discourses and institutional erosion patterns (Bennett and Kneuer 2024; Papada et al. 2023; Štětka and Mihelj 2024). It is also clear that there are broadly similar integrating themes on the illiberal Right in different nations, including white Christian nationalism (or, more broadly, ethnic religious nationalism), anti-immigration, traditional family values (including patriarchy and anti-LGBTQ politics), and the emergence of everyday political "theories" such as the "great replacement" and "deep state" conspiracies. Similar to our analysis, emerging research shows that these patterns are due to a combination of institutional and communication factors. On the institutional side, there is growing evidence of transnational networking across movements, parties, think tanks, and issue organizations (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). On the communication side, researchers have revealed how memes and messages flow over those transnational media networks (often fed by leaders and organizations on the institutional side), with the result that similar conspiracies and campaigns appear in different nations (Heft et al. 2021).

In addition to transnational networking, many nations have experienced similar domestic structural conditions that strain common citizen identifications and shared democratic norms: growing economic inequality, labor market disruptions due to economic globalization, growing cultural diversity due to immigration and expansion of various minority rights movements, and the failed promises of domestic neoliberal economics (Holmes and Krastev 2020). These structural strains produce social divisions, new citizen rights claims, and perceived threats to the status of formerly dominant groups such as white men (Parker 2021). Thus, politicians in different nations have spread similar political narratives of coded white male victimhood as part of larger myths of lost national greatness at the hands of immigrants, minorities, and globalist economic elites. For example, Hronešová and Kreiss (2024) show how Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump

crafted similar narratives of victimhood in very different cultural and historical contexts. The case for common patterns of mobilization on the Far Right is further strengthened by research on European Union election campaigns showing how similar campaigns and themes occurred in different nations, leading to growing right-wing representation in the EU parliament (Pfetsch, Benert, and Heft 2023).

Beyond the core narratives of nativist victimhood and restoring lost national greatness, a host of other common illiberal themes reflect a combination of institutionalist (e.g., party transformation) and communication factors (e.g., networked surrogate organizations): ending immigration, demanding the cultural assimilation of citizens with immigrant backgrounds, and backlashes against gender politics, among others. For example, Off (2022) draws on comparative cultural backlash theories to show how gender values have become predictive of Swedish radical-right voting. Reinhardt (2023) analyzes the commonalities of anti-feminist discourses in the organization of radical-right politics. And Reinhardt, Heft, and Pavan (2023) explain how social media campaigns in Germany, Sweden, and Italy connect attacks on gender equality to radical-right parties. In short, many democracies are warring over gender rights, reflecting transnational campaigns by various "family values" and conservative Christian organizations attacking gender diversity and promoting heteronormativity (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). As a result, patriarchy has moved up the list of core right-wing values in many nations, accompanied by attacks on LGBTQ and women's rights groups.

Processes of connective networked organization are also central to an analysis of how the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party managed to broaden the appeal of its most extreme factions despite state surveillance and legal rulings on the dangers presented by those factions (Klinger et al. 2023). Another study of the growth of the German Far Right by Knüpfer and Klinger (forthcoming) applies a variation of our framework to show how narrative networks connect citizens through media sites, party operatives, and political organizations using memes that travel across fringe networks—a process they refer to as "connective radicalization."

Beyond the growing number of comparative cases of how networked organization expands the base and radicalizes right-wing parties, there are also promising comparative frameworks tracing the development of illiberal communication spheres that block resolution of political conflicts and mobilize popular support for the political capture of public institutions. Štětka and Mihelj (2024) show how the gradual takeover of media systems turns news and cultural journalism into propaganda systems for state capture, mapping various national transitions from liberal to illiberal regimes. A somewhat different model of illiberal communication processes shows how the core norms of liberal democratic communication (e.g., tolerance, civility, inclusion, reasoned debate, independent journalism) are systematically opposed by illiberal communication spheres that violate basic values of reasoned debate and the moderation of public conflicts by broadly representative institutions and independent journalism (Bennett and Kneuer 2024). For example, they contrast the conventional liberal democratic norm that underrepresented "counter-publics" may seek greater political voice with the rise of illiberal "transgressive publics" seeking to exclude those others. In short, whether exploring common patterns of issue and identity discourse, the formation or transformation of parties, or the development of public communication systems, our model of connective networked organization has applications beyond the United States.

Conclusion

Our main point is that the relationships between disruptive technologies and historical patterns of institutional erosion need to be better understood and addressed. We also offer a friendly corrective to thinking about the nature and role of surrogate organizations and digital technologies in party organization. In our account of the United States, the mobilization of online extremist networks by the various enabling factors described earlier threatens the traditional Republican Party's ability to control its own members and maintain ideological boundaries, much less protect democratic institutions. Beyond the erosion of the Reagan-era party, we look at the reorganization of the MAGA-era party as presenting a direct challenge to both liberal communication norms and institutional integrity.

We want to be clear that while popular individual leaders such as Trump seem key to the rise of right-wing movement-parties, we do not believe that Trump's rhetoric, alone, is responsible for the increased intolerance, division, and shadow of violence in American politics. The organizational dynamics of networked extremism are interactive, with a circular flow of disinformation and support for illiberal actions connecting online extremist networks, opportunistic media, political organizations, party operatives, and elected politicians such as Trump. One result is the movement of those online networked organizations into the physical world, embodying actions from electing more extreme representatives to the occupation of the national Capitol (Karell 2021).

Our additions to various institutionalist theories of democratic backsliding suggest that failures of organizational boundary maintenance may make the conservative dilemma unresolvable for the Republican Party, at least insofar as it remains a party committed to some version of liberal democracy. As the cycle of increasing extremism develops, the loudest and most violence-prone elements of an increasingly incoherent party draw energy from failed efforts to reach an accommodation. Whatever hope there

was that Trump himself would somehow exit the scene without leaving an heir apparent was dashed by the outcome of the 2024 election. We might also point to the possibility of better regulation of social media platforms and extremist political sites, though that too seems unlikely given Republican control of government following the elections. Rethinking free speech and related media regulation standards seems unlikely in a political climate where the illiberal Right demands protection for even the most extreme ideas. By contrast, the European Union has taken some modest steps toward platform regulation, but it remains unclear whether they will change the corrosive effects of communication.

We invite scholars of democratic backsliding in the United States and other nations to add to this account. As noted above, similar trends can be found operating in other democracies to different degrees, with the effects on democratic backsliding varying according to types of electoral systems and levels of institutional capture, among other factors. At the very least, this analysis should make clear that it is hard to separate the institutional from the technological roots of attacks on liberal democracy in America and elsewhere.

Note

1 The authors wish to acknowledge that one of them—Livingston—received a $5 million grant from the Knight Foundation for this purpose.

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