# Bringing Far-Right Politics into the Mainstream

written by Matthew N. Lyons | February 7, 2025



A key element of Donald Trump's presidential career has been his symbiotic relationship with the organized U.S. far right. This relationship has been unprecedented for any U.S. president or major party presidential candidate, but it has also been complex and unstable and has evolved considerably over the past decade. Exploring Trump's changing relationship with far-right politics can help us understand and prepare for the looming catastrophe that will be Trump's second presidency.

By "far right" in a modern U.S. context, I mean those rightists who reject the legitimacy of the existing political system—as opposed to rightists who are system loyal. In ideological terms, the most important far-right currents over the past few decades have been white nationalists (who want to create an all-white nation by overthrowing or seceding from the United States), Christian theocrats (who want to replace the secular republic with a theocracy), and Patriot movement activists (who emphasize freedom from state intrusion and often reject governmental authority above the local or even individual level). Additionally the alt-right, or alternative right, first emerged around 2010 and by 2016 represented a distinctively online movement that synthesized white nationalism and a particularly virulent strain of misogyny.[1]

In 2016, Trump's relationship with the far right centered on the alt-right, whose online attacks on Trump's opponents—both Republican and Democrat—helped put him in the White House and were repaid by big boosts in visibility and recognition for the alt-right. Although many alt-rightists were enthusiastic about Trump's campaign, they saw him as someone who was useful to their cause, not as someone who shared their politics. In 2017, Trump's first year in office, many alt-rightists soured on what they saw as Trump's cooptation by the conservative establishment, and after the murderous Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville their movement itself collapsed from a combination of infighting, media deplatforming, and anti-fascist countermobilization.

In 2020, Trump's relationship with the far right centered more on the Patriot movement, which that year spearheaded a series of protests against COVID "lockdowns" and a wave of violent attacks against Black Lives Matter protesters. Patriot activists generally embraced President Trump more wholeheartedly than the alt-right ever did. Although largely rejecting federal government authority, and with a history of killing cops, as a rule they endorsed his efforts to expand the federal government's repressive apparatus, which they rationalized as defense of a populist upsurge against sinister elites. In return, Trump's fearmongering helped validate Patriot groups' conspiracism and base-building efforts.

After the 2020 presidential election, Trump's false claims of widespread voter fraud inspired the "Stop the Steal" campaign and the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, an insurgent attempt by Trump supporters to overturn the election results by force. These efforts led tens of millions of Americans to reject the validity of the voting process, which is supposed to be the foundation for the

whole U.S. system of government, and thus at least temporarily move towards far-right politics by abandoning loyalty to the established political order.

By 2024, the far right as an independent, active force was in a relative lull, partly because of the Biden administration's crackdown against January 6 attackers (including seditious conspiracy convictions against leaders of both the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys) and partly because of cooptation by Trump and the MAGA movement. While some white nationalists have kept their distance from electoral politics, others—specifically the Groypers led by Nick Fuentes—have positioned themselves as the right wing of the Republican Party. Meanwhile, the massive New Apostolic Reformation network—arguably the most powerful theocratic force in the United States today—has entrenched itself firmly in the MAGA coalition.[2]

In this context, the creative tension of past years between the independent far right and the mainstream right has, for now, largely been replaced by a new dynamic of bringing key elements of far-right politics into the Republican Party itself. The Republicans' embrace of election denialism has been pivotal to this shift. Many Republican leaders initially denounced the January 6 attack on the Capitol but later reversed themselves, and Republican leaders are now expected, if not required, to endorse claims that the 2020 election was stolen. Voter fraud claims have tended to spread, undermining the legitimacy of any national, state, or local election that doesn't go the way rightists want. Meanwhile, MAGA forces have continued the decades-old incremental process of taking supremacist attacks on immigrants, trans people, and other oppressed groups that were pioneered by far rightists—as well as conspiracy theories such as the white supremacist "Great Replacement"—and making them more and more acceptable and integral to mainstream politics.

Donald Trump's increasingly authoritarian tendencies also reflect the process of bringing far-right politics into the mainstream. Trump has a long history of admiring figures like Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin, but his dictatorial ambitions have gotten more blatant, as in his comment about being a dictator on day one in the White House and his frequent threats to use the state apparatus to punish political enemies. Having millions of people accept and applaud this outlook has helped legitimize authoritarianism in U.S. political culture. Rhetoric aside, in 2024 MAGA forces seized control of the Republican Party more tightly and systematically than ever before, remaking it in ways that break sharply with pluralistic traditions. They packedthe party's organizational leadership with Trump loyalists, scrapped the traditional program-writing process to impose a new party program by fiat, and subjected party staff members to loyalty tests, even at the cost of organizational capacity.

These changes didn't turn the Republican Party into an insurgent organization, but the party is now dominated by those who appear ready to set aside the established institutional framework for the sake of personal loyalty to a charismatic leader with dictatorial tendencies. At the same time, by refashioning the Republican Party in his own MAGA image, Trump has encouraged many far rightists to give him another chance, discouraging them from independent actions that might conflict with his political project and effectively corralling them once again into a kind of contingent system loyalty.

The U.S. political system has never been a democracy but, as many critics have warned, under Trump's second presidency it's going to get a lot more authoritarian fast. We can expect a range of moves to expand the federal government's repressive apparatus, from cracking down on political opponents to mobilizing the military to aid in mass deportations. Building on the conservative-dominated Supreme Court's 2024 decision awarding presidents broad legal immunity for "official acts," Trump will also try to grab more powers for the executive branch, further eroding the constitutional system of checks and balances. These moves will be aided by Republican control of both houses of Congress, the hundreds of judges Trump appointed during his first term, and four years of MAGA movement planning on how to circumvent legal roadblocks and how to reshape the

federal bureaucracy to do Trump's bidding. As authoritarian culture becomes entrenched, we can also expect increased repression at state and local levels, primarily in Republican-controlled areas but also in Democratic-led ones.

Bringing far-right politics into the mainstream means we can expect increased repression from non-state forces as well as from the state apparatus. Employers and school administrators may exercise tighter control, but vigilante groups may also boost their attacks on oppressed communities and the left, as they did during the George Floyd uprising in 2020 with Trump's blessing. Vigilante forces may also help the MAGA movement circumvent institutional checks on Trump's power. The January 6 attack broke the taboo against deploying masses of violent activists to harass, threaten, and disrupt the workings of government, and it's likely that MAGA forces will build on this precedent. At the same time, because some independent far rightists still regard Trump as too timid, they may undertake actions that clash with what the Trump administration is doing, but this allows Trump loyalists to frame the official plan as more reasonable and rational by comparison.

Counterintuitively, even Trump's increased support among people of color arguably reflects far-right influence to a degree. Various explanations have been offered for why Trump made substantial gains among Latinx, Asian, and Black voters in 2024, from economic grievances to internalized racism. A neglected factor may be that sections of the far right (outside of white nationalism) have been actively recruiting people of color for years. You can see this to a limited extent with groups such as the Proud Boys, and on a vastly larger scale with New Apostolic Reformation, which is a genuinely multiethnic and multiracial network and includes people of color (and women) in high leadership positions. NAR appeals to people of color, in part, through other supremacist themes such as transphobia and denial of reproductive rights, but also by welding distorted forms of anti-racism to their vision of God's kingdom on earth.[3] This ability to co-opt twisted versions of radical themes is a long tradition in far-right politics, from the "socialism of fools" that has scapegoated rich Jews for capitalism to claims that Muslims must be excluded because of their supposed homophobia.[4]

The far right's dynamic influence on the mainstream right isn't the only political interplay that's contributed to the rise of Trump's authoritarian nationalism. For several decades, the Democratic Party, too, has acted as enabler of the Republican Party's rightward shift. Since the late 1970s, Democrats have been complicit with Republicans in making neoliberalism the dominant form of capitalist rule, expanding the repressive state apparatus, and strengthening military interventionism—policies that in some ways laid the groundwork for Trumpism and in others fueled a right-wing populist backlash from which Trump has benefited. Over the past four years, the Biden administration has embraced slightly watered-down versions of Trumpist policies on China, trade, and border restrictions for asylum seekers.[5] Over the past year, Democrats have also been complicit in vilifying and suppressing protests against the U.S.–backed Israeli genocide in Gaza—a suppression campaign that's likely to intensify sharply under Trump. And in the 2024 presidential race, Kamala Harris tried to defeat Donald Trump in large part by wooing Republican support, while refusing to meaningfully address the profound economic and social problems and inequities that have helped fuel populist anger, a strategy that failed spectacularly.[6]

Given the Democratic Party's role in helping to fuel Trump's rise—and more fundamentally its structural role as defender of ruling-class interests—relying on the Democrats to lead opposition to Trump would be disastrous. The situation we face going into the second Trump presidency is grim, but it's far from hopeless. MAGA forces will face institutional barriers, internal conflicts (for example between military interventionists and anti-interventionists), the incompetence of many Trump appointees, and other challenges as they try to carry out Trump's program. The MAGA movement embodies not just a drive to defend privilege and hierarchy but also people's genuine rage at being beaten down and disempowered, and a basic challenge for the Left is to speak to that rage in ways

that are liberatory rather than supremacist. Yet left to their own devices, many Democratic leaders are likely to concede more ground—or at most try to rally people around a hollow and dysfunctional "democracy." The best hope for fighting the Trump catastrophe and laying the basis for positive social change is to build independent, grassroots-based oppositional forces that offer radical possibilities, not defensive holding actions.

*Portions of this essay are adapted from the blog post, "Notes on Trump/MAGA 2024,"* Three Way Fight*, October 27, 2024.*

Notes

1. Matthew N. Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right's Challenge to State and Empire* (Oakland: PM Press, and Montreal: Kersplebedeb Publishing, 2018).

2. Shane Burley, "Why the Jan. 6 Convictions Set Dangerous New Legal Precedents," *Waging Nonviolence*, June 6, 2023; Amanda Moore, "I Watched Groypers Descend on Detroit—Where They Were No Longer Pariahs among Mainstream Republicans," *The Intercept*, July 18, 2024; Fred Clarkson, "Still Here: The Christian Right in the 2020 Election," Political Research Associates, Jan. 13, 2021.

3. Gloria Oladipo, "Why Trump's Racism Isn't an Issue—Or Enough of One—For Some Voters of Color," *The Guardian*, Nov. 21, 2024; Cloee Cooper and Daryle Lamont Jenkins, "Culture and Belonging in the USA: Multiracial Organizing on the Contemporary Far Right," Political Research Associates, Sept. 3, 2019; Matthew N. Lyons, "'Create a Fire in You to Fight Injustice': How Some Christian Theocrats Co-opt Liberatory Themes," Three Way Fight, Sept. 26, 2021.

4.Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists*, 121.

5. Justin H. Vassallo, "How the Democrats Traded the New Deal for Neoliberalism," *Jacobin*, July 1, 2022; Jennifer Conrad, "A Year In, Biden's China Policy Looks a Lot Like Trump's," *Wired*, December 30, 2021; "Biden's 'America First' trade policy," East Asia Forum, Nov. 1, 2021; "Human Rights First Decries Biden Administration's Border Proclamation," Human Rights First, June 4, 2024.

6. "Gaza, the Democrats, and How to Fix Our Wretched Politics," *Hammer & Hope*, Summer 2024; Julianne McShane, "The Harris Campaign Is Now Actively Courting Republicans," *Mother Jones*, Aug. 4, 2024.