

**Book Reviews:**

**John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. ISBN-13: 978-0812253474 (hardcover). 312 Pages. \$36.50.**

**Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s*. Basic Books, 2022. ISBN-13: 978-1541646889 (hardcover). 368 Pages. \$32.00.**

**George Hawley, *Conservatism in a Divided America: The Right and Identity Politics*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2022. ISBN-13: 9780-268203740 (hardcover). 368 Pages. \$45.00.**

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As the ballots cast on November 8th reveal, our entire political system has been cast into a catastrophic state of flux. This may be most true for the GOP, whose search for identity continues to walk further into the previously fringe elements of their base. Backing their star quarterback (Trump) and seeing the growth of newer celebrities in the movement like the National Conservatives and figures associated with the Claremont Institute, it is the Conservative Movement more than the Republican Party that is trying to craft a coherent sense of self. A series of contradictions have occurred, such as the fact that its most energized constituencies are also so controversial that they are just as liable to tear the party apart as to inspire rabid partisanship. This may seem like an especially fractured moment for the movement, but it is decades in the making. This was a process that began when William F. Buckley launched movement rag *National Review* in 1957 and Russell Kirk published *The Conservative Mind* in 1953. In an effort to coalesce a consistent, intellectually rigorous conservative ideology, these ideologues hobbled together a tenuous

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theoretical position: social traditionalism, aggressive foreign policy, and economic liberalization. This political house of cards had little that bound it together in the long-term theoretical sense, but an aggressive (and conspiratorial ) anti-communism helped to insulate these activists from their philosophical vulnerabilities. This synthesis created the foundations for what has dominated the last 50 years of electoral contests.

Our current period is somewhat indistinct from other periods of conservative redefinition. The alleged “founding” of the movement in the 1950s was actually, more correctly, a re-imagining and branding exercise more than a completely new invention. Conservatism is more contiguous than even their official organs usually reflect. Because of the recent rightward shift of the Republican Party towards what Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin call “national populism” (a similar process taking place in Western Europe, Central Europe, Israel and other allied “Western” countries), a great deal of scholarship has tried to track this trajectory, usually bound together by one key motivation: if we understand the past we just might be able to predict the future.

Three recent books on conservatism act as a de facto trilogy despite being written by different authors with wildly varied styles and shifting perspectives. If we want to understand the development of the American right temporally, reading John S. Huntington’s *Far-Right Vanguard, Partisans* by Nicole Hemmer, and, finally, *Conservatism in a Divided America* by celebrated scholar of the right, George Hawley, give us a perfect timeline for the movement. All three of these books build on each other, perhaps unintentionally, and present a nearly complete picture as to how the conservative movement evolved, grew, and radicalized.

Huntington’s *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* focuses primarily on the mid-century fringes of the Conservative Movement. The way Huntington uses “far-right” is to restrict it to the electoral sphere, where revolutionaries and fascists could perhaps be housed under the term “extreme right” instead. Huntington’s key thesis is that the conservatives and the far-right tend to hold the same ideological assessments of the world, but what separates them is a measure of degree, blatantness, and the role of baroque conspiracy theories. “The conspiracy theories, nativism, white supremacist rhetoric, and radical libertarianism promoted by mid-twentieth century ultraconservatives had metastasized slowly over the course of sixty years until they consumed the Republican Party,” writes Huntington (2), noting that what Richard Hofstadter called the “paranoid style in American politics” was always a piece of the movement and has, perhaps, become the dominant strain influencing the GOP.

The far-right is the base of conservatism, something on full display during primary seasons as Republicans get more and more extreme with their (particularly racial) rhetoric to ensure party loyalty. Rather than a movement made up of moderates, Huntington shows that the far-right is key to understanding who conservatism is for and what its function is. The Republican Party has had a certain ideological consistency since the conservatives took it over, but its intensity accelerated. This evolved from an earlier political contingent, one that believed Roosevelt was a communist and who wanted to stay out of World War II. That movement coalesced in later years to support candidates like Barry Goldwater and George Wallace, a high water mark for a certain generation of far-right organizers. An entire far-right electoral and legislative network developed out of that, one that is still in place today and whose exact character says a lot about where the energy has emerged in the base. It would be interesting to hear Huntington's assessment of the far-right NGOsphere today, and how Tanton Network anti-immigration groups or "National Conservative" organizations like the Claremont Institute are positioned in that schema.

Huntington's work really closes in the late 1960s and early 1970, right about the point that Hemmer picks up the thread in *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s*. Starting with the Reagan Revolution, Hemmer looks at how figures like Pat Buchanan and, later, New Gingrich changed the tribalist nature of the party, how white grievance politics and populism took over, and how they built the modern personality we so now closely associate with the GOP. Hemmer tells this story with a hallmark narrative flair, which makes this perhaps the most readable of the three histories and the easiest to jump into for the uninitiated. We meet a lot of characters along the way that have changed our entire political world: Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, Laura Ingraham, even Bill Maher, all taking part in hollowing out political argumentation and rebuilding Republican ideology by rephrasing the angst we normally associated with extremists. At the same time, politics were refashioned for talk radio and panel television, turning it into the kind of circus that reached its zenith with Trump's entry in 2016.

*Conservatism in a Divided America: The Right and Identity Politics* is where George Hawley picks up the thread introduced by Hemmer and Huntington to look at how the conservative movement is desperately trying to define its mission going forward. Part of its self-definition is to maintain the "classically liberal" tradition of the Enlightenment, which prefers individual over group identities, and many on the right believe that collectivist "identity politics" are a corrosive force unleashed on America

by progressives. As Hawley discusses throughout, the right clearly has its own form of identity politics, and this has been self-employed by the “National Conservatives” and others on the party’s right-flank.

Hawley’s approach will give you a good survey on what different conservatives and political scientists have said regarding these issues, and the book’s look at the conservative relationship to the Civil Rights Movement, feminism, and immigration is particularly insightful. Hawley’s work has been foundational to our understanding of the alt-right, and he provides a quick post-mortem to the movement and its correlation to the larger right-wing trends (a section that itself could have benefitted from more space). Overall, this is one of the most comprehensive, data driven looks at modern conservatism written in the past decades, an amazing addition to a stellar career.

What all three books highlight is how the overlapping circles that make up the broad right are, themselves, pushing further into the territory previously identified as “far-right,” meaning outside the previous bounds of standard respectable politics. This shifting of the Overton Window has fundamentally changed what’s possible, but has not necessarily changed the ideological positions that run underneath the movement. As Hawley explains, even figures like William F. Buckley, who policed the edges of conservatism in an effort to kick out antisemites and white nationalists, while at the same time he was writing his own theoretical work that hinged on his belief in human inequality and elitism, exactly the kind of foundational anti-liberal praxis that the far-right is partially defined by.

Likewise, the conservative base has always been far to the right of its Beltway figures (a point made heavily by alt-right figures like Paul Gottfried and Richard Spencer), and today’s conspiratorial ideas in the Republican rank-and-file are only different from the past in terms of percentage numbers. That said, the rightward shift is obvious and the conspiracism has grown profoundly, and the movement’s shifts towards anti-democratic attacks on election integrity seem partially the result of the increased presence of conspiratorial far-right ideas.

Without a figure like Buckley to police the boundaries we are seeing those who Huntington chronicled as living on the fringes of conservatism moving to the center (a process described by Hemmer), and are now running for state houses around the country (with limited success) and declaring elections to be rigged. This reality opens up a few questions, not the least of which is what will define the far-right (as opposed to now what is the mainstream right) today, and how disconnected from reality the party apparatchiks will allow their base to become. While challenging vote counts and gerrymandering can win them some seats, one of the realities

of conspiracy theories is that they allow for poor strategic decision making. These are the questions about whether or not there will continue to be a conservative movement that is electorally viable in our current system, or if the right will more thoroughly become a revolutionary mass movement whose intentions towards power exist outside of the democratic framework.

The primary intervention that Richard Spencer made to conservatism early in his career was what he called “The Majority Strategy.” If, as polls show, the Republican Party is the de facto party of white people, it should more effectively mobilize those whites, ignore minorities, and become an open institution of white grievance. While Republican strategists acknowledge, correctly, that the white electorate, the Republican base, is rapidly shrinking, those on the far-right have a solution in mind: close the borders, limit who can vote, cut apart districts, and, when all else fails, claim it was stolen. This would be the only salient strategy for a party so broken with consensus reality, but, as all three books show, nothing is out of the realm of possibility.