

Placing Media in Conservative Culture

Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins

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Abstract

Republican voters often see politics as an ideological battle between liberalism and conservatism, but do not necessarily share the policy agenda of their elected leadership. Linking right-leaning citizens with elite political goals, the conservative movement created a multimedia infrastructure to communicate with the Republican electoral base and counteract mainstream institutions. Republican elites, activists, and voters now rely on conservative media, even sometimes empowering Fox News Channel, talk radio, and conservative websites over party leaders. This media environment set the stage for the rise of Donald Trump, who consciously shaped his messages to appeal to voters based on conservative media concerns and styles.

Introduction

Beginning in the spring of 2011, real estate developer and reality television host Donald Trump began to appear weekly on the Fox News Channel morning television program *Fox and Friends* during a segment called “Monday Mornings with Trump.” Trump used this regular platform on conservative media’s most influential outlet—which ended only when he announced his presidential candidacy four years later—to pontificate on current events, practicing his appeals to Republican base voters and earning credentials as a conservative in good standing. Trump proceeded to ride his newfound popularity with conservative viewers to capture the Republican presidential nomination and the White House despite a lack of enthusiastic support from most conventional party leaders. Fox News has not only continued to serve as a welcome source of reliably favorable publicity for Trump during an otherwise tempestuous administration, but has also begun to function as an important instigator of presidential action. Aides have revealed that President Trump remains an avid Fox News viewer who regularly speaks privately with Fox prime-time anchor Sean Hannity; journalists have noted the existence of a repeated correspondence between Fox News segments and Trump’s subsequent tweets or comments on the same topic; and a number of conservative media figures have jumped directly from perches at cable news to top positions in the executive branch during the first two years of the Trump presidency—following in the footsteps of the president himself.

More than any other single person, Trump personifies the substantial influence of the conservative media universe within the contemporary Republican Party. But the emergence of prominent media outlets on the right presenting themselves as necessary alternatives to a biased mainstream press significantly predated Trump’s rise. Long before Fox News Channel and Breitbart, conservative talk radio generated calls to

Congress, Republican politicians ran against the mainstream media, and media figures helped transform the party. Conservative candidates have also long grappled with the challenge of attracting electoral support for an ideological movement primarily dedicated to the perennially unpopular objective of limiting or rolling back major government programs and social benefits, with Trump-style “populism” representing merely the latest strategy for combating liberal accusations that the American right is primarily dedicated to the promotion of wealthy and corporate interests at the expense of average citizens. Both the role of ideological media as key actors in party affairs and the limited appeal of party leaders’ favored domestic policy agenda—even among the party’s own voters—are unique to Republicans, with no true parallel among the Democratic opposition.

Today’s multimedia conservative infrastructure reflects the conscious efforts of activists to mobilize shared values to move the country rightward and to counteract a mainstream media perceived as hostile to their beliefs. Like the officeholders and candidates of their party, most Republicans in the wider electorate identify themselves as political conservatives and hold a common set of general views about the proper role of government and direction of society. But Republicanism at the mass level is less motivated than its elite counterpart by commitment to a coherent policy agenda and is habitually frustrated by the continued resilience—and, in some cases, growing prevalence—of liberal ideas and social trends. Conservative media figures can thus win and maintain a large popular audience not only by attacking other media sources, Democratic politicians, and “the left” more generally, but also by accusing Republican politicians of ineffectiveness in opposing, if not outright complicity in, the enduring nemesis of liberalism.

The rising power of the conservative media thus represents a mixed blessing from the perspective of Republican politicians and traditional conservative elites. Fox News, talk radio, and right-wing internet sites allow Republicans to communicate with their party's popular base and help to mobilize conservative activists and voters against the Democratic opposition. But the distinctive popular conservative culture that these media outlets both reinforce and promote is also fertile ground for repeated challenges to the party's existing leadership by self-styled political outsiders—including, most notably, Donald Trump—that are rewarded for their antipathy to liberalism and the “establishment” despite frequent difficulties in achieving broad appeal among the American public or demonstrating skill in governing.

The Distinctive Characteristics of American Conservatism

The modern conservative movement in the United States emerged in the 1950s as a response to the national expansion of government capacities and responsibilities during the New Deal era. From the movement's earliest days, conservative politicians, interest groups, and intellectuals attacked the mainstream media for being part of a liberal ruling class that favored and protected the newly-enlarged domestic state. Conservative activists funded their own networks of print and broadcast media as part of their larger efforts to gain organizational control of the Republican Party and to build a broader social movement. They rooted their appeals in the popular principles of social traditionalism, limited government, and American national strength, largely uniting the mass constituencies associated with each set of concerns. The movement rapidly ascended within the Republican Party between the 1960s and the 1980s, with media figures such as William F. Buckley Jr. playing important roles in connecting partisan activists and politicians with the conservative electoral base.

In *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), we trace the rise of the conservative movement in Republican politics and the key contribution that conservative media has made to the resurgence of the American right. We argue that the Republican Party is uniquely aligned with a symbolic ideological movement premised on a fundamental political conflict between left and right, whereas the Democratic Party is best described as a coalition of diverse social groups with distinct and practical policy interests. As a consequence, only the Republicans provided an opportunity for the rise of a consciously ideological media to unite their voters, define their shared concerns, and advance their agenda. The conservative media ecosystem has further reinforced the existing differences between the parties, becoming a cause as well as a consequence of Republicans' ideological self-definition, symbolic predispositions, and aggressive political style.

Conservative media thus represents a key component of the broader cultural character of the Republican Party, reflecting the historical influence of the modern conservative movement in the United States. This movement has a number of important characteristics that have remained fairly consistent throughout its history and are not equally prevalent on the American left. Among them:

1. Conservatives, both at the elite and mass level, view themselves consciously as members of a single political cause and principled tradition that extends over time and across specific policy issue domains.

2. Conservatives regard the Republican Party as their natural political home and conservatism as the sole proper doctrine of the party. But conservatism and Republicanism are not equivalent in practice; Republican politicians are often judged by

critics within the movement as having unacceptably betrayed conservative principles, fueling recurrent efforts to “purify” the party.

3. American conservatism is fundamentally oppositional in nature, responding to and defining itself in relation to a “liberal establishment” that it views as having captured many of the nation’s most important social institutions, including government bureaucracies, the educational system, and the mainstream news media. Much of the organizational energy of the conservative movement has been devoted to discrediting these institutions in the eyes of the American public while building a parallel network of conservative alternatives. The perception of a formidable and entrenched liberalism accounts for the rhetoric of conservative leaders and media figures, who frequently portray themselves, their followers, and their ideas as besieged by hostile forces perpetually advancing in power. Preoccupation with a menacing Left is therefore a perennial characteristic of conservative rhetoric in America even during periods of Republican electoral ascendance.

Conservative media content draws upon these long-standing attributes, adapting them to the specific issues, leaders, and events of the moment. Writers and speakers on the right routinely use ideological terms and concepts to evaluate political developments, bestowing a rhetorical seal of approval on individuals and ideas deemed faithful to the tradition of American conservatism and its patron saint Ronald Reagan. But much of their time is spent on the offensive, repeatedly expressing outrage at conservatism’s many perceived apostates and opponents—from insufficiently faithful Republican Party leaders to liberals both in and out of government. The conservative media’s persistently negative tone and penchant for sharp attacks on a familiar series of targets are in part an effective strategy for holding and mobilizing a loyal audience,

reflecting the power of anger as a motivating force in politics. But this approach also has the advantage of activating the deep well of symbolic conservatism in the American electorate, uniting and rallying citizens who identify as conservatives against a common set of ideological enemies.

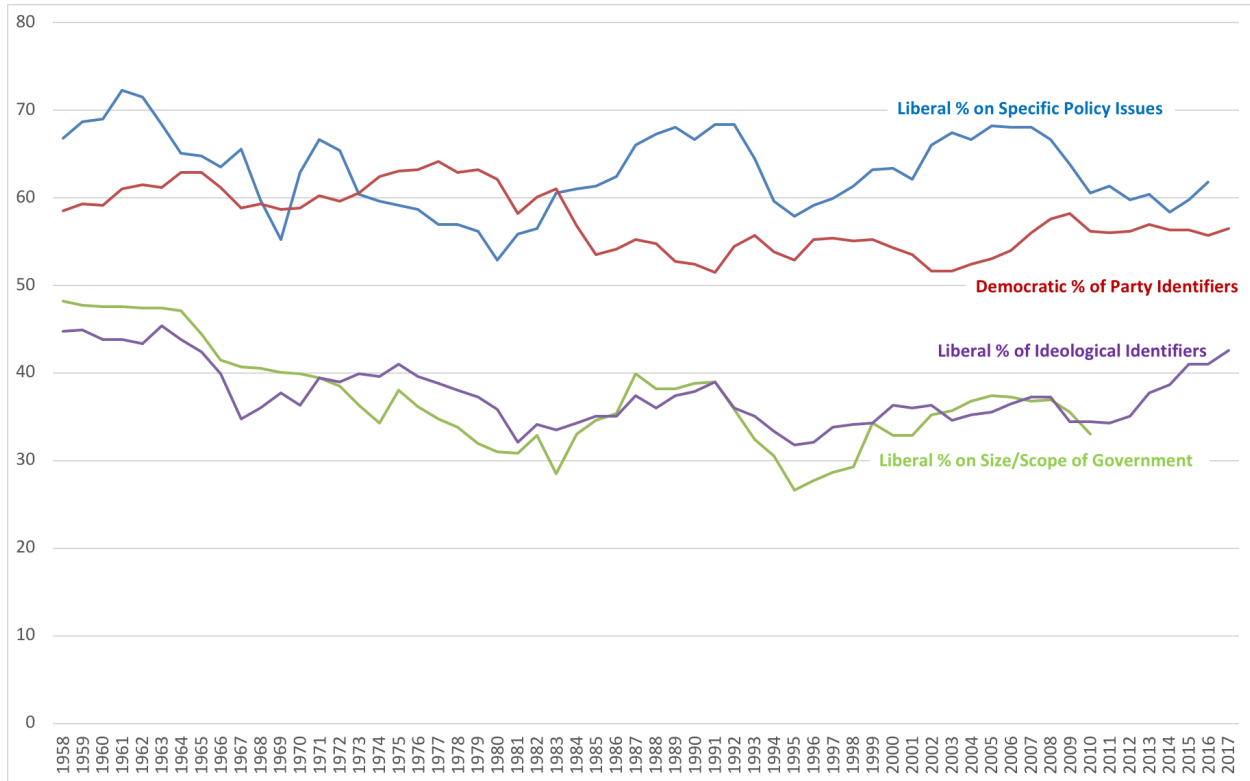
The Nature of Conservative Ideology in the Mass Public

The conservative movement's strategy and success in building an alternative network of ideological media has required accommodating the perennially ambivalent structure of public opinion in the United States. The American electorate has consistently leaned to the left in its specific policy preferences, even during periods when the Republican Party has achieved considerable electoral success at the national level. Yet citizens have collectively held more conservative attitudes on the general scope of government and the relative merits of liberal and conservative ideology. Conservatism as a brand name, or as a collection of general principles and values, is consistently more popular than conservatism as a package of detailed policy positions.

Figure 1 illustrates the enduring gap between the public's operationally liberal policy views (and preference for the Democratic Party over the Republican Party) on one hand and its conservative symbolic commitments on the other. It displays the average percentage of respondents giving liberal answers on questions about public policy issues out of all those giving liberal or conservative answers (the blue line), the percentage identifying as Democrats out of those identifying with one of the two major parties (the red line), the percentage identifying as liberals out of all those identifying with an ideological group (the purple line), and the percentage giving a liberal answer on broader questions about the size and scope of government out of those giving a liberal or conservative answer (the green line). All measures are coded such that higher

scores indicate greater relative liberalism; the value of 50% denotes an equal number of liberal and conservative responses.

Figure 1: Party, Policy, and Ideology in the American Public, 1958–2017



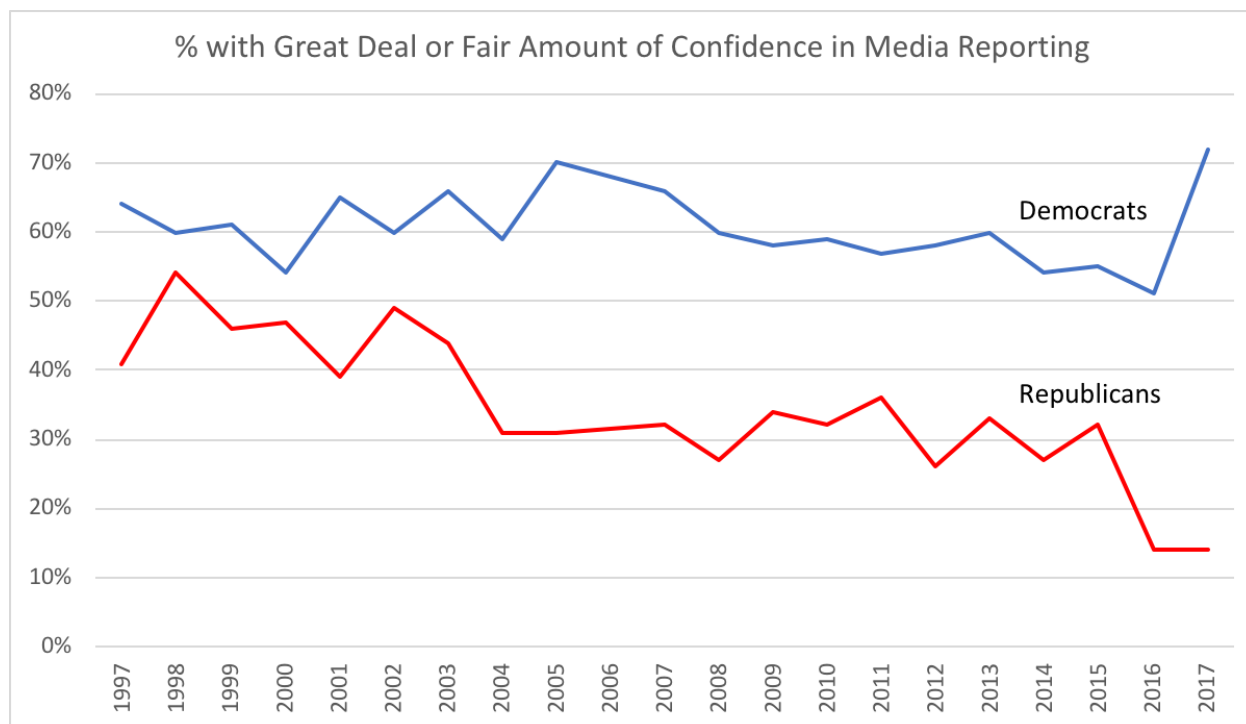
Source: James Stimson data collection (stimson.web.unc.edu), updated with Gallup polls.

The results show that the public has long been relatively liberal on specific policy issues and relatively conservative on ideological self-identification and general attitudes toward government. In order to court greater popular support, conservative politicians seek to shift the terms of partisan debate away from specific policy proposals and toward larger ideological and symbolic predispositions on which they enjoy a corresponding numerical advantage in the American electorate (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). They emphasize the concepts and themes of limited government,

individualism, patriotism, nationalism, moral traditionalism, and conservatism as a cause in itself—along with stoking Americans’ antipathy toward socialism, communism, and “the Left.” Note that all of the indicators follow a thermostatic pattern: they tend to move against the party in power, with conservative attitudes gaining support during Democratic administrations (as national policy shifts leftward) and losing it during periods of Republican rule—including the Trump presidency.

Conservative elites have long perceived the mainstream media, including print and broadcast media outlets, as hostile to their viewpoint, but it took considerable time to communicate these suspicions to conservative citizens and to gain their agreement. Reporters have long been disproportionately liberal in self-identification compared to the general public, but Republicans in the electorate did not always distrust them at dramatically higher rates than Democrats. Aversion to the (non-conservative) media has increased significantly among Republican citizens over the past 15 years, producing a substantial gap between the parties (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Confidence in the Media by Party, 1997–2017



Source: Gallup polls, gallup.com.

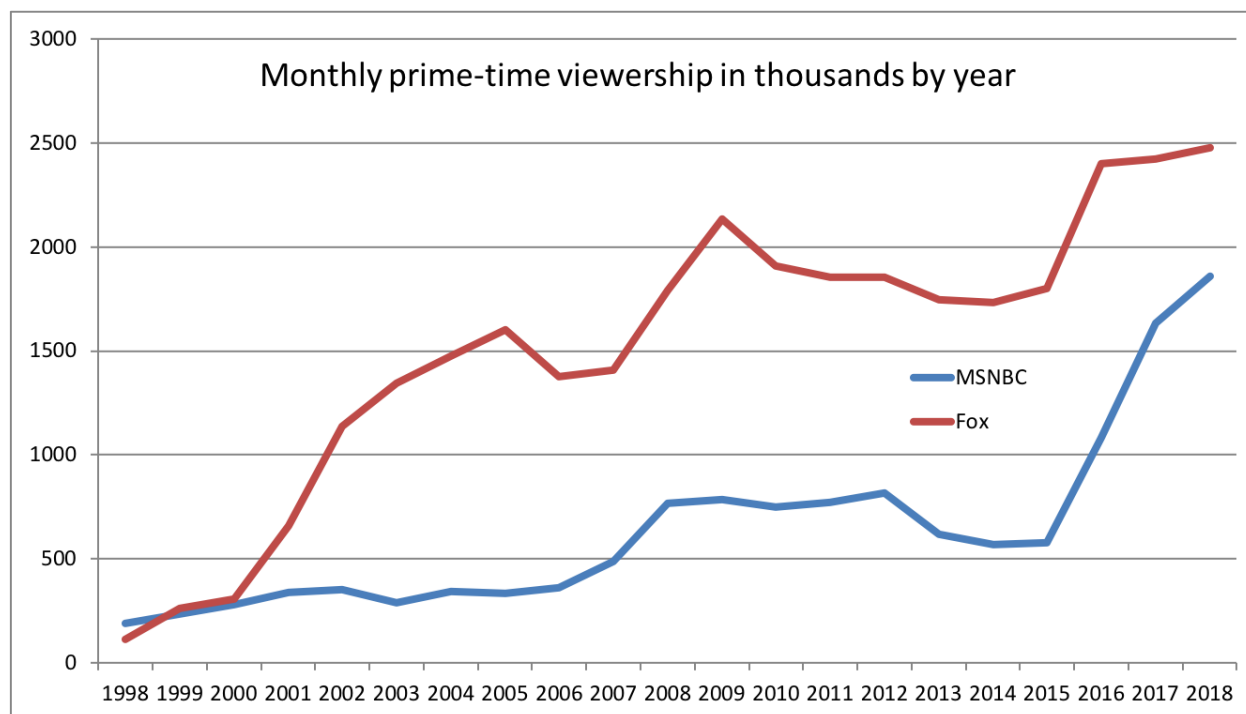
From the beginning, conservative media groups adopted a strategy of criticizing mainstream sources as tainted by liberalism and thus untrustworthy, positioning themselves as the sole source of legitimate information and promoting conservatism as a salient political identity. Conservatives created organizations to track liberal bias in the media and repeatedly complained of slanted coverage during campaigns. They organized themselves via ideologically-oriented media attached to conservative organizations as early as the 1950s, both in highbrow print publications and lowbrow radio broadcasts. The strategy was self-reinforcing, as right-leaning citizens came to rely more on conservative media and become less trusting of other news sources.

Conservative organizations' emphasis on ideology rather than partisanship as the

primary divide in American politics similarly represented a strategic calculation, since the number of self-identified conservative Democrats consistently outnumbered liberal Republicans in the national electorate and were particularly concentrated in the South—a key swing region in electoral politics after the mid-1960s.

Although conservatives have maintained an advantage in talk radio from the 1950s to the present and long sought a television channel that similarly promulgated their views, they lacked a large broadcast infrastructure until the rise of Rush Limbaugh and his imitators in the 1990s and the subsequent founding of the Fox News Channel network. As Figure 3 reveals, Fox and MSNBC both attracted low ratings during their early years in the late 1990s, when MSNBC offered a mix of liberal and conservative commentators and Fox was far less stridently conservative than it is today. In the wake of George W. Bush's election, and especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Fox became a nationalistic conservative outlet with a primetime lineup of commentary from the right. As a result, it gained a much larger audience, eventually surpassing CNN to become the most popular news channel on cable. Fox still attracts a more limited viewership than local television news or network news—but it effectively reaches the Republican base, with some activists watching Fox for hours per week.

Figure 3: Viewership of MSNBC and Fox News Channel, 1998–2018



Source: Nielson data from the Pew Research Center, updated using Ad Week news stories.

Studies taking advantage of plausibly exogenous variation in Fox News viewership based on its early roll-out or its arbitrary early channel position estimate that exposure to Fox exerted large positive effects on voting for Republican candidates (see Martin and Yurukoglu 2017) and produced more conservative voting records among congressional representatives (Clinton and Enamorado 2014). Although studies of MSNBC do not show these same aggregate effects, experiments that force subjects to watch the channel do produce some changes in political attitudes (Levendusky 2013), suggesting that the recent Trump-driven surge in MSNBC viewership (see Figure 3) may eventually influence public opinion in the opposite direction.

Like previous conservative media sources, Fox News combines its ideological advocacy with repeated denunciations of other journalistic sources, persuading its

audience that the coverage of rival organizations such as CNN, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the major broadcast networks is rife with liberal propaganda and intentionally slanted against conservatives. Fox News segments describing the failures or scandals of Democratic politicians are invariably accompanied by claims that the stories are being systematically distorted or ignored by a mainstream media universe that intentionally skews the news to advance its own political goals. Notably, the rise in Fox News viewership between 2002 and the present (as denoted by Figure 3) coincides with the decay in Republican citizens' confidence in the news media over the same period (as depicted in Figure 2).

In the early days of "netroots" political organizing associated with DailyKos, some commentators suggested that the political left might build an advantage on the internet that would counteract the conservative edge in broadcast media. Although many left-of-center digital outlets have maintained significant audiences (with the most successful, HuffPost, moving toward entertainment journalism), conservative media has increased its online presence. Long-running outlets like drudgereport.com, wsj.com, wnd.com and nypost.com have been joined in more recent years by breitbart.com, dailycaller.com, conservativetribune.com, and westernjournal.com. There are also more conspiratorial popular websites like zerohedge.com and thegatewaypundit.com, which have been associated with spreading pro-Trump fake news stories during the 2016 campaign. An "alt-right" universe of organizations and citizens, concentrated in online social networks, has further shifted Republican-aligned activism toward racial conservatism and hostility toward ethnic and religious minorities.

The rise of the conservative media universe over the past few decades does not appear to have exerted a major persuasive effect on the American public as a whole. But messages from conservative media sources have worked to activate the existing

symbolic predispositions of their audience and, by discrediting alternative sources of information, insulated them from countervailing forms of influence. Just as Republican politicians seek votes, conservative media figures seek viewers, listeners, and readers—encouraging them, too, to emphasize broad symbolic themes that resonate with large sectors of the public rather than focusing on conservative policy details that are not always popular even with their own audiences.

The content of conservative media is dominated by broad social and cultural appeals (such as support for the military and law enforcement, defense of religious faith and traditional “family values” against perceived societal threats, and attacks on personifications of liberalism such as journalists, academics, and feminists) rather than the promotion of specific conservative economic and domestic policy initiatives such as Medicare reform or corporate tax cuts. Fox was an innovator not only in its conservative viewpoint, but also in its sensationalism—with striking graphics, banner breaking news headlines, and over-the-top conspiratorial displays. Conservative media coverage also commonly focuses on a small number of topics that are the subject of repeated invocation and discussion: Barack Obama’s supposed “apology tour” abroad; the IRS’s alleged mistreatment of conservative political groups; Hillary Clinton’s private email server and handling of the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

Conservative talk radio and television hosts (including Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham, who currently appear on both platforms) advance the view that conservatives are perpetually on the edge of losing an existential fight with the Left—even during periods of unified Republican control of the federal government. Each public controversy that attracts their attention, many of which are not even policy issues as traditionally defined, is framed as central to a larger ideological battle between conservatives attempting to preserve traditional American ways and liberals bent on

remaking the nation into something new and unfamiliar. According to this perspective, liberal leaders' claims of sympathy with the disadvantaged are a smokescreen for making them indefinitely dependent on government benefits provided by the Democratic Party. But conservative media authorities also reserve some of their anger for a Republican "establishment" whom they accuse of kowtowing to Washington insiders and mainstream media outlets, and they understand that major elements of the elite-level Republican policy agenda do not inspire enthusiastic support among their mass audience. As a result, a complicated and sometimes acrimonious relationship exists between the newly-empowered faction of conservative radio, television, and internet personalities and the more traditional conservative leadership class in government, think tanks, opinion journals, and the business world.

New Conservative Media and Traditional Conservative Elites

The development of conservative media and its content reacts to the liberal record of policymaking. The size and scope of government tend to grow over time, with more expansionary than contractionary laws passed and more programs added than eliminated (Grossmann 2014); social changes are also slowly embraced, with attitudes toward minority groups and non-traditional lifestyles becoming more positive since the 1990s (see Hopkins 2018). From a conservative perspective, both government policy and broader cultural trends thus drift in a mostly liberal direction even under ostensibly conservative national leadership. These trends have contributed to American conservatives' sense of being constantly under siege and having their values undermined by a set of hegemonic liberal institutions. It also encourages a sensibility that views each new proposal for government action, especially by a Democratic president, as marking the tipping point in a permanent slide toward socialism or moral

decadence. For example, critics on the right characterized the Affordable Care Act as not simply a wasteful or unnecessary government program but as an existential threat to the capitalist economy, our uniquely limited government, and the American way of life.

The liberal direction of policymaking puts conservative elites in a bind. The primary policy objective of conservative politicians and other movement leaders is the rollback of public-sector redistributive and regulatory activities, especially at the federal level. The chief political impediment to this goal is the durable popularity of most existing major domestic programs and a persistent demand from the public for the government to respond to additional social problems as they emerge. Conservative elites address this issue primarily by portraying politics as a broader battle between Left and Right over the scope of government, the direction of society, and American strength in the world. Because social traditionalism is more popular than libertarianism, they also tend to raise a series of social and racial concerns more in campaigns and public discourse than in congressional policymaking. Over the course of a public debate over policy, they are also able to activate symbolic values to reduce the appeal of (even largely economic) Democratic policy proposals by linking them to the broader and less popular concepts of socialism, degeneration, and internationalism.

As a result, most political elites do not realize how popular specific liberal policy positions tend to be. The conservative movement has succeeded in shaping both Republican and Democratic politicians' sense of the electorate, making public opinion appear far more conservative than it actually is on specific issues (Broockman and Skovron 2018). Because citizens' voting choices are often based on symbolic predispositions rather than policy positions, this systematic misperception has not overwhelmingly disadvantaged Republican candidates. But it has been important to

maintaining politicians' support for a (usually unpopular) Republican policy agenda in Washington and for reducing support for initially popular Democratic proposals.

For example, Republican members of Congress who had been repeatedly elected for six years on the platform of "repealing and replacing" the Affordable Care Act found, perhaps to their surprise, that the politics of health care reform shifted abruptly once the prospect of repeal became legislatively realistic upon the inauguration of a Republican president in 2017. Public attention immediately focused on the rise in health care premiums and reduction of coverage that repealing the ACA would produce, and Republican leaders were unable to formulate an alternative plan that would prevent these politically treacherous consequences while remaining true to their own small-government principles. The partywide enthusiasm for ACA rollback on the campaign trail faded in office as Republican politicians grappled, many for the first time, with the policy and political implications of reform. The Republican leadership's proposed replacement bill received some of the lowest public approval ratings of any recent major legislation, and repeal efforts ultimately fell short in the Senate due to the defection of a handful of party moderates. Yet such failures to deliver on campaign promises of large-scale conservative policy achievements merely provide additional ammunition to conservative critics in the news media who charge Republican politicians with insufficient devotion to ideological principles.

Conservative popular media is the key communication channel for Republican elites to transform everyday policy debates and political controversies into what their supporters in the mass public view as life or death battles over the direction of America. But in the process, politicians and traditional movement leaders have empowered a new set of powerful actors who are often followed more readily and trusted more by the Republican base. Because the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity are never

forced to make the inevitable compromises of governing that face Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell, they can maintain a perfectionist stance and critique the performance of Republican politicians from the comfort of their broadcast studios.

Tensions between the purist/wordsmithing and pragmatic/governing strains of the conservative movement are not new. Conservative elites began using media outlets like *National Review* to build consensus among one another and spread their messages as early as the 1950s. But from the beginning, they faced competition for reaching their base from conspiratorial talk radio hosts and the John Birch Society, which distributed its own propaganda. The vilification of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in the 2000s similarly built on a long history from McCarthyism in the 1950s to the *American Spectator's* Clinton conspiracy peddling in the 1990s.

But the more recent generations of conservative media outlets have succeeded in amassing considerable and arguably unprecedented influence over the internal politics of the Republican Party. Prominent media personalities have steadily gained power within the extended Republican network at the expense of elected officials and legislative leaders, forming an alternative set of party elites with their own priorities and interests. Republican politicians now view conservative media as a key conduit to their party “base” and are visibly fearful of receiving negative coverage, even if satisfying the demands of the conservative media complicates their attempts to win general elections or pursue pragmatic policy achievements once in office.

Some conservative commentators and elected officials, especially those who became associated with the “Never Trump” movement during the 2016 Republican presidential primaries, have come to fear that Republican politicians follow the lead of conservative media figures rather than using them as a channel to communicate their messages. Because debates on complex economic matters such as corporate tax policy

draw lower audience ratings than those on white-hot “culture war” topics like illegal immigration, there is also concern that conservative media is moving the Republican agenda toward racially-tinged social conservatism and away from economic concerns. “Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us,” joked former George W. Bush speechwriter and anti-Trump Republican reformer David Frum, “and now we’re discovering we work for Fox.”

But the hard-edged populist style of Fox News, talk radio, and websites like Breitbart and the Daily Caller also fills a void left by the limited mass appeal of the *laissez-faire* economic program favored by traditional conservative elites and by the lack of a national Republican model of governing success in the nearly 30 years since Ronald Reagan departed the presidency. It is only natural to expect major figures in the conservative media world to be dissatisfied with a suggested division of labor in which they serve as mere cheerleaders for Republican politicians, deemed useful by party leaders for revving up Republican voters to defeat the Democratic opposition at election time. Conservative media figures demonstrated a growing willingness to assert independent power within the GOP after the electoral defeats of 2006 and 2008, helping to fuel the internal rebellions of the Obama years. Perhaps inevitably, several have decided to make the leap themselves into public office, further reinforcing the bonds between the governing and broadcasting wings of the Republican Party.

Conservative Culture and the Rise of Donald Trump

By the 21st century, the boundary between conservative media and Republican politics had visibly blurred. At least seven former talk radio hosts have served in Congress (including Vice President Mike Pence) and ten members became hosts after leaving Congress. Talk radio and television personalities played important roles in the

Tea Party movement (including headlining protests), insurgent congressional primary challenges, and Republican fundraising. They help defeat legislation, influence the outcomes of party leadership elections, and vet presidential nominees.

Yet even at the height of the Tea Party's influence, few observers expected the next Republican president to himself be a creature of the conservative media who lacked any previous experience in elective politics. Donald Trump's rise to the top of the Republican Party—over the tacit or active opposition of many veteran officeholders, interest group leaders, and fundraisers—demonstrates the extent to which power has shifted away from conventional party officials and toward media figures. But his success also reveals the ways in which contemporary conservatism in the mass public, as shaped and promoted by popular media outlets on the right, differs from the intellectual strain of the movement that has traditionally claimed sole authority over the definition and enforcement of conservative doctrine.

From the perspective of conservative elites in Washington, Trump was a deeply imperfect conservative—if he could be called a conservative at all. Trump had previously been a registered Democrat and had contributed to the campaign funds of Democratic politicians, including his eventual opponent Hillary Clinton. He had previously voiced support for legalized abortion and had criticized the Iraq War. And while most other Republicans dodged Democratic attacks on their economic positions by sounding the general rhetorical themes of limited government and free enterprise, Trump simply adopted—albeit in vague terms—the language of operational liberalism, promising to protect middle-class entitlements and enact a “beautiful” health care plan that would “cover everybody.”

Trump was able to shrug off attacks on his ideological credentials in the Republican primaries because of his years of positive coverage on Fox News and other

leading conservative outlets. He had skillfully established himself as one of the nation's most outspoken critics of Barack Obama just as Obama had become the primary nemesis of conservative activists. Most famously, Trump became the chief proponent of the "birther" conspiracy theory, arguing that Obama may not have been born in the United States and would therefore be ineligible for the presidency. In early 2011, he picked up on this conspiracy and orchestrated a sustained media campaign to challenge Obama to release his long-form birth certificate (which he did in April of that year). Even after the release, Trump continued to maintain that the certificate might be fake, that Obama was suspiciously foreign, and that he may have been born in Kenya. Although debunked repeatedly by mainstream journalists, the story gained substantial followers in the conservative media; even Republicans who did not agree with the birther theory associated Trump with strong criticism of Obama and his administration.

The reaction of Republican politicians to Trump's emergence as a prominent conservative voice foreshadowed their later confused responses to his presidential candidacy. Many tried to distance themselves from his specific accusations but feared angering the Republican base. Trump's brief flirtation with a presidential run in 2012 garnered enormous media coverage and instant poll results (likely because he had been in the spotlight for the birther issue), forcing other candidates to respond on his terms. Mitt Romney heartily accepted Trump's endorsement, even after otherwise trying to project a public image of maturity and sobriety. By the time Trump entered the presidential race in 2015 with a candidacy focused primarily on the issue of immigration, he was already associated with racial conservatism and anti-Obama stridency—allowing him to stand out in a large field of Republican candidates.

On the stump and the debate stage, Trump demonstrated a familiarity with the style and tropes of contemporary popular conservatism. He sounded less like a scripted

political candidate than a free-associative talk show host, adopting a discursive rhetorical style replete with extemporaneous asides, signature catchphrases (“build the wall,” “drain the swamp”), and derogatory nicknames for his opponents (“Little Marco,” “Crooked Hillary”). He ignored the details of policy, projecting the persona of a man who had achieved exceptional success in the business world, who had no connection with the recent failures and defeats of the Republican Party, and who—above all—was just as angry as his audience about what the liberals were doing to his beloved country.

Trump himself seems to recognize the critical role of the conservative media in his own political ascendance. In the White House, he remains a voracious media consumer—especially of television—and is demonstrably influenced by the day-to-day programming of Fox News Channel. He judges success based on how his administration is covered in the media, especially by conservative commentators. Despite persistent anticipation among the pundit class of an inevitable strategic shift to the ideological center or toward a less combative political style, a Trump “pivot” has never materialized (in the primaries, in the general election, or in his 15 months as president). Instead, he has maintained a focus on maintaining enthusiastic support among the Republican base, in part by going out of his way to insult or aggravate liberal critics and the mainstream media. Sean Hannity, the top-rated prime time host on Fox, regularly confers personally with Trump, according to White House aides, and was even named in April 2018 as a fellow client of Trump’s personal attorney Michael Cohen, after federal investigators served a warrant on Cohen’s offices.

Under Trump, other conservative media personalities have also increasingly made the jump to top positions in the federal government. The president’s chief economic and foreign policy advisors are both former cable news mainstays who were

selected for their roles based on their television performances. Steve Bannon, the president's former campaign and political strategist, amassed influence as the chairman of the conservative website Breitbart News and then briefly returned to it after being fired from the White House.

Trump's rhetorical departure from orthodox conservative doctrine on a few economic issues such as entitlements and trade during the 2016 campaign, when combined with his own previous support for Democratic candidates, prompted much of the mainstream media—as well as his critics within the Republican Party—to challenge his credentials as a conservative in good standing, and even to portray him as a “populist” whose politics transcended the traditional ideological spectrum entirely. After a year in office, however, it is clear that Trump's actual governing record is equally or more faithful to conservative doctrine as any modern president. What explains this discrepancy?

Trump grasped one of the central insights of popular conservative media in the 21st century: mass support for the Republican Party is based more on broad appeals to conservative symbols, and pugnacious antipathy toward liberals and liberalism, than it is on devotion to a laundry list of specific conservative domestic policies. The policy-making apparatus of the Trump administration has largely pursued a traditionally conservative issue agenda on taxes, health care, and other major domains, while its public communications have emphasized cultural appeals typical of conservative media content—from criticizing the civil rights protests of professional football players to accusing the mainstream press (“fake news”) of ideological bias and factual inaccuracy. Trump has amassed a decidedly mixed record of political success so far, but one major achievement of his presidency has been a consolidation of power within the Republican Party that would have been impossible without the support of the popular conservative

media universe. In the face of such support, most anti-Trump Republicans have either muted their opposition or, as in the case of Arizona senator Jeff Flake, announced their departure from office.

The Future of Conservative Media in the Republican Party

Conservatives have built an enormous alternative media apparatus to counter mainstream outlets, have convinced the Republican base that the mainstream media is biased and cannot be trusted, and have established connections between media figures and other conservatives within Republican Party organizations, in Congress, and in the presidency. The conservative media universe is now inseparable from the larger Republican Party network within which it lies, and Republican voters are often more responsive to its media than its elected leadership.

Conservatives are also building for the next generation. Outrage at “political correctness” on university campuses was an important theme of Rush Limbaugh’s early programming and received periodic attention on Fox News. Today, a set of online news outlets produces daily coverage of controversial statements by leftist professors and victimized campus conservatives. Outlets like Campus Reform and the Collegiate Network hire students to police their own campuses, providing training for future conservative media figures. Organizations like the Leadership Institute, American Majority, and Turning Point USA also prepare conservative young people for futures in the conservative media ecosystem. Millennial-generation personalities like Tomi Lahren have established themselves in online social and video networks, providing a bench for conservative media’s future.

The Trump presidency has certainly stimulated liberal organizing, including by boosting the audience for liberal media outlets. But it has not undermined the strength

of conservative media, despite losing the benefit of constant energized opposition to the Obama administration. Even with considerable turnover in its television personalities, Fox has remained the number one cable network. Conservative talk radio is likewise still unparalleled in listenership despite an aging set of celebrity hosts. As news consumption shifts to online social networks like Facebook, conservative outlets have prepared to succeed by producing viral content—and Republicans have proven quite likely to consume and share right-of-center news on social media.

Conservative media still addresses needs and takes advantages of opportunities in the Republican Party that are not as necessary or apparent in the Democratic Party. Democrats do not benefit from transforming everyday policy concerns into existential ideological battles. They do not need to counteract mainstream sources as biased and oppositional. Their diversity of constituencies and concerns makes organizing into discrete interest groups, media outlets, and protest movements more feasible than creating or maintaining a single ideologically-aligned movement.

The success of conservative media, however, has not been consistently beneficial to Republicans. They have a harder time adjusting to the limits of governance and achieving a realistic policy agenda, when outrage and intransigence are better rewarded by media figures. Traditional Republican leaders no longer control the party's nomination processes, enabling outsiders with more media cachet to gain success in primary elections. When their voters become incensed about a controversy or issue, even if it appears unwarranted, Republican politicians lack the power to change the conversation or deflect popular anger. And, perhaps most immediately, the growing power of the conservative media has led to the election of a president who is both politically controversial and unsteady in office. Many Democrats look upon the

conservative media with envy, hoping to reproduce its success on their own side, but they should be wary of the consequences.

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