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Illiberalism in American Political Culture Today

After Charlottesville

A wave of revulsion and anti-racist organizing followed the violent "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, during which a counterdemonstrator was murdered by an Alt-Rightist participant. So potent was the response to the rally that many observers concluded the Alt-Right and other white supremacist movements were all but dead. *Newsweek* asked, "Is the Alt-Right Dying?" *The Guardian* concluded, "The Alt-Right is in decline." Antifascist organizers were particularly pleased by and took credit for the shrinkage of the movement's web presence. The leftist news organization Truthout declared, "In the wake of Charlottesville, they [Alt-Right sites] were forced off social media, web hosting, podcast platforms and just about every outreach tool available, leaving them only to the back alleys of the internet." The Daily Stormer, the most extreme and offensive Alt-Right outlet, was denied access by responsible service providers and as a result "is now isolated and marginalized" opined the *Anti-Racist News*.

But unfortunately, reports of the death of the Alt-Right are greatly exaggerated. In terms of the crucial measure of web audience size, the movement, if defined narrowly, has indeed shrunk somewhat since its supposed Waterloo at Charlottesville. But the Alt-Right has a significant and steady audience. And adding other racist, anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, and otherwise illiberal movements to the picture reveals an audience of many millions.

Using data from the digital analytics firm SimilarWeb for the period of January to November 2019, I calculated traffic to ten prominent Alt-Right sites that I identified in an earlier study. I also had data on traffic to those sites for the period October 2015 to February 2018. With these data, I was able to analyze the impact that the events in Charlottesville in August 2017 had on the audience of the Alt-Right.

Looking at only the ten Alt-Right sites I identified in my earlier research, from October 2015 to July 2017 the average number of visits per month to all ten sites combined rose steadily from about 1.6 million to 4.5 million visits. For the month of August 2019—that is, two years after the Charlottesville tragedy—these Alt-Right sites received about 3.2 million visits. Thus, visits to these sites were down by about 29 percent.

Consider the Alt-Right site with the most visitors, the ferociously radical Daily Stormer. In the month before Charlottesville, the site received about 1.9 million visits. Immediately after that debacle, a deplatforming campaign hit the Daily Stormer hard, depriving it of access to major web services. The site received only about 13,000 visits in November 2017, in effect a nearly 100 percent decline. But in August 2019 the Daily Stormer was back to about 1.4 million visits per month on average, which is a decline of about 25 percent.

Thus, visits to the original ten Alt-Right sites are down since the period immediately before Charlottesville but have been holding steady at about 3 million visits on monthly average for the period January to November 2019. So by this measure, the movement is down somewhat from its heyday but seems to have found a significant and stable audience. The Alt-Right, even by this narrow standard, is not dead.

Why should the continued presence of the Alt-Right be a matter of concern? The reason has nothing to do with the movement's support of Donald Trump, protectionism, nationalism, immigration restriction, or any other issue debatable within the wide spectrum of traditional American politics. The Alt-Right is objectionable because it is an illiberal, anti-

democratic movement. The essential elements of its ideology are racialism and white supremacy; secession, disunion, and anti-Americanism; a rejection of liberal democratic principles; and a reliance on vituperative, intolerant rhetoric. All expressions of such radical illiberalism are worrisome insofar as they undermine the nation's broad consensus that favors a free and open society. Therefore the real questions are, how large is the Alt-Right and how expansive is the total presence of all illiberal ideologies on the web?

Using data from SimilarWeb along with ideological classifications of political outlets by the nonprofit watchdog group Media Bias/Fact Check and other sources, I calculated visits to the websites of 215 rightist illiberal political outlets. The methods by which I identified these sites are described in detail in chapter 3. I included the ten original Alt-Right sites and others that I identified later, for a total of thirty-two Alt-Right sites. The analysis also included the websites of traditional hate movements; sites that disseminate conspiracy theories and fake news; Alt-Lite sites that are superficially less radical than the Alt-Right; and a range of reactionary movements such as the Manosphere, the Dark Enlightenment, the Alt-South, and hyperorthodox religious groups. To measure the web footprint of these right-wing illiberal sites compared to other, more mainstream tendencies, I also collected data on sites of all political orientations, from the extremist or Illiberal Left through to the traditional Right. I ended up with data on a total of 1,952 sites for the period January 2019 to November 2019. Unless otherwise noted, all figures used below refer to this time period.

All of the 215 sites that are the most radically right wing—identified here as Hard-Core Right Illiberal—had a monthly average of about 186 million visits. This is nearly one-third the size of the monthly average traffic to sites of the mainstream Right, which received about 604 million visits. This is an impressively sized audience, especially given the extreme radicalism of these Hard-Core Right Illiberal sites.

Moreover, not only is explicit, radical illiberalism a concern, but so too are its less overtly anti-democratic characteristics such as nasty, alienating rhetoric; hyperpartisanship; race baiting; highly biased reporting; treatment of adversaries as enemies; and acidic scorn of democratic institutions. Has this illiberal style of discussion penetrated into mainstream political culture?

Documenting the audience for a style of political discussion is dif-

ficult, but there is relevant evidence. Breitbart News, once described by its former editor Steve Bannon as "the platform of the alt-right,"[1] has one of the largest audiences of any political web magazine, with about 51 million visits and 5.5 million unique visitors on monthly average. (If one person visits a site five times in a month, that represents five visits and one unique visitor.) Ann Coulter, Michelle Malkin, and Pat Buchanan are long-time practitioners of the illiberal style. All of them have their syndicated columns appearing in the Alt-Right outlet VDARE and Malkin and Buchanan also appear in American Renaissance. The traffic to their websites is not large, but they reach many millions of people through their columns, best-selling books, and television appearances. Tucker Carlson's website also receives relatively few visits, but he reaches an audience of millions through his Fox News program. Carlson's style is clearly illiberal. Andrew Anglin, editor of the Daily Stormer, described Carlson's Fox News show as "basically Daily Stormer: The Show," referred to Carlson as "literally our greatest ally," and has featured Carlson in 265 stories on the site.[2] And the greatest exponent of illiberal style, Donald Trump, became president and continues to be a major influence in American politics.

In short, the Alt-Right and related illiberal ideologies remain, in both substance and style, a major presence in American political culture. Charlottesville and the deplatforming efforts that immediately followed did not have the impact that was expected. The long march of extremism through American political culture and on to an authoritarian future continues.

After Trump

The above analysis and the data they are based on were conducted and collected before the presidential election of 2020. At that point there was optimism that Donald Trump would be overwhelmingly defeated, that Democrats would achieve unified government with control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, and that a political realignment away from the illiberalism lite of Trump would begin.

Democrats did achieve a unified government, but with only the absolutely slimmest of margins in the Senate, a reduced majority in the House, and a sound but not landslide win for Joe Biden. We have a unified government but not political realignment. In fact, by some criteria the grip of illiberalism on American political culture looks stronger than ever. The stunning spectacle of angry mobs of Trump supporters, deluded by

widespread fake news of a rigged election storming the U.S. Capitol and shutting down the final counting of the electoral vote, was perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of widespread illiberal sentiment in modern American history. For electoral democracy is a central component of liberal democracy and a corrosive cynicism about the legitimacy of elections in the face of overwhelming evidence of their fairness is an expression of illiberalism. Yet, according to a poll conducted for Reuters, 52 percent of Republicans think that Trump "rightfully won" the 2020 election, and 68 percent were concerned that the election was "rigged." Further, the poll showed that "more Americans appear to be more suspicious about the U.S. election process than they were four years ago. . . . The 28% who said they thought the election was 'the result of illegal voting or election rigging' is up 12 points from four years ago."[3] A substantial percentage of the population believes in still more florid conspiracy theories. An NPR/Ipsos poll asked respondents whether they believe "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media."[4] This bizarre recycling of themes from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is the central message of the online conspiracy mongering movement QAnon. Seventeen percent of respondents believed the claim while 37 percent said they did not know, which makes for 54 percent of the American public who give some credence to a movement that has been accurately described by a scholar of genocide studies as "a Nazi cult, rebranded."[5]

This susceptibility to lies, disinformation, and conspiracy theories is a clear threat to democracy. Thomas Jefferson was correct when he wrote "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."[6] But America's current situation is graver than that envisioned by Jefferson. The people who stormed the Capitol are not merely ignorant but are among the "active misinformed," who are convinced that their false beliefs are true and who are willing to take action—even illegal, violent, and anti-democratic action—based on those false beliefs. Moreover, the chief misinformation fomenter, Donald Trump, earned more than 74 million votes, retains his grip on the Republican Party, and is the most popular man in America.[7] And perhaps most concerning of all, a PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll conducted on January 6, 2021, found that 8 percent of adults and 18 percent of Republicans expressed support for the disruption of the electoral vote process at the Capitol.[8] The corruption of public opinion and the disorder it provokes are signs of the enduring presence of illiberalism in America.

Outline of the Book

This book is, in part, about the development and growth of a right-wing extremist ideology and rhetorical style that have penetrated deeply into American political culture. Call it the rise of illiberalism. The current size and influence of illiberal ideology, its intellectual origins, the social and political developments that facilitated its spread, and what to do about it are the main issues that this book addresses.

The book explores the full range of illiberal ideologies. By "illiberal" I mean any political ideology that explicitly rejects liberal democracy or some central principle of liberal democracy, such as political egalitarianism, human rights, electoral democracy, the rule of law, an enlightened ethics of controversy, and tolerance. Illiberal ideologies include all of the right-wing extremisms mentioned above, as well as leftist illiberal movements such as various schools of communism, anarchism, and some varieties of antifascist or antifa movements. But to recognize ideologies that reject liberal democracy, liberal democracy itself must first be defined, and chapter 2 accomplishes that necessary methodological step.

The analysis of illiberalism begins in chapter 3, which includes a quantitative analysis of illiberal outlets of political opinion on the web. One purpose of this chapter is to address the objection that, even when all its many expressions are wrapped up together, illiberalism is still an insignificantly small phenomenon and so focusing on it is alarmist. To tackle this issue, chapter 3 presents an analysis of data on hundreds of websites that identify themselves as illiberal or are identified as such by expert observers of this material. I compare the audiences for these sites with the audiences of opinion outlets that fall within the traditional liberal democratic political spectrum, running from the Left through the political center to the traditional Right. Altogether 1,952 websites are included in the analysis, which shows that, by many measures, the audience for illiberalism is nearly as large as the audience for outlets of mainstream political ideologies. Other important findings are that left-wing illiberal movements such as Antifa—a favorite bugaboo of conservative media—are vanishingly small in terms of their digital audience; audiences for rightist illiberal sites are much more engaged with and visit their favorite websites more often than is the case with websites of other orientations; and in between the Hard-Core Illiberal Right sites and sites of the conventional Right are a

set of In-Between Right sites that facilitate transmission of Hard-Core ideology into mainstream political culture.

Chapter 3 also documents and critiques the content of Hard-Core Illiberal Right ideology. To facilitate that process, the analysis sorts the pertinent websites into subcategories such as Hate, Alt-Right, Alt-Lite, Manosphere, Dark Enlightenment, and others, then reviews the content of the sites identified within each subcategory as having the largest audiences. One of the main findings is that, although there is some variation among these sites, for the most part the ideology of the Hard-Core Illiberal Right is extremely radical. In fact, this material is so radical that it had to be laid out at length and in depth; otherwise the extremism of the Hard-Core Illiberal Right would be hard to believe. Suffice it to say that the ideology of these sites is not simply a slightly more populist, rightist, or hyperbolic version of the mainstream conservativism that dominated American politics during the 1980s. Today's Hard-Core rightist illiberalism is an explicit, root-and-branch break with liberal democracy and embraces a mash-up of fascist, reactionary, racialist, inegalitarian, anti-Semitic, and anti-democratic principles. Another feature of this ideology is a rhetorical style based on open scorn of tolerance, including an insistence that politics is war, an embrace of the friend-versus-enemy conception of politics, an unconstitutional definition of treason that is applied to all political opponents, and a vituperative style of criticism. Further, respect for the idea that political discourse should be based on reasoned debate, established facts, and a search for common ground is rejected by the Illiberal Right. Instead, words are used as weapons, seeking consensus is repudiated, facts are countered with factoids and fake news, and conspiracy theories are disseminated. Here again, the illiberal rhetorical style is so extreme that ample documentation is necessary to overcome the generally helpful disinclination to think too ill of political opponents.

But documenting the rise of illiberal ideology is only part of what this book seeks to accomplish. The real question is why this political vision has crystalized, found a significant audience, and exerts influence throughout American political culture, even all the way to the White House. There is no one answer to any of these questions, so they require a comprehensive overview of American politics. Chapters 4 to 7 seek to provide such an overview, with each chapter looking at one aspect of political life that in combination provide a 360-degree picture of American politics today.

Chapter 4 concerns identity. Political deliberation has to start from somewhere in particular, from a set of cognitions that are taken for granted, at least provisionally. This starting point may be thought of as the identity of a given polity, and in this sense, identity is a necessary aspect of political life. Moreover, identity is relevant because Right Illiberals have made a racialistic theory of identity into the lance tip of their attack on liberal democracy. So chapter 4 rebuts the Right Illiberal conception of identity and develops a conception of identity compatible with liberal democracy. Much of chapter 4 is devoted to an intellectual history of the development of the illiberal, or identitarian, conception of political identity. Very briefly put, illiberals have learned there are rhetorical advantages to be gained by painting themselves—rather than African Americans, women, or gays—as the true outsiders to liberal democratic society and thus the only group possessed of critical distance from society and capable of instigating fundamental change. The discussion of how illiberals made use of what has been called the "inversion thesis" is the main theoretical contribution of this book. Understanding how this maneuver turned out to be more effective than might be thought requires going back to mid-twentieth-century efforts to protect scientific communities from the pitfalls of groupthink. Rebutting identitarianism also involves a review of the empirical sociology that shows Americans widely share a sense of political identity that is compatible with liberal democracy.

Chapter 5 takes up another key aspect of political life, ideas—the units that make up the arguments advanced in the course of political discourse. The chapter explains how a certain type of ideas, public ideas, played a positive role in American politics that was undermined by developments in the twenty-first century. The argument is that from about the early 1970s to the turn of the millennium, the United States had a system for producing and disseminating public ideas that were simple enough to be grasped by mass audiences but also had roots in more complex ideas produced by experts. This system was shattered by the traumatic political and social developments of the early twenty-first century, and also by the rise of digital communications technologies that called the whole notion of expertise into question and undermined the cultural gatekeeping functions of public intellectuals. This digital revolution is irreversible, and the gatekeeping power of public intellectuals cannot be fully restored. What intellectuals can do, however, is abandon some of the dogmas that

weakened their position even before the transformational changes of the twenty-first century. Intellectuals can also facilitate the development of a progressive New American Majority based on the oncoming minority-majority population by interpreting these developments as consistent with the existing American political identity.

Chapter 6 describes the role of ideas in American political culture now that the process of developing public ideas that are linked to expert knowledge has been undermined. The result, on the internet at least, is a world of weaponized irony and total ambivalence, where the meaning of words and the intent of their writers are often almost impossible to determine for sure. Public ideas that trace back to expert understanding have been replaced by digital memes that trace back to other memes ad infinitum and, in the end, to nothing at all. The rhetoric of weaponized irony that now dominates the web needs to be balanced by a rhetoric of assent that helps build a social consensus around ideas that have passed the inspection of qualified gatekeepers and that merit provisional acceptance. To achieve this, internet service providers must be pressured to more strongly moderate the content they carry than they do now.

Chapter 7 is devoted to interests, the final major aspect of political life covered here. Interests are a major motivation behind political action. Even if the United States sorts out the issues related to identity politics and revives its capacity to develop useful public ideas, the power of interest groups will remain strong and the well-known problems of pluralistic politics will remain, creating problems that illiberalism will seek to exploit. These problems are exacerbated by the notoriously fragmented American Constitution, which encourages the development of interest groups and, as a result, makes collective action unnecessarily difficult. Chapter 7 therefore proposes constitutional amendments to reduce fragmentation and improve rationality in policymaking. The key to making constitutional change realistic is to advance only proposals that have been road tested at the state level. In general, state constitutions are much easier to change than the federal Constitution, and some of these mechanisms for change should be adopted at the federal level. Chapter 7 also explores a constitutional amendment designed to improve coherence in policymaking by strengthening the hand of the president in forming a legislative agenda. Chapter 8 offers some elaborations on and qualifications of the book's major themes.