The Logic of Connective Faction

How Digitally Networked Elites and Hyper-Partisan Media Radicalize Politics

Final Version: October 2025

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Across democratic systems, ideological cleavages increasingly emerge not only between but also within political parties. At the same time, hyperpartisan and digitally networked media ecosystems amplify polarization by fostering ideologically segmented information networks. To explain the interplay between internal party divisions and digital connectivity, we introduce a novel framework termed the "logic of connective faction." We illustrate this framework via a case from the US, and the sudden circulation of the issue of "Critical Race Theory" (CRT), which became a far-right moniker for almost any discussion of race, particularly in education. Utilizing an original dataset comprising right-wing and mainstream news sources, newsletters and social media posts by Republican Members of Congress (n = 1,941,742), we analyze ideological behavior and connectivity patterns, distinguishing Republicans who adopted the "CRT" issue from their co-partisans who did not. We find that the former group represents a distinct faction characterized by greater ideological extremity and deeper integration into right-wing digital networks. Beyond this combination of political behavior and digital connectivity, we highlight various networked media logics, such as platform-based engagement and media attention, which may incentivize such factional behaviors. Finally, we consider implications for political actors and media systems beyond the US.

Keywords: Far-Right Radicalization, Right-Wing Media, Republican Party, Digital Networks, Connective Action, Intra-Party Factions

Accepted at *Political Communication* pending replication. Please cite published version.

Introduction

Across various national contexts, the rise of illiberal politics and democratic backsliding has coincided with the growing circulation of polarizing issues and more direct forms of political communication (Bennett and Kneuer 2024; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Štětka and Mihelj 2024). These developments manifest through the spread of illiberal or far-right[1] discourses (Klinger et al. 2023; Knüpfer, Schwemmer, and Heft 2023; Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti 2024, 2025) and new connections linking political actors to ideologically aligned media environments (Knüpfer and Hoffmann 2024; Livingston and Miller 2025). Over time, such shifts have empowered previously fringe actors and ideas, fueling ideological realignments and political upheavals (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Müller and Gebauer 2021; Startin 2015). Two overarching trends underpin these dynamics: an increase in factional party politics, and the emergence of fragmented and ideologically polarized informational ecosystems.

To better understand how these trends intersect, we introduce the framework of a "logic of connective faction". Our framework explains how digital connectivity shapes factional dynamics within parties and fuels ideological radicalization. It captures how specific political actors become embedded in hyperpartisan media networks that provide distinct incentives, exposure, and opportunities for political positioning. Our contribution is less about cataloging what factionalism or media fragmentation looks like, or theorizing in the abstract why these developments occur, but about showing how this logic operates in practice. We demonstrate how connective dynamics unfold empirically: factions become visible not simply because they exist, but because ties to digital surrogates, issues, and communicative behaviors are responses to new incentive structures within (parts of) the party. Our approach therefore identifies how the logic of connective faction plays out in practice.

In previous eras, two principal institutional arenas for political contestation in democratic societies were media organizations and political parties. Media organizations not only provided an

[1] We follow Andrea Pirro's (2023) suggestion to understand "far right" as an umbrella concept, encapsulating both radical as well as extreme right elements, which are increasingly fluid between party and movement actors—especially so within discursive environments.

"arena" for public discourse but also acted as gatekeepers, filtering political information (van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). Political parties, meanwhile, were central to curating this discourse and channeling it into policy preferences (Bawn et al. 2012). Together, these institutions operated under specific logics, offering incentive structures and deterrents that shaped which actors gained public attention and which issues circulated in public forums. The weakening and fragmenting of these two institutional environments has eroded their capacity to moderate the positions individual political actors are likely to espouse.

Media systems have since evolved into more "hybrid" forms (Chadwick 2013). New avenues have emerged for forging connections between political actors and the informational ecosystems they tap into. Such modes of "disruption" are especially pronounced on the political right, where alternative media and influencers create parallel information networks that antagonize traditional journalism, as populist actors effectively use digital platforms to channel affect and discontent into political mobilization (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Törnberg and Chueri 2025; Wells et al. 2016; Zhang, Chen, and Lukito 2022). Meanwhile, right-wing media increasingly function as political organizations, performing essential roles like setting policy agendas, fundraising, or deflecting attention from scandals (Yang and Bennett 2021; Yang 2025).

In tandem with these media system shifts, many political parties are also experiencing increased radicalization and internal fragmentation, with realignments and transformations both between and within parties (Blum and Cowburn 2024; Cowburn 2024b). In many electoral systems, the longstanding structure of center-left and center-right parties has been "hollowed out" (Mair 2013; Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024), leaving room for radical challenges either externally in the form of new parties or internally from emboldened party factions further from the political center (Blum 2020; Thomsen 2017). Here, too, new modes of political organization have arisen, with technological advancements reshaping party operations and mobilization (Karpf 2016; Kreiss 2016). This trend is also especially notable on the right, where party organizations and supporters demonstrate a heightened receptivity to blending novel organizational and mobilization strategies with the demands

of electoral politics (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2018; Blum 2020; Cowburn and Theriault 2025; Livingston and Miller 2025).

Previous studies show that interaction with hyperpartisan media can impact the behavior of political elites (Arceneaux et al. 2025; Jamieson and Cappella 2008). These effects are not unidirectional, in that they are unlikely to fundamentally change political preferences but rather serve to highlight agenda items or vet specific sets of candidates. In highly networked information ecosystems, these media can also bridge divides between mainstream party elites and more radical actors at the party's periphery (Klinger et al. 2023), forming extended party networks (Albert 2020) and blurring the boundaries between parties and media systems.

Taken together, these developments raise important questions about how media fragmentation interacts with intra-party factionalism and showcase why focusing solely on institutional decline is insufficient. New forms of hyperpartisan media deliberately challenge the established order, just as novel partisan actors challenge traditional hierarchies within their own parties and beyond. Though ample research examines these media and party transformations separately, few studies integrate these factors to analyze how increased connectivity among ideological actors and content interacts with rising intra-party contention.

We argue that the fragmenting of media environments and the weakening of political party structures have enabled new logics of political behavior and ideological positioning, to which some actors are more receptive than others. Parts of the political elite respond to distinct sets of network dynamics, shaped by peer-to-peer signaling, media logics, and the affordances of diverse social media platforms. The modes of connectivity these actors engage with affect the information they are exposed to and the incentives they face to circulate new topics or adopt more extreme positions. Over time, this not only deepens divisions within political organizations but also has the potential to polarize and radicalize party platforms and politics as a whole.

To capture these dynamics, we offer the framework of a "logic of connective faction", which theorizes how digitally enabled media logics and connectivity influence intra-party factionalism and ideological alignment. In the United States in particular, an alternative news ecology has expanded

alongside distinct intra-party factions such as the Tea Party, MAGA, and QAnon movements, collectively driving the Republican Party towards increasingly extreme positions. We therefore empirically demonstrate our framework using a US case study, where the issue of (so-called) "Critical Race Theory" suddenly became highly salient on the political right. Empirically, we are interested in how "CRT" diffused rather than exactly what it *is*. In the following sections, we first provide an overview of the recent history and effects of factional politics within the Republican Party before moving on to a deeper analysis of the existing literature on media fragmentation and hyperpartisan information ecologies. The subsequent section then outlines our core theoretical concept, before we introduce our case study.

Intra-Party Factions in the Republican Party

In the mid-twentieth century, intra-party factional division in Congress was the result of ideologically broad parties with close connections to regional bases. In the Republican Party, moderate or liberal "Rockefeller Republicans" represented Northeast and industrial Midwestern states (Reiter 1981). More conservative Republicans often came from the plains states, and, after Nixon's successful southern strategy, the South. In this less nationalized era (Hopkins 2018), these members of Congress were closely attuned to the needs of their districts, presenting as distinct preference within the congressional party. From 1932 until the mid-1990s Republicans were the majority party in either chamber for a total of just ten years. To deliver for their constituents, Republicans in this period had to work with Democrats to pass legislation, making intra-party conflict in Congress less important.[2] From the 1970s onwards conservative Republicans came to dominate the party on both economic and cultural issues. Consequently, academic interest in factions waned between the late 1970s until the first decade of the twenty-first century with a focus instead on inter-party difference in terms of partisan polarization. Seminal literature on polarization from this time (see e.g., Sinclair 2006;

[2] Factional intra-party conflict was rife in presidential nominations (Rockefeller vs Goldwater 1964, Ford vs Reagan 1976, Reagan vs Bush 1980).

Theriault 2008), identified that as the parties moved apart, they became more internally cohesive and ideologically congruent.

Yet, since this time, we have seen a reemergence of factional cleavages in the Republican Party. Reactionary actors on the political right—first in the form of the Tea Party and then coalesced around the singular figure of Donald Trump—pressured the party from within, taking over local party organizational structures, running alternative candidates in primary elections, and connecting directly with movements on the (far-)right (Blum 2020; Blum and Cowburn 2024; Cowburn 2024b). Initially focused on fiscal conservatism and limited government, the Tea Party combined a coalition of grassroots activists and established conservative elites, prompting ideological divides within the party as the group often clashed with traditional Republicans over policy priorities and strategies (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Consequently, the Republican Party organization was left fractured and fragmented, and unable to rally around an establishment candidate in the 2016 presidential nomination contest, enabling Donald Trump to become the nominee (Noel 2016). Since then, the character of Trump has come to define the GOP, with Republican opponents in Congress sidelined, pressured to retire, successfully primaried, and subject to threats of physical violence (Blum, Cowburn, and Masket 2024; Lubin 2024). These concepts have quickly aligned such that being more "Trumpy" is now understood as being more "conservative" (Hopkins and Noel 2021). Yet, intra-party conflict, particularly in Congress, has continued unabated (Cowburn 2024a), as evidenced in the historic fifteen-round election and subsequent ousting of Speaker Kevin McCarthy (Reilly 2023), and the growing importance of the House Freedom Caucus (Bloch Rubin 2017; Green 2019).

In summary, the factionalism of the twenty-first century Republican Party is distinct from that of the mid-twentieth century in several ways. First, the factionalism of the mid-twentieth century was regionally oriented, with different parts of the country having distinct preferences and members of Congress trying to address the concerns of their citizens. In a nationalized environment, members of Congress increasingly focus on national (e.g., education or infrastructure policy) rather than local policies (e.g., a school or highway in the district). This national focus reduces the dimensionality of factional conflict in the twenty-first century, with fewer cross-cutting issues at both

the intra- and inter-party level. Second, contemporary intra-party cleavages in the party are not defined by broad ideological distance in the way that the mid-twentieth century party was. Whereas the Republican Party once contained liberals such as Rockefeller, moderates such as Eisenhower, and hardline conservatives such as Goldwater, the twenty-first century Republican Party is located solidly on the right of the political spectrum.

The shifting media landscape likely plays a role in both trends. The rise of Fox and the concurrent decline of local journalism coincided with a broader shift in factional conflict towards national issues. As Daniel Hopkins has succinctly observed, "all politics is national because all media is national" (Hopkins 2018). More importantly, we believe that the evolving media landscape is the driving force behind the second trend noted above: the recent pattern of factional politics moving away from the party's center and occurring almost exclusively on the ideological far right. As we explain further below, a key transformation of the media environment is the rise of hyperpartisan, far-right information systems.

Fragmented Media and Hyperpartisan Information Networks

One important driver of the fractious intra-party politics in the Republican Party since the first Obama administration is the role of media actors on the far right who have incentivized political elites to reject party orthodoxy and authority, often by providing a direct connection to voters that bypasses the traditional party organization (Z. Li and Martin 2023). As identified above, these media and established political institutions are operating under shifting—if not "disrupted"—conditions in which they not only respond to new economic or electoral pressures but the rules and mechanisms for political communication flows have also drastically been altered (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018).

Research on the affordances of digital information environments has highlighted how these allow for or even incentivize the spread of radical or highly politicized topics (Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, and Bourassa 2020; Knüpfer, Schwemmer, and Heft 2023; Zhang, Chen, and Lukito 2022), disinformation (Starbird, Arif, and Wilson 2019), or ideologically-infused and culturally-embedded

"deep story" narratives (Tripodi 2022). A salient aspect of these dynamics are the interaction effects that emerge between various types of content creators or particularly influential accounts, and their respective audiences (Diaz Ruiz and Nilsson 2023; Lewis 2018). The radicalization effects that emerge here, may thus be classified as both reactionary in their ideological outlook and reactive in that they respond to audience and peer input.

One novelty of the recent media environment is the unprecedented abundance and proliferation of communication channels. The expanded range of outlets has expanded citizens' and elites' choices in ways that fundamentally alter patterns of exposure and attention (Blumler 2016; Prior 2007). Old and new forms of communication now intersect in a hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2013), enabling political actors to use digital affordances alongside legacy platforms. This proliferation injects volatility into political communication, as issues can emerge suddenly, circulate rapidly, and decline just as quickly. The result is a communication environment marked by disruption and fragmentation of traditional logics of newsmaking and agenda-setting, where partisan media and political entrepreneurs can strategically engineer politicized news cycles (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Knüpfer 2020).

Since the 2016 US election, scholars have increasingly highlighted the interplay of digital networks and established media sources in amplifying the disruptive candidacy of Donald Trump (Wells et al. 2016; Zhang et al. 2018). The circulation of disinformation has also been associated with social media entry points and subsequent elite amplification (Lukito et al. 2019). Meanwhile, the rise of conspiracy-driven movements such as QAnon and #SaveTheChildren has been primarily driven by digitally enabled modes of connectivity (Moran and Prochaska 2022; Tollefson 2021). Other research has highlighted how new networks of digital news and social media influencers form "echo systems" (Starbird et al. 2018), engage in strategic mobilization for political objectives (Yang 2025), and amplify Republican talking points (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Yang and Bennett 2021).

Similar dynamics are occurring in other consolidated democracies. In Germany, the increasingly radicalized party AfD has been shown to actively pull issues and frames from far-right digital networks and news sites onto their agenda (Klinger et al. 2023; Knüpfer and Hoffmann 2024).

In the Benelux countries, digital media have provided new avenues for political communication by right-wing populists, as radical ideas slowly become normalized via mainstream media formats (de Jonge 2019; de Jonge and Gaufman 2022). As far-right governments have assumed power in countries such as the Netherlands and Austria, these countries' trajectories have been marked by incremental shifts towards more discursively radical policies (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). The interaction between far-right and centrist or center-right political parties amplifies this discursive radicalization, especially when the latter adopt specific agenda items (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Heinisch et al. 2019; Knüpfer, Bennett, and Klinger 2025; Lewandowsky and Wagner 2022).

In European multiparty systems, pressure from the radical right has commonly emerged in the form of parties such as Reform UK (UK), Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), Fratelli d'Italia (Italy), or Partij voor de Vrijheid (Netherlands). These parties alter the political landscape through a combination of their ability to make gains in elections and their external pressure on center-right parties to prioritize their policy concerns and positions, thereby moving them ideologically to the right (Gagatek 2024; Wagner and Meyer 2018). Yet, even in these multiparty systems, mainstream parties' levels of factional conflict have increased in the era when media has fragmented (Cowburn, Malpas, and Blum 2025). In the United States, with single-member plurality districts and open systems of candidate selection, these same drivers manifest not as external pressures but as an internal faction within the major party closest to them ideologically: the Republican Party (Drutman 2017). But what connects the trendlines of increasingly factional parties and shifts in more networked but also ideologically infused media environments? In the following section, we offer a novel framework to account for these dynamics.

The Logic of Connective Faction

Traditional theories of political mobilization emphasize the centrality of collective action, where formal organizations aggregate individual resources, construct shared identities, and coordinate activities to achieve common goals (Olson 1971; Tilly 1978). Political parties have historically functioned as archetypical collective actors, channeling individual preferences into coherent policy

platforms and representing them within institutional arenas (Bawn et al. 2012). In democratic systems, collective action was therefore understood as depending on organizational infrastructures that reduce participation costs, provide selective incentives, and sustain durable identities binding members together.

The rise of digital media environments has transformed these dynamics. In their influential account of *connective* action, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that networked digital communication has enabled new forms of participation that do not require strong organizational control or collective identity construction. Rather than relying on hierarchical structures, connective action operates through personalized, digitally mediated networks in which "formal organizations are losing their grip on individuals, and group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 748). Here, communicative connections are facilitated by social media infrastructures, allowing for coordination without the symbolic construction of a united "we".

Though connective action theory has primarily focused on citizens and social movements, similar dynamics are unfolding within formal political organizations (or parts thereof), particularly where traditional party structures have weakened or been circumvented by novel or highly ideological actor types—or in systems that have enabled the emergence of new organizational formats that draw more deliberately on these affordances. As parties outsource communicative functions to digital platforms, they increasingly operate under new conditions for public communication and within hybrid media systems (Blumler 2016; Chadwick 2013). New intra-organizational dynamics emerge that transcend classic models of collective action but also force us to reconsider the mechanisms of connective action.

Recent work by Bennett and Livingston (2025) acknowledges these shifts and extends the initial connective action framework to illiberal politics, arguing that digitally networked organizational actors often rely on "digital surrogates". Digital surrogates might be ideologically aligned media, influencers, and hyperpartisan networks that assume quasi-organizational roles by shaping public discourse, providing informational input, allocating attention, and mobilizing followers. Digital surrogates therefore play a crucial role in advancing more radical agendas by

facilitating circulation and amplification beyond the formal party apparatus (Bennett and Livingston 2025; Livingston and Miller 2025).

Building on these observations, we introduce a *logic of connective faction* to capture how digitally networked ideological subgroups within political organizations form connective ties to external informational networks by promoting distinct issues or positions, thereby amplifying their influence both within their parties and in broader political discourse. Three core elements characterize this framework:

1. ***Connectivity* with Digital Surrogate Networks**: Factional actors develop strong ties to ideologically aligned digital networks and digital surrogates, such as alternative or hyperpartisan media outlets, influencers, and follower communities. These external nodes perform quasi-organizational functions, providing informational input, audience attention, and agenda-setting power that enhance factional visibility and strategic capacity.

2. **Emergence of Intra-Organizational Factions**: Not all party actors are equally embedded within these networks. Specific factions may cultivate deeper connections to external digital environments, leading them to exhibit distinct behavioral and communicative patterns compared to their co-partisans. These patterns shape factional identity and position within the broader organizational hierarchy.

3. **New Network *Logics***: These connectivity structures generate new incentive logics that shape factional behavior. Rather than relying on party hierarchies to prioritize issues, factional actors strategically circulate topics and signal ideological commitments that bolster their visibility, credibility, and intra-party influence to each other as well as the networks they connect to, thus also shaping and incentivizing future connectivity.

We conceptualize these dynamics as a latent network structure activated through informational circulation. Key nodes in this network consist of organizational actors (e.g., party members or legislators) embedded within strong intra-factional ties and connected outward to digital

surrogates. Informational flows (e.g. shared content, media references, social media posts) act as a type of network ping, rendering specific ties visible, strengthening them, and in some instances, activating only parts of the organizational cluster. Much like a digital ping checks whether a connection is active, an informational ping refers to a discursive trigger that surfaces or reinforces connections within a communicative network. Via such reinforcing connections, the activated factions can develop stronger ties to external networks than to their own party apparatus, facilitating a dynamic where digital surrogates co-produce factional agendas.

In contrast to connective action, which describes how individuals coordinate loosely around shared causes without strong organizational control, connective faction highlights how ideological subgroups within formal organizations exploit similar digital affordances to strengthen their factional positions, challenge internal hierarchies, and insert fringe or illiberal issues into wider circulation. Under these conditions, hyperpartisan media and factional elites become co-producers of political agendas, reshaping traditional patterns of elite-media interaction (Cowburn and Knüpfer 2024; Yang 2025).

We refer to this as a "logic" because it reflects emergent patterns of behavior and connectivity that transcend individual strategic choice, shaping dynamics at meso- and macro-levels. Much like Olson's original theorization of a *collective* action logic, our logic rests on the assumption that, "what a group does will depend on what the individuals in that group do, and what the individuals do depends on the relative advantages to them of alternative courses of action" (Olson 1971, 23). In an era of increased connectivity to digital surrogate organizations, new sets of potential advantages emerge that may pull actors towards actions that are more individualized but still shape a connected pattern. Though individual party actors adopt digital technologies for personal or strategic reasons, aggregated factional behaviors produce systemic effects. Such logic is therefore not unidirectional: it both shapes actor behavior as they tap into these networks, while also selecting for actors predisposed to engage in ways that maximize visibility, ideological signaling, and influence within the party and public sphere.

The logic of connective faction therefore forces us to rethink established models of elite-media relationships. It highlights the need to distinguish between hyperpartisan and mainstream media ecologies, as well as between different elite subgroups within parties, each responding to divergent audiences, incentive structures, and modes of communication. These distinctions are critical to understanding how factional dynamics and digital connectivity interact to polarize party platforms, radicalize ideological positions, and reshape contemporary politics. To demonstrate and exemplify this logic, we turn to our empirical case study.

Case Study: "CRT" as a Floating Signifier for Far-Right Ideology

We empirically examine a case study from the US, where right-wing activists and partisan media engaged in a simultaneous push to define a highly contentious topic. We thereby focus on an issue-topic that enables us to collect data from before it was prevalent to trace its spread across various actor types. In part, we draw this distinction for practical reasons and to make clear that our study is focused on a specific issue, in circulation for a specific moment in time, since it would be next to impossible to capture the entire complex dynamics of debates around racial equity, privilege, and US history in a study such as this one. Meanwhile, as we demonstrate in our data further below, there were practically no mentions of "CRT" in the media formats or elite sources we analyzed, going as far back as 2017.

We are therefore interested in how discourse around CRT emerged and diffused rather than exactly what it says. Yet, we are also cognizant that the sudden emergence of "critical race theory" in the far-right sphere served as a catch-all term, filled with racialized animosity and strong appeals to White identity, using an underlying claim of victimization of Whites allegedly under threat by progressive curricula and racial equity programs and seemed specifically designed to engage Republican partisanship (Carbone, Harell, and Soroka 2024; Smith et al. 2025). It is therefore crucial to distinguish between what we therefore refer to as a strategically chosen "floating signifier"[3] of

[3] In using this concept, we draw on the writings of Stuart Hall (2021b, 2021a), which mark "race" as a floating signifier and examine the structure of "moral panics" these feed into. Republican elites and media have recently created outgroup signifiers around "antifa" and Black Lives Matter activists, see Knüpfer (2020).

"critical race theory", versus the academic field of Critical Race Theory that the signifier purports to identify. Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1970s as an interdisciplinary academic approach that prioritized the structural relationships between political and social institutions and the social construction of race. Pioneered through the work of Derrick Bell (1988, 1995) and advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Critical Race Theory "is a way of seeing, attending to, accounting for, tracing and analyzing the ways that race is produced, the ways that racial inequality is facilitated, and the ways that our history has created these inequalities that now can be almost effortlessly reproduced unless we attend to the existence of these inequalities" (Crenshaw, quoted in Fortin 2021). Intersectionality, a crucial concept in Critical Race Theory, centers how individuals' identities and characteristics combine to structure both discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

Yet, in recent years, the political right has put an almost entirely different understanding of the term in the spotlight: Republican lawmakers, conservative activist groups, and partisan media have increasingly attacked so-called "critical race theory" for exacerbating division between groups, needlessly prioritizing the role of race, and supposedly making White people, especially White children, feel guilty and responsible for the actions of previous generations (Rufo 2021b). Much of this more recent agitation galvanized around the right-wing activist Christopher Rufo, who strategically stoked outrage against a series of articles running prominently in *The New York Times Magazine* under the banner of "The 1619 Project," aimed at challenging dominant white-centric notions of US history (Jones 2021).

As Smith et al. (2025) demonstrate, the strategic act of re-framing was rooted in the efforts of partisan actors to shape public perception of the concept, to ultimately further the ideological goals of white identity politics. In redefining the term, proponents therefore also reject any notion of systemic racism—which, on these terms, can only be an individual characteristic or attribute—as well as broader trends regarding social and cultural challenges to traditional hierarchies of power (see e.g., Krasne 2020; Rufo 2021a).

Strategically, the term has thus been used to galvanize the Republican Party base and push back against perceived encroachments of traditional values. Most often, this tactic has been used to

mobilize opposition to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in schools and workplaces, framing them as indoctrination or "woke" ideology (Asen 2024). As recent research on US public opinion suggest, this push was relatively successful: the term "CRT" can be shown to significantly lower support for teaching about race and may activate a blend of partisanship and symbolic racism more strongly than other terms (Carbone, Harell, and Soroka 2024). By framing these efforts as promoting "critical race theory", opponents seek to discredit them as un-American or harmful to society. At the federal level, Donald Trump's 2020 Executive Order on "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping" sought to ban diversity and sensitivity training in federal agencies that referenced systemic racism or white privilege. At the state level, Texas, Florida, Idaho, and Oklahoma, all passed laws banning CRT or certain types of discussions around race and gender in K-12 public schools.

Though sizable portions of the American public may well not agree with the type of politics actual Critical Race Theory stands for, the point here is to say that the sudden spikes in media and elite attention were not driven by proponents of this actual school of thought, but rather by those seeking to define it in negative terms, stoking moral outrage against it, to implement new or curb existing policies. This also means that most Americans who are currently aware of "CRT" will have heard about it via these actors and their preferred definitions. It is, therefore, this redefinition of Critical Race Theory, deliberately labeled in parentheses here as "critical race theory" ("CRT"), that we examine.[4] We are cognizant of the distinctions between these two concepts, but our interest is motivated by the political weaponization of "CRT" on the right of the political spectrum rather than empirical trends about the teaching or adoption of Critical Race theory.[5]

We recognize that our approach has the potential to exacerbate misperceptions about the nature and definition of (actual) Critical Race Theory, but believe that the misuse of the term under the guise of "CRT" is sufficiently problematic to warrant scholarly attention. The sudden emergence

[4] This redefinition can be understood as analogous to the differences between the fake news genre and the fake news label (see Cowburn and Oswald 2020; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019).

[5] This motivation is rooted in the researchers' normative beliefs that the political weaponization of "CRT" represents a credible threat to the functioning of pluralistic multiracial democracy and equity in the United States, which stands in fundamental contrast to what underlies the *actual* teaching of CRT.

of the topic and it becoming a major talking point on the political right also offers a strong empirical case to explore how the weaponization of CRT is a result of information flows between the right-wing media sphere and formal actors in the modern Republican Party. Importantly, the topic continues to animate the conservative right, with The Heritage Foundation's "Project 2025", seen by many as a blueprint for the second Trump administration, advocating that the "noxious tenets of 'critical race theory' and 'gender ideology' should be excised from curricula in every public school in the country" (Project 2025 2023). We therefore expect that the topic will remain salient in the near future, at least on the political right.

The adoption of the term by Republican members of Congress is shown in full below. Descriptively, we find that between May and December 2021, more than eighty Republicans in Congress began using the term either online or in their congressional mailers. The sudden uptick in usage coincided with Glenn Youngkin's campaign to become Governor of Virginia, with a focus on education issues that commonly focused on the teaching of race and the need for parents to be involved in determining the curriculum (Schwartzman 2021). Youngkin's attacks on "CRT" were interpreted by many analysts as decisive in helping the Republican Party win the governorship in November 2021 (Beauchamp 2021), and the strategy was quickly interpreted by news media as a potential way for Republicans to win competitive races in 2022 (Cox and Quarshie 2021). Youngkin underscored his perceived importance of the issue, with his first order of business after winning the election, Executive Order 1, whose stated objective was "ending the use of inherently divisive concepts, including critical race theory" (Commonwealth of Virginia, Office of the Governor 2022).

Building on our main conceptual approach outlined above, our three empirical research questions are designed to identify the relationships between *connectivity* to digital surrogates, *factions* among Republican elites, and new network-based *logics* that might incentivize these patterns. In RQ1, we consider a sample of right-wing news sites to be indicative of a larger informational network that consists of ideologically aligned "digital surrogate" organizations, while a sample of mainstream news sources can be seen as providing a baseline for informational environments that are governed by different sets of logics. Our expectation here is that right-wing news sources and Republican elites

will engage with "CRT" before mainstream sources do. In RQ2, we distinguish between *ideological behavior* and various modes of *connectivity* these two factions exhibit. Here, we expect that more ideologically "extreme" and more connected members of Congress will be more predisposed to adopt and spread the "CRT" issue. RQ3 aims to capture new network logics that might potentially incentivize the adoption of specific issues among connected factions and their digital surrogates. We expect that mentioning "CRT" is positively associated with both platform-based engagement and media attention.

RQ1: What is the pattern of "CRT" diffusion among Republican elites, right-wing news sources, and mainstream media?

RQ2: What differences can we observe between the faction of Republicans that adopt and spread the "CRT" issue and those that do not?

RQ3: How do "CRT" mentions impact platform-based engagement and media attention?

Data and Methods

For media content, we used a paid subscription to NewsWhip to collect every online article published by *The New York Times*, CBS, and CNN (mainstream sources), as well as *Fox News*, *The Daily Caller*, and *Breitbart* (Right-wing News Sites–RNS) between January 2019 and January 2022. NewsWhip is a firm specializing in digital analytics and open-source intelligence. It monitors news coverage and audience engagement across major online social media platforms and news websites. Although its data sources are publicly accessible, its infrastructure and collaborations with companies like Meta enable more efficient and systematic data collection than independent researchers can manage. Through its API, NewsWhip offers access to archived online news content and associated social media engagement metrics dating back to 2014, making it a common resource in academic studies (Brown and Mourão 2022; Garrett and Bond 2021; Harlow et al. 2017; Q. Li, Bond, and Garrett 2023; Yang, McCabe, and Hindman 2024).

For elite communicative output, we use the DC Inbox dataset (Cormack 2023) for the same timeframe, which provides text-based data from newsletters sent out by members of Congress to

their subscribers—i.e., constituents who have opted into receiving these formats. For social media output and engagement data, we collected all tweets published by members of the 116th and 117th Congress between January 2019 and January 2022, collected using Twitter's Academic API in February 2023. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of posts, articles, and newsletters collected overall, as well as the subsamples containing a reference to "critical race theory". We searched for mentions of the entire phrase and "CRT", manually validating and ruling out—very rare—false positives, such as references to the "Colorado River Treaty".

Table 1: Data Sources and Counts

Type	Data Source	CRT Count	Total Count
Mainstream	The New York Times	146	352,477
	CBS	41	144,899
	CNN	164	185,245
Elites	DC Inbox	409	44,954
	Twitter (GOP)	713	512,510
RNS	Daily Caller	1,447	92,186
	Fox News	610	209,780
	Breitbart	964	399,691
Total		**4,494**	**1,941,742**

Findings

Next, we apply our data to our research questions. First, we identify temporal trends in the use of CRT by our different actor types, comparing patterns that emerge between ideologically aligned media and part of the Republican party. Next, we examine uptake by congressional Republicans in a more granular manner, identifying differences between those members who deploy the term ("CRT Republicans") and those who do not ("Non-CRT Republicans"). Finally, we consider the potential network logics that may incentivize engagement with the "CRT" issue.

RQ1: Pattern of "CRT" Diffusion

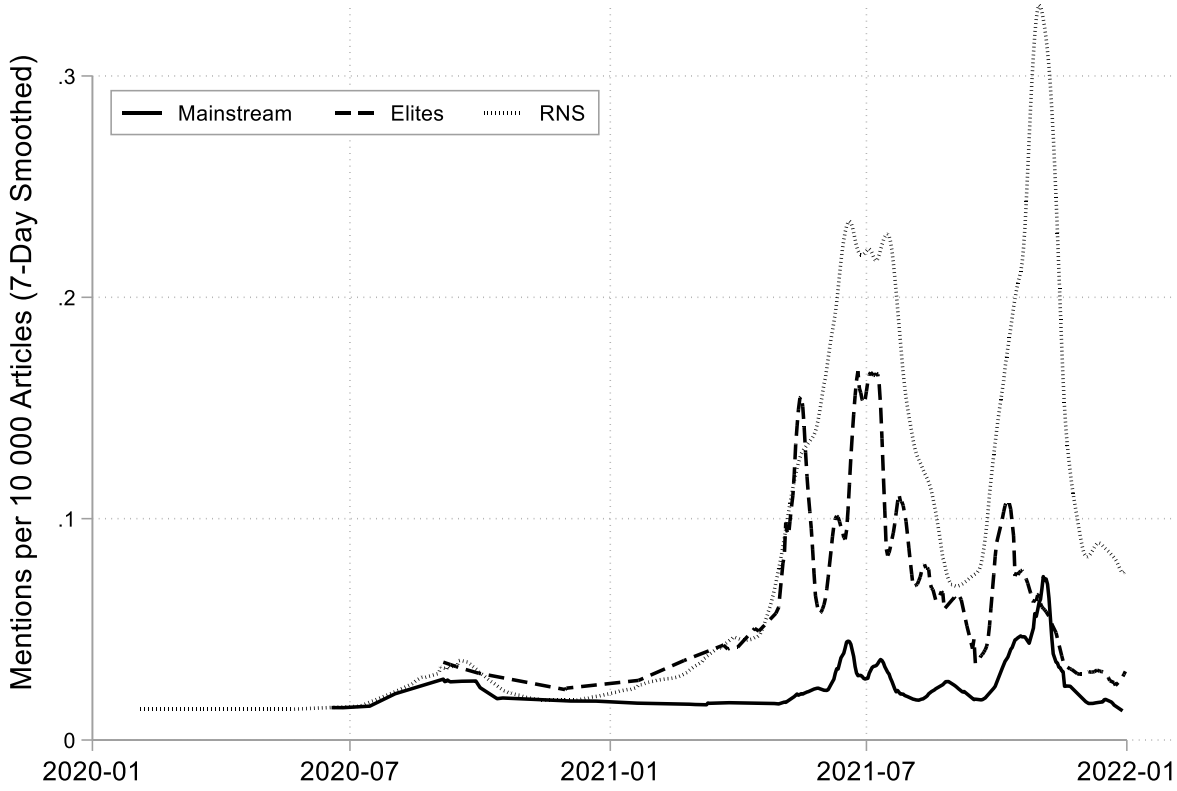
To identify the emergence and spread of "CRT" we first map the use of the term in posts or articles over time by different source groups. Our *mainstream* group includes all online articles in *The New York Times*, in CBS, and CNN. Our right-wing news sources (*RNS*) include all online articles from

Fox News, *Breitbart*, and *The Daily Caller*. Our *elite* measures include mentions in Republican newsletters collected using the DC Inbox platform (Cormack 2023) and their respective Twitter feeds.

In Figure 1, we present the uptake of the term "critical race theory" ("CRT") across source groups, showing a sequential diffusion pattern. Early mentions emerge in Spring 2020 among RNS, followed by mainstream news in the Summer and subsequently resurface in late 2020 across the three actor types, including elite sources. This is followed by major spikes beginning in the early Summer of 2021, another uptick in November 2021, likely linked to Glenn Youngkin's gubernatorial victory in Virginia. In the supplementary material, we provide a more granular breakdown by actor type, noting that *Breitbart* and *The New York Times* adopted the term earlier than their respective peer groups. Additionally, we observe that elite engagement with "CRT" began on Twitter before appearing in newsletters, which may be read as being indicative of a more dynamic two-way communication function that this interactive platform has, by which it provides members not only with a venue to publish statements but also access to information that is circulating there, versus the strictly unidirectional output function of the newsletters.

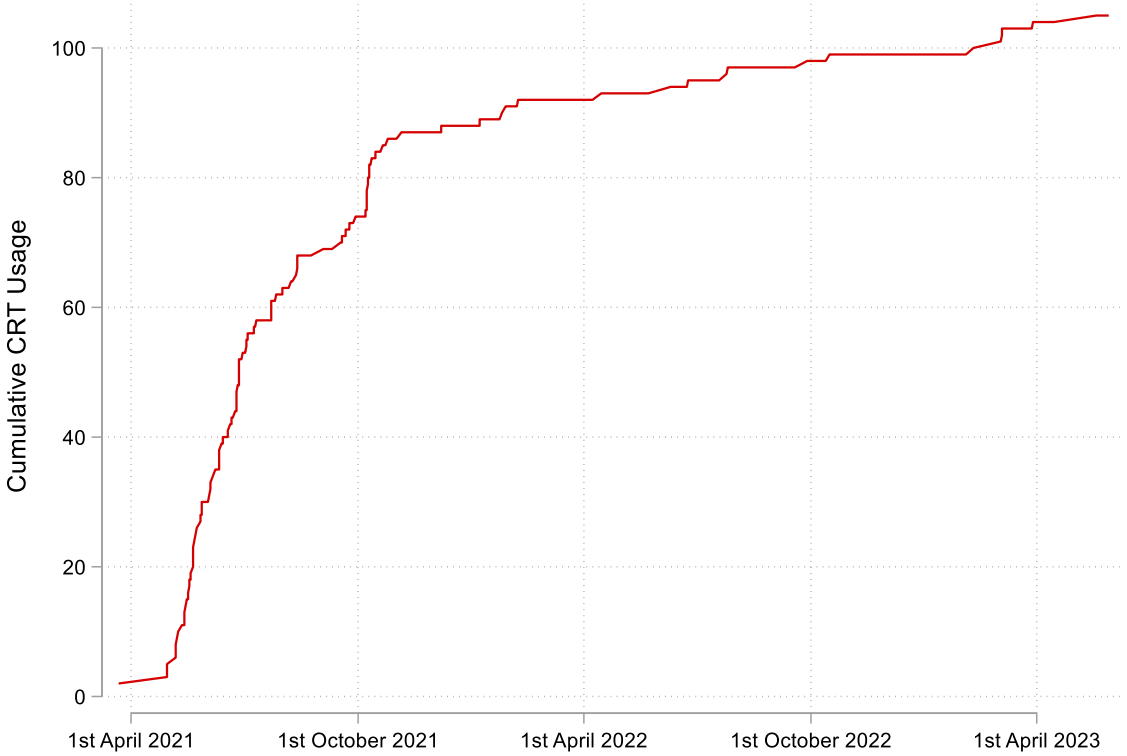
The main takeaway of the normalized temporal trends we uncover here is that based on the relative volume the "CRT" agenda item holds, there are clear overlaps between the elite sources and the right-wing news sites in our sample. While mainstream media certainly also cover the issue, the relative levels of attention are far lower and appear to lag behind the focus by RNS and congressional elites, making it likely that at least part of the coverage here is in direct response to the other two actor groups, which are clearly more in sync with one another. In terms of our main research question and conceptual focus, we take this to indicate a clear overlap and potential connection between Republican elites and ideologically aligned informational networks.

Figure 1: Normalized Temporal Trends of "CRT" by Source Group



As mentioned above, to identify the use of the term "Critical Race Theory" among members of Congress, we also collected data from their weekly newsletters to constituents via the DC Inbox platform (Cormack 2023). Our full dataset dates back to 2010, but we observe no use of the term before 2020 (see supplementary material). In Figure 2 we plot the cumulative use of the term by Republicans, such that each increment on the y-axis represents a member's first use. As shown in the supplementary material, Democratic members of Congress barely mention the term in our data, with only three Democrats (Jamie Raskin, Yvette Clarke, and Jackie Speier) ever using the term. Conversely, Republicans saw a huge uptick in usage between the spring and autumn of 2021, with a steady addition of new uses thereafter.

Figure 2: Republican Member of Congress Use of CRT



By the end of our period of analysis, more than 100 Republicans in Congress had referenced the term in their newsletters. Notably, however, this initial and sudden spike quickly plateaus. We take this as being indicative of two factors: a) some but not all Republican members adopt this issue, and b) among those that do, "CRT" uptake happens quickly and almost in unison. Based on these observations, it seems likely that parts of the GOP are reacting to the spikes previously observed among right-wing news sites in ways that others are not. We turn to our second empirical research question to find out more about why that might be.

RQ2: Differences Between "CRT Republicans" and "Non-CRT Republicans"

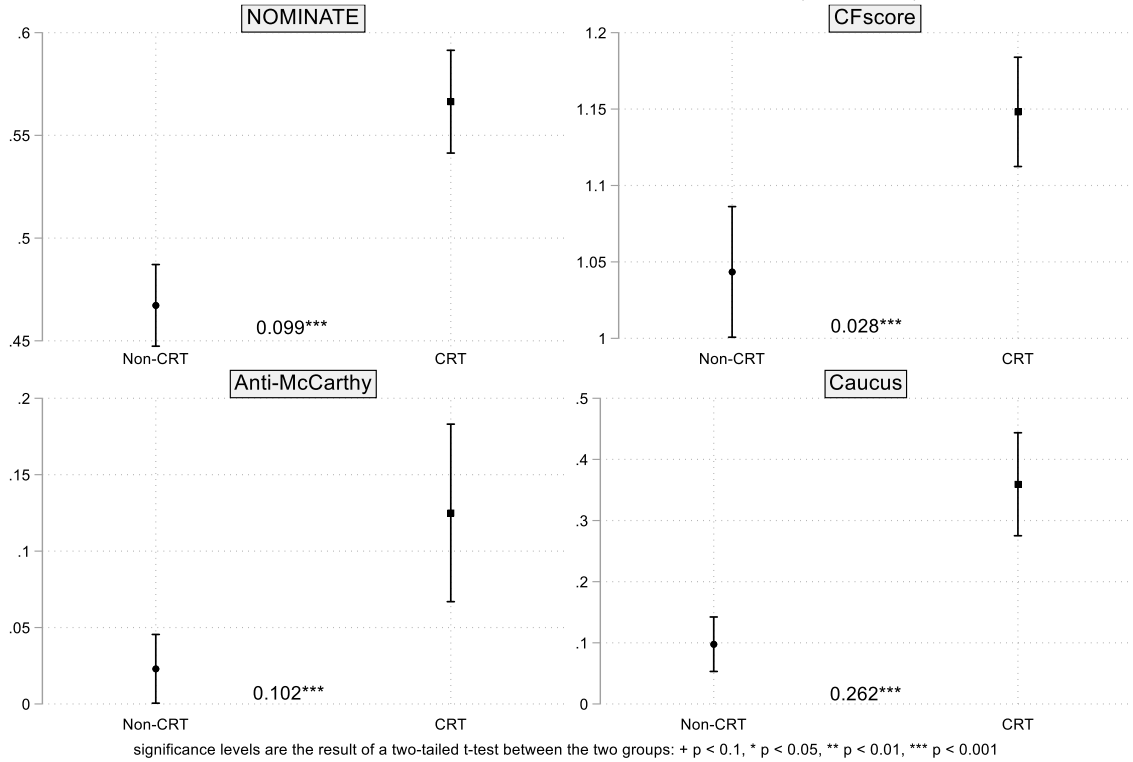
Next, we look to identify differences between those Republicans who talked about "critical race theory" in their weekly newsletters or Twitter feeds and those that did not. To do so, we create two groups, those Republicans who ever mentioned the topic on either feed ("CRT Republicans") and those who did not ("Non-CRT Republicans").

We first analyze the differences between these two groups in terms of their behavior in Congress. To do so, we use four independent measures that might reasonably be considered as proxies for ideology. Our first measure, *NOMINATE* (Nominal Three-Step Estimation), is a statistical method used to measure and analyze the ideological positions of legislators based on their voting

records (Poole and Rosenthal 1985). NOMINATE generates spatial models where each legislator is scaled based on their voting patterns, enabling the inference of ideological positioning over time. Our second measure, Campaign Finance Scores (*CFscore*), estimates the ideological leanings of political actors based on campaign contributions (Bonica 2014). CFscores assign a continuous ideological position by analyzing patterns in who gives to whom, assuming that donors support candidates or causes aligned with their ideological preferences. Our third measure, titled *Anti-McCarthy*, takes the value 1 if the member of Congress voted against Kevin McCarthy being Speaker of the House in January 2023 and 0 if they voted in favor of him being speaker. All Senators are coded as missing according to this measure. Our final measure considers membership of an ideological *caucus*. Following Cowburn and Knüpfer (2024), we interpret current or historic membership of the House Freedom Caucus (HFC) or Liberty Caucus as an indicator of alignment with the more ideologically extreme faction of the congressional party (see also Bloch Rubin 2017; Green 2019). Members of these caucuses are coded as 1 and non-members as 0. Both caucuses are identifiably on the right of the party. Given that these caucuses only exist in the House of Representatives with no equivalent group in the Senate, all senators are dropped from this measure. Grouped together, we might therefore conceive of these characteristics as being representative of individual preferences or ideology.

Figure 3 shows the differences in each of these measures between those members of Congress that we identify as CRT Republicans and those that we identify as Non-CRT Republicans. Across all four measures, we identify a substantive and statistically significant difference between the groups. Figure 3 also shows the means and 95% confidence intervals for each group, with the results and significance of a two-tailed t-test shown at the bottom of each panel.

Figure 3: Differences in Individual Behavior (Ideology)



Having identified a clear behavioral cleavage between those members of Congress who do and do not talk about "CRT", we next analyze the differences in their engagement with different media sources. On Twitter, CRT Republicans also have significantly more followers and follow significantly more accounts on average than non-CRT Republicans.[6] Beyond these simple counts, we use several distinct indicators that measure the degree to which members of Congress connect to right-wing news sources. The first two indicators measure the frequency of references to either Fox News, Breitbart, or The Daily Caller across all Tweets (*Tweets: Fox-Breitbart-DC*) or congressional newsletters (*Newsletter: Fox-Breitbart-DC*). We selected these three media to test here as the previous analysis established that they featured "CRT" heavily. Explicitly referencing these sources therefore provides a potential indicator for MoC's awareness of the content on these media.

For the third metric, we follow Cowburn and Knüpfer (2024), scaling Republican members of Congress using the hyperlinks that they share on Twitter. Cowburn and Knüpfer (2024) create codebooks based on three different news site collections: Media Cloud (MediaCloud.org), AllSides (AllSides.com), and RNS-US (Heft et al. 2020, 2021). Put simply, having a higher score on these

[6] CRT Republicans have on average 238,477 ($p<0.001$) more followers than non-CRT Republicans and follow 360 ($p<0.05$) more accounts.

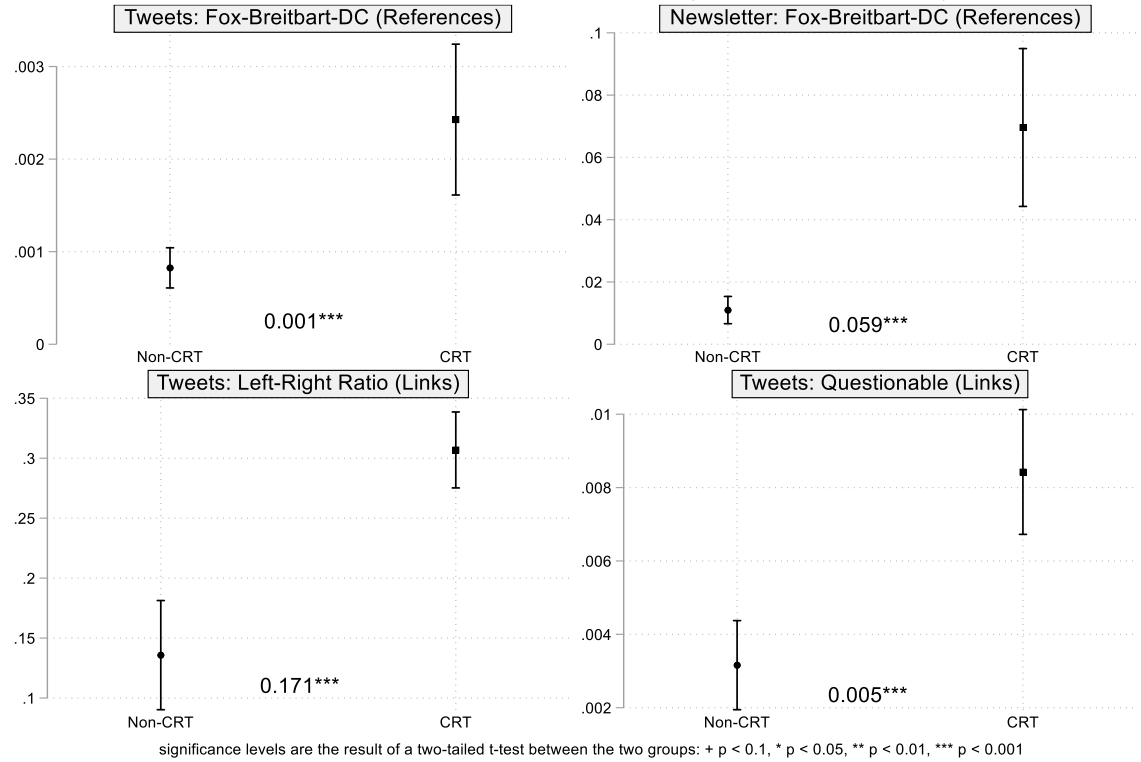
indicators means a member of Congress tended to link more to right-wing and far-right sites than to other types of media. We use the same approach here, and, as explained in more detail in the supplementary material, we draw on the Media Bias Fact Check's 2020 list of ideological media sites[7] to create a similar *Left-Right Ratio*, which counts hyperlinks in Tweets to domains classified as either left, center-left, center, center-right, or right, divided by the total number of thus classified hyperlinks.

Media Bias Fact Check also provides a category for "questionable sources", which link to sites known to push conspiracy narratives. As with our sample of RNS, these sites indicate engagement with a sub-sample of informational input that signals being outside of the (perceived) mainstream and reflects an "alternative" news and information ecology. We use this *Questionable* category of links as our fourth indicator of connectivity.

In Figure 4, we present the differences in means between CRT Republicans and Non-CRT Republicans in terms of these four media connectivity measures (mentions or sharing or re-tweeting links to them). As with behavior in Congress, we see a substantive and statistically significant difference on each of the four media engagement measures. What these distinct metrics tell us is that CRT Republicans are much more likely to engage with ideologically extreme or alternative media formats, including (but not limited to) the three we probed for initial "CRT" related content, in the time series featured above (Fox News, Breitbart, Daily Caller). CRT Republicans are more connected than non-CRT Republicans, using digital platforms to link to and amplify content from these sites and the informational environments they represent.

[7] Media Bias Fact Check: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/about/. We recognize that any such classification of sources into ideological (or "biased") categories is contentious. We believe that creating a ratio here, rather than taking absolutes, is the best approach to provide metrics on differences in hyperlinking practices. Our results align with scholarship that uses alternative classification metrics (Cowburn and Knüpfer 2024).

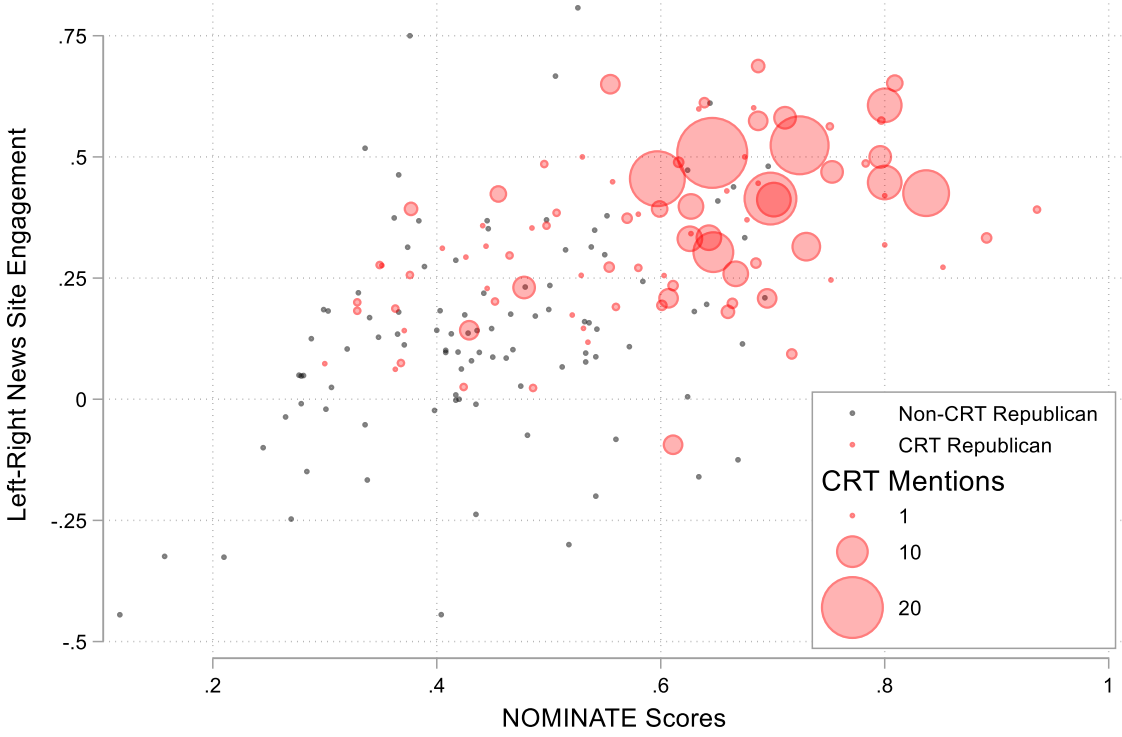
Figure 4: Differences in Connectivity (References & Links)



The above metrics provide a clear picture of both sets of factors: CRT Republicans are distinct both in terms of their behavior in Congress, as well as in the connectivity they exhibit in engaging with more ideologically extreme media. We next wanted to understand how these factors are associated. In Figure 5, we therefore plot ideological news-engagement by members of Congress on the y-axis, while the x-axis provides a proxy for ideological behavior in Congress—their NOMINATE score. We deem the news engagement score, as measured via the ratio of hyperlinks posted to Twitter that link to sites classified as left-versus right-leaning news sites, to be an indicator of connectivity to hyper-partisan news ecologies. The color of the point identifies whether the member of Congress is in our non-CRT (black) or CRT Republican (red) grouping, with the size of the observation weighted by how many newsletters they sent out that mention "CRT".[8]

[8] We chose to only use the value for newsletter-based "CRT" mentions here, as this provides an indicator via data that is distinct from that derived via Twitter, which we use for the y-axis' left-right news site link ratio.

Figure 5: Ideology and Connectivity to Partisan News Sources



Though some non-CRT Republican are more to the right in their behavior in Congress or more connected to RNS online, Figure 5 demonstrates a fairly consistent pattern whereby those Republicans whose voting record is further to the right and who engage heavily with far-right media online—and therefore are positioned in the upper right corner of the plot—are also those members of Congress who push the "CRT" agenda item most consistently. In other words, the more ideologically extreme and the more connected to right-wing news ecologies that a Republican member of Congress is, the more likely they would have been to not only pick up but also heavily push the "CRT" agenda.[9]

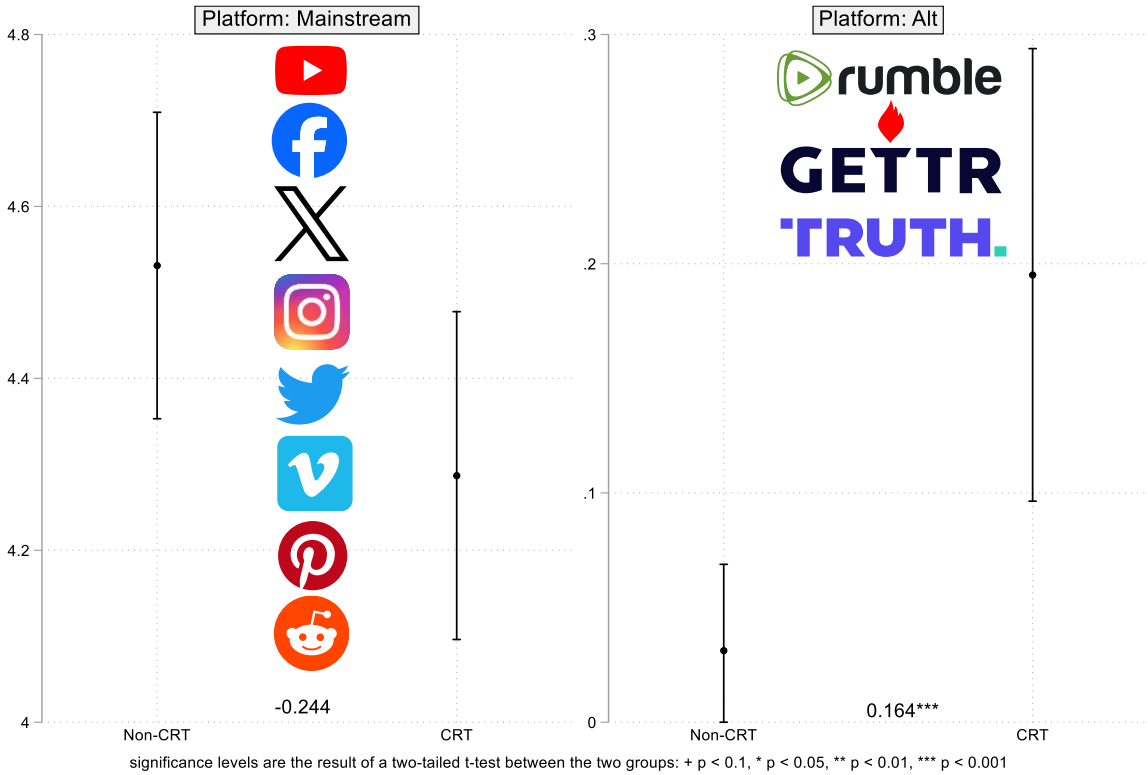
One limitation of the above data is that they are derived from activity via a single digital platform environment (Twitter / X). While the indicators for newsletter offer an additional metric for how engaged members of Congress are in using digital tools to build connections to their constituents, this is a fairly unidirectional information flow, meaning we use this metric to understand the salience of "CRT" within elite-to-public communication. To expand our findings on differences in connectivity between the two groups of Republicans, we therefore gauge differences in terms of which

[9] In the supplementary material, we also present a version of this plot that includes the names of members of Congress for those readers interested in positioning individuals on these dimensions. We present this version here for ease of interpretation.

networking affordances these tap into, via the emerging possibilities of a high choice platform environment.

To do so, we gathered data from the official homepages of all current members of Congress as of October 2024. We collected the hyperlinks that point to official profiles on various social media platforms featured on these official homepages. We take this to be an indicator of the various modes of digital networking that might be employed by a given party elite. We group these platforms into what we might refer to as "mainstream" and "alt-tech" platforms, showing the difference in usage in Figure 6. In this categorization, we consider Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, YouTube, Threads, Flickr, Pinterest, LinkedIn as being "mainstream" based on their widespread adoption beyond communities on the (far-)right. The distributions are very similar, suggesting that these platforms are widely used by CRT and non-CRT Republicans alike, and we do not identify significantly less usage of mainstream digital spaces by CRT Republicans. However, as Figure 6 shows, websites that link to what we characterize as "alt-tech" platforms (Rumble, Truth Social, and Gettr)-—known for deliberately providing spaces for far-right ideologies—disproportionately come from CRT Republicans, with a significant difference between the two groups.

Figure 6: Mainstream and Alt Platform Links on MoC Website



Arguably, the method we employ here, which analyzes the official homepage infrastructure of members of Congress, is somewhat limited, as it will only register a profile if it is deliberately linked to via an MoC's official website infrastructure. Yet, we believe that, if anything, this approach will undercount the extent to which Republicans have profiles on alternative platforms—and that this potential undercounting would affect both groups equally, meaning that we believe the sample here would still be indicative of the overall difference ratio between them. We therefore interpret these results as a further indication that members of the "CRT faction" within the GOP are more likely to be connected to a particular type of media environment provided by different platforms—and not solely based on the observed behavior within them, which our Twitter/X and congressional newsletters datapoints previously identified.

RQ3: New Network Logics of Engagement & Media Attention

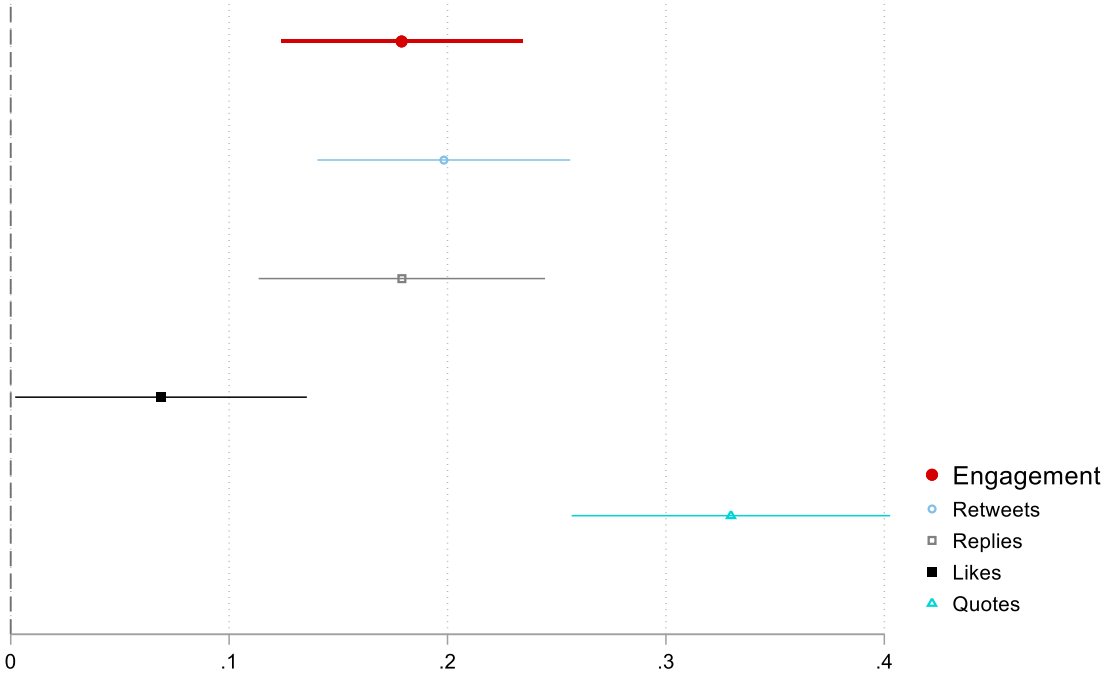
Our third and final research question seeks to uncover potential pull-effects by which network structures might incentivize specific modes of connectivity, thus pointing us towards new logics that govern the processes we observe above. In order to do so, we again take a comparative approach, this time focused on engagement metrics and media attention that is devoted specifically to "CRT" content.

We begin by considering the engagement of tweets by members of Congress, when they feature "critical race theory" versus those that do not. In Figure 7, we show these differences by presenting the coefficients of a series of regression models. Because engagement data is overdispersed count data with many zeros, we use negative binomial regression (for full results, see Appendix). We set our data with the member of Congress as the panel indicator and include member fixed effects to isolate within-member variation in engagement associated with CRT content, thereby controlling for any between-member differences.[10] These models indicate that tweets featuring CRT receive

[10] These models also include a time trend to control for secular growth in engagement on the platform. Full model results are shown in the supplementary materials.

significantly more engagement than other tweets from the same member of Congress.[11] This pattern holds across all four engagement metrics; retweets, replies, likes and quotes.[12]

Figure 7: Twitter Engagement when MoCs Mention CRT



Next, we turn to platform-based engagement garnered by news articles that feature "CRT" and are posted to social media. The NewsWhip data that we use here provides an indicator for social media metrics that each of the recorded articles had amassed at the time of data collection.[13] In Figure 8, we show the difference in the mean article engagement on Facebook, calculated by adding the total number of reactions[14], shares, and comments on a story. As in the previous model, we use negative binomial regression.[15] Here we see that for sources on mainstream media sources we see significantly less engagement on Facebook for stories that feature CRT. Conversely, stories from RNS that feature the term receive significantly more engagement on the most popular social media platform, offering a clear incentive for these media organizations to promote such narratives.

[11] Coefficients in a negative binomial regression represent the log of expected counts in the dependent variable given a one unit change (in this case using CRT) in the independent variable holding all other variables constant.

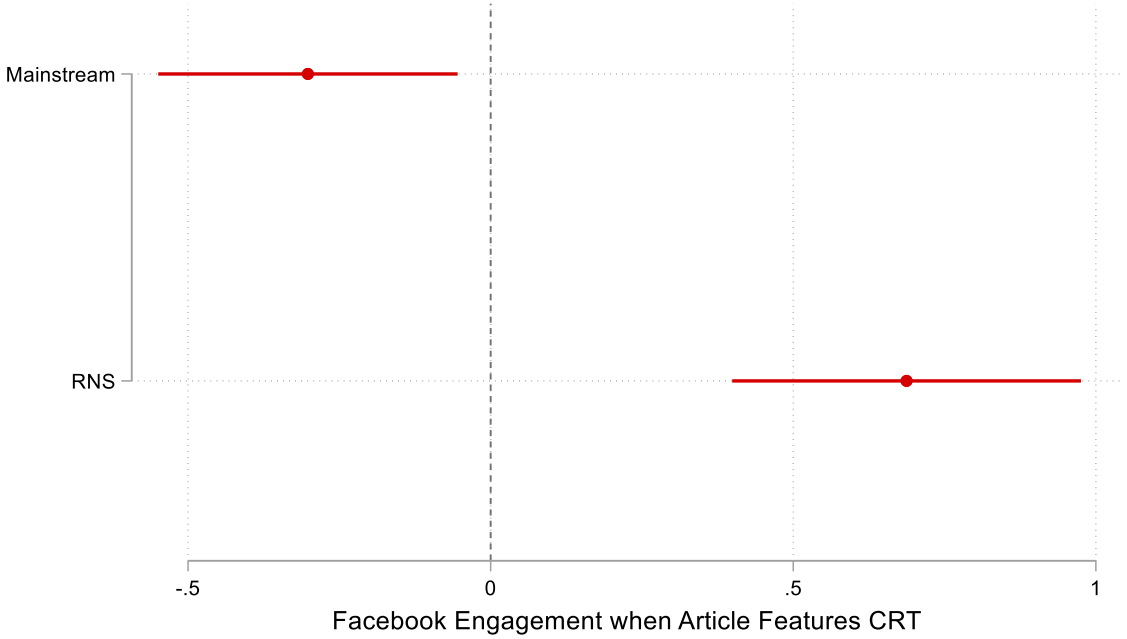
[12] The variation observed between the size of the coefficients across affordances is consistent with prior research on how platform features shape politicians' social media engagement (Cowburn, Klinger, and Larsson 2025).

[13] We collected the NewsWhip data in December 2021. There is no reason for us to believe that the engagement metrics of online articles provided by NewsWhip would be biased in any meaningful way between the two article types (CRT vs. Non-CRT).

[14] Like, love, haha, wow, angry, sad.

[15] The model includes the same controls as the previous model.

Figure 8: Change in Facebook Engagement when Articles Feature CRT



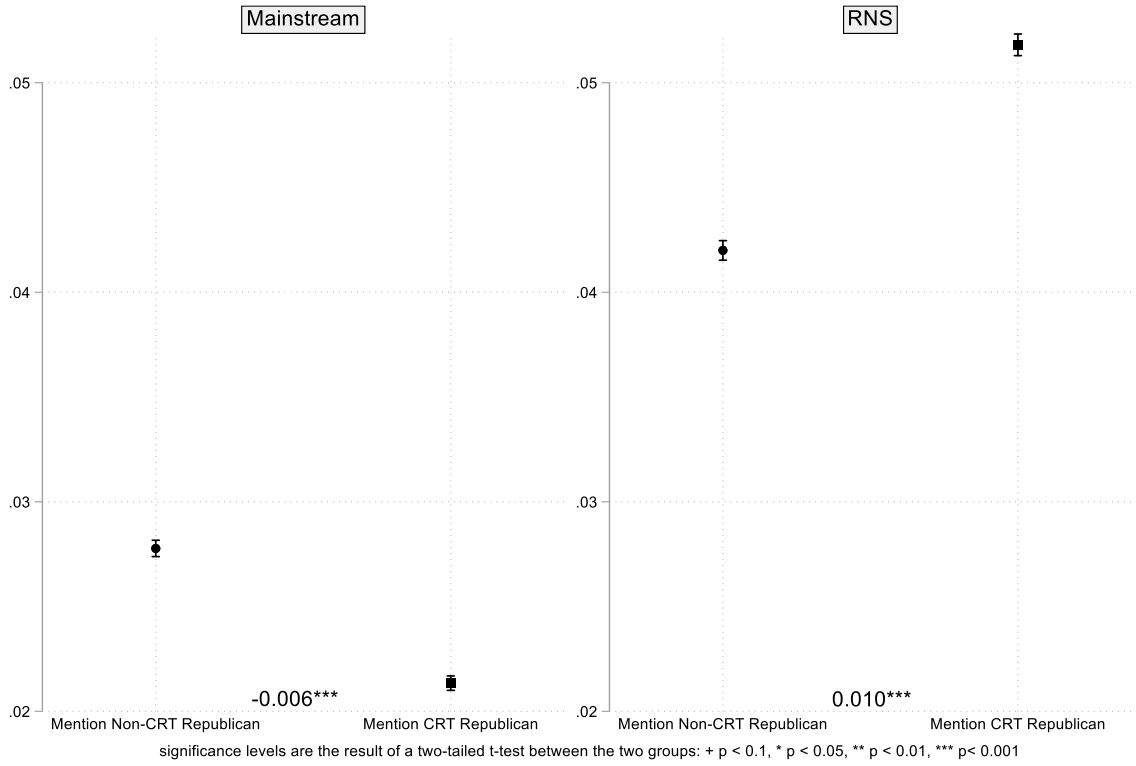
Beyond platform-based engagement metrics, we also believe that a potential logic of connective faction offers incentives to political elites to use narratives such as "CRT" in order to receive media attention. To measure this, we employed a dictionary approach, searching for the use-names of all Republican members of Congress used in our sample, divided into the two factions.[16] In Figure 9, we show the percentage of articles on mainstream and right-wing news sites that mention CRT and non-CRT Republicans. Among both sets of sources, we observe clear differences. For mainstream articles, non-CRT Republicans are mentioned far more often than CRT Republicans were. RNS were more likely to mention both types of Republican than mainstream sources, but were yet more likely to mention CRT Republicans than their non-CRT co-partisans. In the supplementary material, we show that these patterns are even more pronounced when we restrict our data to articles that mention CRT. This indicates not only that ideologically aligned media are more likely to devote attention to Republicans, but also that here too, the previously observed divide between a more connected and ideologically extreme faction within the GOP manifests.

In summary: Republican MoCs who post about "CRT" receive more social media engagement, just as RNS articles which feature "CRT" do, while CRT Republicans, as a group, also receive more

[16] The dictionary contains 353 entries, divided into "CRT Republicans" and "non-CRT Republicans" corresponding with the sample we used in our previous analysis. The results were manually validated by drawing a random sample of text passages across all corpora. Since we use the full combination of first and last names, there is little reason to suspect biases in the data that would tilt to one of the two groups.

attention from ideologically-aligned media formats. This finding is consistent with previous scholarship, namely that the digital information environments incentivize the spread of radical or highly politicized topics pushed by political elites and right-wing media (Knüpfer, Schwemmer, and Heft 2023), which have increasingly functioned as political organizations and digital surrogates for the Republican Party (Livingston and Miller 2025; Yang 2025). Based on these findings, we believe it safe to conclude that implicit and explicit incentives exist, which are provided to some members of the Republican party via the digital networks they actively connect to. Notably, these same logics do not seem to hold for the news environment provided by mainstream media.

Figure 9: Mentions of CRT & Non-CRT Republicans in Mainstream & RNS Articles



Discussion: Networked Media Logics & Elite Radicalization

What have we observed in studying the use of the "CRT" issue across elite and media actors? Based on the sources and metrics we provided, the issue initially emerges within hyper-partisan and ideological sources, where peaks in attention then proceed to mirror those by Republican legislators. As the issue spread to these elite organizational actors, cleavages emerge between those that choose to adopt the "CRT" agenda and those that do not. Across a variety of indicators both for degrees of connectivity as well as political behavior, these form a distinct faction within the entire sample of

Republicans we looked at here. Furthermore, mentions "CRT" ensures these individuals higher social media engagement numbers, and more attention by ideologically aligned media.

We think that this case study demonstrates the connective dynamics at work here, which supersede any single medium or communication platform. As our multi-media, multi-platform analysis shows, the dynamics we observe are not limited to right-wing media outlets or a specific social media logic. Rather, they transport across a hybrid variety of actor types and platforms. What connects them is in fact the highly ideological "network ping" by which these communicative ties manifest. In other words, to these ideological networks, "CRT" has a signal function that generates connectivity beyond a specific communicative space. It becomes part of a larger narrative network, which appears primed to be activated by similar issues that will be collectively read through specific interpretive lenses. This logic may be akin to what Tripodi (2022) has described as a form of culturally embedded "deep story", which goes beyond any single medium and infuses the content of highly dynamic digital media formats. Other scholarship has highlighted how elite-driven disinformation campaigns strategically engage larger networks by inviting them to participate in the shared articulation of core grievances (Starbird 2025). In such cases, digital media may provide a way to forge these connections, but ultimately a deeper form of collective affect and overarching narrative maintains and shapes the network (Knüpfer and Klinger 2025).

Based on these observations, it seems safe to assume that experiences with previous, similar "network pings" such as the sudden "CRT" activity may have primed at least a faction of the Republican Party to be more responsive to this specific iteration. While this goes beyond the scope of our study, future research could probe whether past "CRT" activity may incentivize future engagement with similar topics and dynamics. In considering the radicalization processes towards increasingly illiberal positions within the GOP, Karpf (2025) highlights the role of "digital listening" and "analytics-based feedback loops," whereby "elite organizations go haywire through the self-rationalization that they are 'giving the people what they want,' based on the narrowest, most easily obtained metrics...with no broader vision of their purpose, or of what democracy requires" (Karpf 2025, 271). Based on the observed engagement metrics both for RNS as well as individual MoCs'

own digital content, we believe that the "CRT" case fits this rationalization. At the organizational levels (for party actors and media outlets) "CRT" might be one of many examples by which new logics manifest over time, by not only creating and maintaining new network ties but also incentivizing and conditioning organizational actors to become part of these communicative and political formations.

One useful way to clarify the boundary between what our findings demonstrate and what they imply is to think in terms of falsifiability. Empirically, we show that mentions of "CRT" are concentrated among a distinct subset of Republican elites who are more ideologically extreme and more tightly connected to hyper-partisan media networks. Issue uptake and connectivity patterns are not evenly distributed across the party but cluster around a faction. In contrast, our broader conceptual claim—that connective factions operate through "network pings" that sustain ties across elites and digital surrogates—is inferred from observed alignments in timing, attention, and engagement. Our contribution therefore empirically documents co-occurrences that are consistent with the logic of connective faction, while theorizing how these co-occurrences may be structured by underlying network logics.

To make this distinction clearer, we can also consider what would count as disconfirming evidence for the logic of connective faction. If factional elites who adopted "CRT" showed no stronger connectivity to hyper-partisan media, or if mentions of the issue did not translate into measurable differences in attention and engagement, our argument about connective dynamics would be substantially weakened. Similarly, if the diffusion of "CRT" emerged primarily through mainstream media or through centralized party coordination, then the role of digital surrogates and "network pings" would appear less central. These hypothetical counterfactuals point to the scope conditions of our framework: connective factions will be most visible when external digital networks provide attention, feedback, and incentives that party organizations alone cannot.

The implications of our framework reach beyond what we can establish with the "CRT" case alone. By interpreting "CRT" as a "network ping", we suggest that connective factions are primed to activate around issues when they strike a particular cultural resonance in the context of media

affordances. Though this is a theoretical extrapolation rather than an empirical finding, it highlights why connective factionalism matters. If networked factions can repeatedly re-activate around new signals, the result is not just a one-off event but a durable feedback loop that can (re)structure intra-party dynamics and thereby radicalize the party writ large.

As we have previously observed elsewhere (Cowburn and Knüpfer 2024), digital network ties, such as direct connections via social media platforms or hyperlinks to information outlets, can serve a "dual function" for political elites: for one, they can be markers of informational input. Secondly, they can signal in-group dynamics, by which the political actor communicates that they are in-the-know and part of a particular group that cares deeply or is aware of an issue. This dual function can lead to radicalization spirals, in which the signaling function itself serves as an important network tie between members of these factions, thus becoming further amplified and increasing in its potential signaling function.

Beyond the individual level, the outlined logic also forces us to rethink the roles of networked connectivity on the level of political organizations in the context of democratic norms. While scholarship on democratic theory has long deplored that parties and elites may not be receptive enough for outside information flows, the logic we highlight here also clearly shows how increases in connectivity might align with a narrowing of scopes towards more radical ideas or issues, questioning one of the main normative assumption of democratic participation: more connectivity need not necessarily lead to more pluralistic politics. Rather, as we have observed via the case study featured here, these forms of connective action may well function as mechanisms by which reactionary and exclusionary politics manifest and unfold productive power (see also Bennett and Livingston 2025; Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2018; Livingston and Miller 2025). Our findings show how a single political issue item can transform into a mode of connectivity between partisan actors and their surrogate networks, and how this process can make underlying organizational divisions within parties visible. In this sense, "CRT" is not just an issue, it provides a mode of connectivity within a broader system of digitally mediated ideological alignment.

Conclusion

We introduce a novel framework to explain how digital connectivity shapes the intra-party factional dynamics within political parties and contributes to the radicalization of (some parts of) the party. We call this "a logic of connective faction" which we demonstrate empirically using the issue of "CRT". As a political project, "CRT" introduces a disruptive set of ideas into US politics, aimed at fundamentally altering school curricula and reversing the logics underlying most progressive initiatives to curb or at least mitigate the ongoing legacies of racial disparity and white supremacy in the US (Carbone, Harell, and Soroka 2024; Smith et al. 2025). To highlight at least part of the mechanism by which this unfolded, we constructed an original dataset of right-wing as well as mainstream news sources, while also analyzing in what ways Republican elites who spread this agenda item are distinct from those who did not. We show how elite adoption of "CRT" messaging is directly connected to ideological preferences as well as modes of connectivity to digitally networked, ideological information environments.

As we demonstrate across a variety of indicators, a more connected faction exists within the Republican party; one that becomes visible around the circulation of a highly political and polarizing issue and which also correlates significantly with more extreme political behavior. Importantly, this is not a story about being "more connected" in general, but about being more connected to a specific type of network, via a politically charged issue. In this sense, "CRT" operates less as a coherent policy position and more as a mode of political linkage, through which underlying factional structures and digital alignments become visible.

One important limitation to our work is that we can say little about causality in terms of how the various factors we lay out may affect one another. Does more connectivity result in more radical positions? Or do more radical positions incentivize actors to connect more? It is ultimately unclear whether networks exert a conditioning force or whether particular elite types self-select into them. Our research cannot answer this question definitively and merely uncovers the degree to which these factors align. Yet, we also believe that we may well be dealing with a chicken-and-egg dynamic, in which both sets of factors impact one another in mutually reinforcing ways. The logics we make

out, and the incentive structures they provide, are likely to exert a conditioning effect on political behavior, shaping what kinds of issues are seen as resonant and what kinds of visibility are rewarded within these information environments. Future studies would benefit from tracing such processes over time and between contexts to better understand the co-evolution of factional positioning and media connectivity.

It is also unclear from our analysis what adopting the "CRT" issue ultimately provides to members of this faction in terms of political gain, either at the individual level or collectively as a group. It might still be too early to tell. The far-right shift that the second Trump administration and the congressional majority have taken in regard to abolishing DEI initiatives and dismantling the Department of Education might be seen as a continuation of the ideas that this rhetorical marker transported, which are themselves of course part of a much larger and longer trajectory of politics based on racial anxieties and animosities in the US. However, as we suggest above, what such an agenda might eventually produce in terms of policy change or electoral consequences may also diverge quite substantially from the more immediate and performative feedback that faction members receive via networked media: connectivity, engagement, and amplification.

One further limitation of this work is that it is based on a singular case study. It is possible (if highly implausible) that the dynamics we observe regarding "CRT" may be distinct or even unique. In future studies, we would be highly interested in testing cases marked by similar patterns of sudden spikes of widespread visibility of highly ideological and contentious issues. Recent discussions around "DEI," the framing of Black Lives Matter as synonymous with "Antifa," the trajectory of the "Stop the Steal" campaign, or various forms of moral panics and anti-trans agitation all come to mind as potentially revealing comparative cases.

Our analyses here focus solely on the interplay between elected officials and hyperpartisan media Yet, the nature of digital networks is that they are, to differing degrees, open to public and wider input, where activists, party members, and "outrage entrepreneurs" such as Christopher Rufo likely play an important role in seeding issues, framing them for broader circulation, and mobilizing grassroots engagement. Similarly, citizen networks on social media might provide feedback loops that

amplify certain elites and narratives, while also conditioning what is acceptable within partisan discourse. Future research can focus particularly on this aspect in testing or modeling how various forms of network openness can lead to diverging effects regarding receptivity and factionalization effects. Such an agenda could also tease out the role of strategic movement actors or foreign influence operations seeking to strategically influence or merely disrupt democratic institutions and deliberation practices. By doing so, this work could investigate how bottom-up mobilization, movement entrepreneurs, and online communities intersect with elite-media dynamics both in terms of intra-party contention and radicalization.

Another limitation of our focus here is that we do not account for what might be referred to as the "Trump factor" in setting and maintaining a specific faction's agenda. This was a deliberate choice. Our focus was on the congressional party, with the aim of shedding light on intra-organizational factionalism beyond presidential politics. We believe that this focus also offers a more generalizable lens, better suited for application to other national contexts where charismatic leaders may not dominate party identity to the same extent, but where factional dynamics still shape issue uptake and ideological positioning.

Relatedly, we are limited by our focus on the United States. The claims we derive from this specific country case may well have limited applicability to other media and political systems, especially if these are not marked by the same dynamics of disruption emerging from radical to extreme right information ecosystems and intra-party factionalization. In multi-party parliamentary systems, connective factions might even constitute the majority of a party apparatus. Still, even in these cases, it is likely that it is primarily this faction that will drive rapid radicalization processes. There are, therefore, strong reasons to suspect that similar dynamics and logics can be made out in cases like Brazil, Sweden, Germany, or Spain, where disruptive actor types within established parties (e.g., the Sweden Democrats) or in newly founded parties (AfD, Vox) have been shown to rely on high degrees of digital connectivity to propagate far-right ideological agendas.

We therefore call on scholars working in these and other national contexts to probe whether the dynamics we observe here might also apply to the countries they study. Based on our findings,

we believe that a logic of connective faction is likely to manifest wherever ideologically extreme political actors or factions outsource organizational capacities to their digital surrogates. This, in turn, is most likely to occur in media systems that have seen an influx of hyperpartisan informational networks positioning themselves as alternatives to a perceived liberal or mainstream media establishment, and among parties and factions that have actively incorporated networked media infrastructures into both their messaging and internal analytics. If our theorizations are correct, these conditions will not only give rise to distinctive actor-media linkages, but will also be accompanied by elite radicalization patterns, amplified through digitally mediated feedback loops. By identifying and theorizing this mechanism, we aim to offer a conceptual tool that helps make sense of the new pathways through which partisan factions consolidate power, circulate agendas, and rewire the architectures of party politics.

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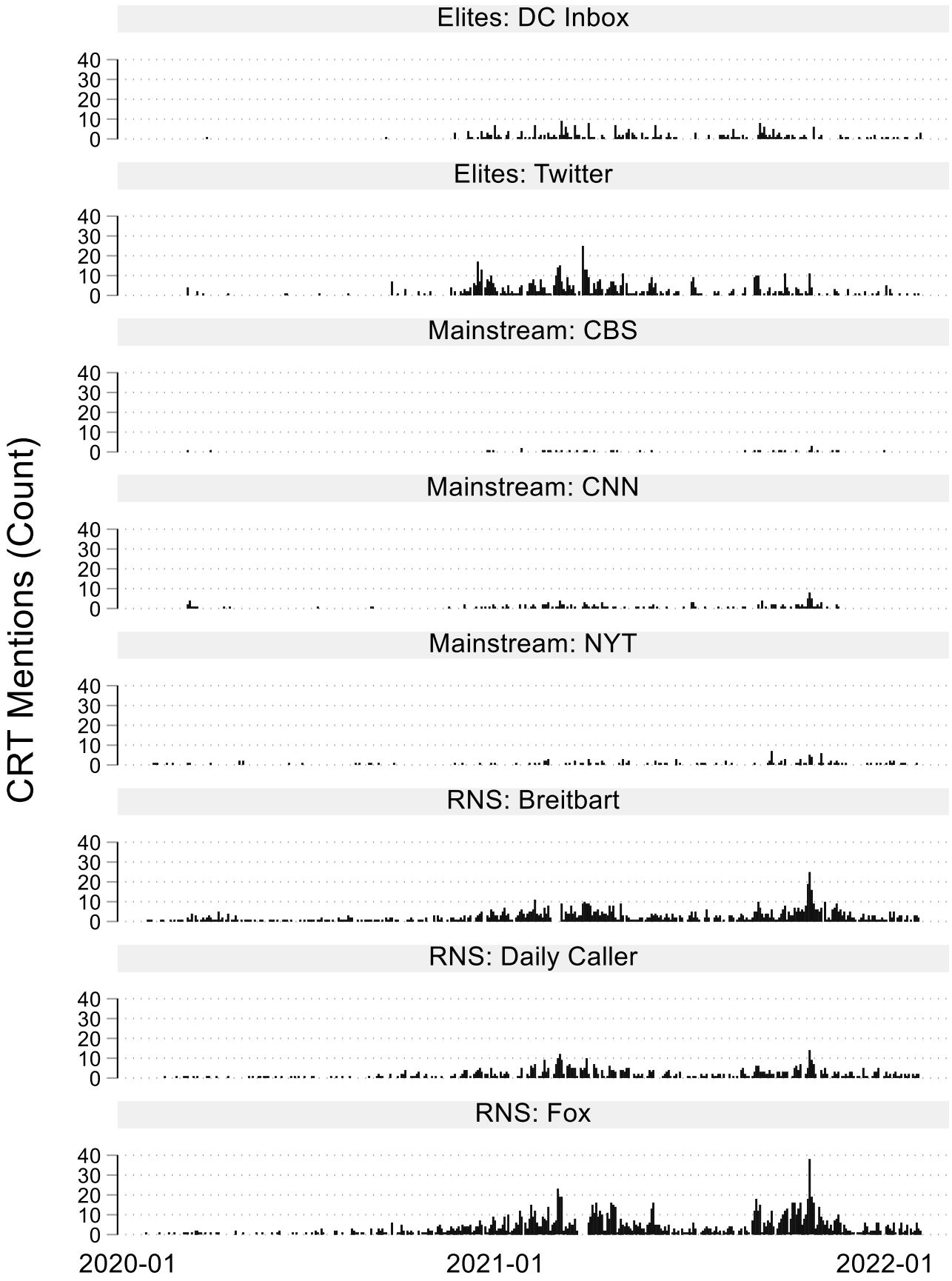
Supplementary Material

In this supplementary material we first present the descriptive statistics for our consolidated dataset of Republican members of Congress. Next, we provide some further description of the variables and their construction. Finally, we demonstrate that the empirical associations presented in the main paper are robust to a variety of alternative construction methods.

Timelines of "CRT" Mentions

Figure A.1 shows the timelines for "CRT" mentions in articles or posts, by individual actor type (i.e. data source). It shows initial spikes for the RNS groups, with Elite sources (Twitter and Newsletters) as well as Mainstream Media following suit later, but at much lower volumes. As described in the main part, there is a progression of RNS to Elites and then Mainstream the becomes evident here. Furthermore, for the elite subset, we find that Twitter posts precede Newsletters—likely due to the more immediate contact with other sources engaging with this issue (and then being retweeted by MoCs).

Figure A.1: CRT Featured in Posts or Articles over Time by Source



Descriptive Statistics

In Table A.1, we present the descriptive statistics, including the number of observations, means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values of our key variables used in the main paper.

Table A.1: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
(1) CRT Republican	364	.412	.493	0	1
(2) NOMINATE	364	.508	.158	.117	.996
(3) CFscore	322	1.091	.263	.113	2.572
(4) Anti-McCarthy	302	.066	.249	0	1
(5) Caucus Extreme	302	.209	.407	0	1
(6) Tweets: Fox-Breitbart-DC (References)	235	.002	.004	0	.037
(7) Newsletter: Fox-Breitbart-DC (References)	364	.035	.108	0	1.183
(8) Tweets: Left-Right Ratio (Links)	235	.235	.222	-.5	.808
(9) Tweets: Questionable (Links)	235	.006	.009	0	.064

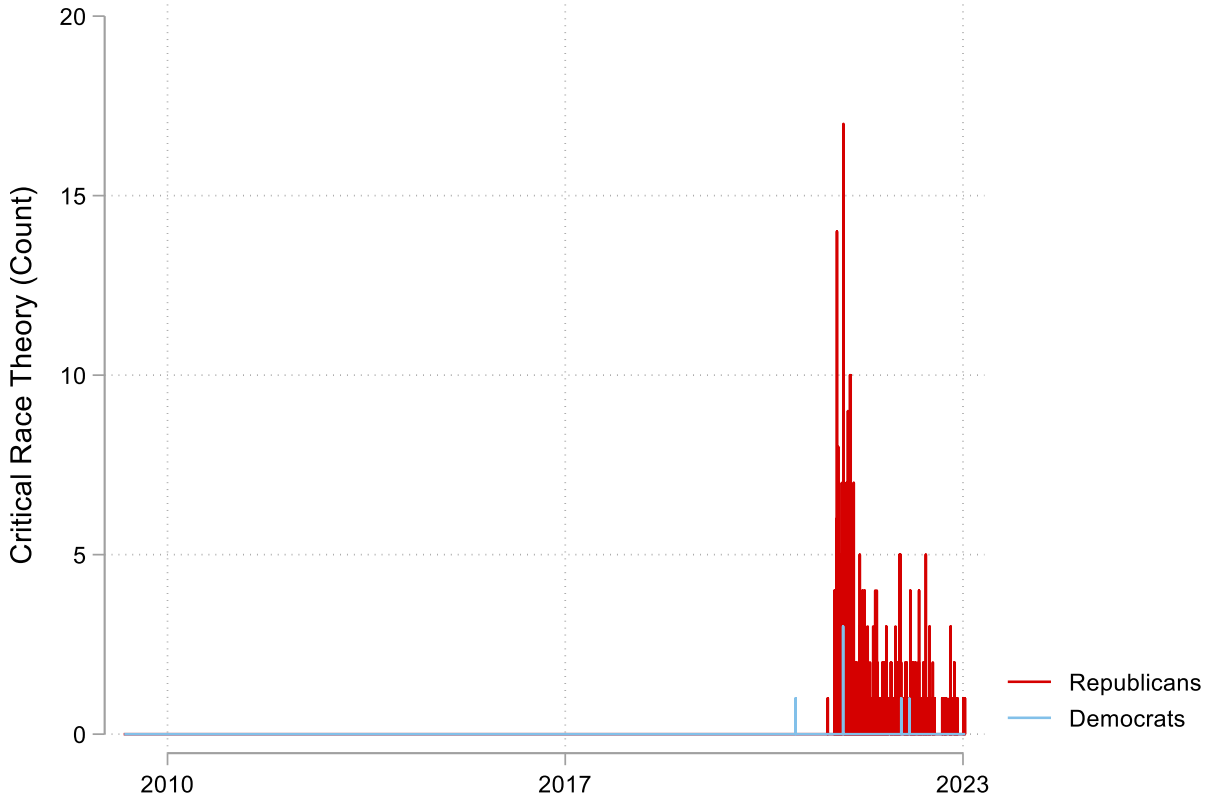
In Table A.2, we present the correlation matrix of the key variables in our dataset.

Table A.2: Matrix of Correlations

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) CRT Republican	1.000								
(2) NOMINATE	0.403	1.000							
(3) CFscore	0.243	0.510	1.000						
(4) Anti-McCarthy	0.179	0.434	0.187	1.000					
(5) Caucus Extreme	0.324	0.625	0.360	0.488	1.000				
(6) Tweets: Fox-Breitbart-DC (References)	0.167	0.194	0.076	-0.002	0.219	1.000			
(7) Newsletter: Fox-Breitbart-DC (References)	0.202	0.191	0.075	0.334	0.223	0.088	1.000		
(8) Tweets: Left-Right Ratio (Links)	0.422	0.612	0.387	0.249	0.457	0.252	0.244	1.000	
(9) Tweets: Questionable (Links)	0.260	0.402	0.162	0.298	0.332	0.207	0.306	0.471	1.000

In Figure A.2 we present each individual usage of the term "critical race theory" in newsletters from members of Congress in both parties between 2010 and 2023. Figure A.2 shows that there was no usage of the term prior to 2020 and most usage began in 2021 with a large uptick among Republican members of Congress as shown in the main paper (Figure 2). The lack of use before this period justifies our focus on 2020 onwards. Three Democratic members (Jackie Speier, Jamie Raskin, Yvette Clarke) ever used the term "critical race theory" in their newsletters. Each member sent one newsletter containing the term exactly once, with Speier sending a further newsletter that contained the term three times. The relative lack of engagement with this topic among Democratic members of Congress motivates our focus on the Republican Party in this paper.

Figure A.2: All Instances of CRT Usage in Congressional Newsletters



Variable Descriptions

Below we clarify how we identify mentions and hyperlinks in our data to construct our connectivity measures.

Mentions

We converted all tweets into lower case and counted the mentions of "fox news," "daily caller," and "breitbart" respectively in the tweets. Then, we summed them up for each member of Congress and divided it by the total number of tweets for each member. This gave us a ratio of mentions of three major right-wing media outlets over the total number of tweets. It is called "tweet_fox_breitbart_dc". We followed the same step for the DC Inbox data and computed a ratio of mentions of right-wing media outlets over the total number of newsletters. It is called "nl_fox-breitbart-dc".

Hyperlinks

Next, we extracted and unrolled URLs embedded in the tweets. Using Media Bias Fact Check's 2020 list of ideological media sites, we classified the domains into three categories, left, right, and questionable sources. We subtracted the number of left-wing domains from the number of right-wing domains and divided that number by the total number of URLs for each member of Congress. This gave us the variable "left-right ratio." In addition, we divided the number of questionable sources by the total count of URLs for each member and calculated the "questionable ratio".

Robustness Checks

To ensure our construction of the distinct "CRT Republican" category is not merely an artefact of our coding process we demonstrate the robustness of our descriptive results to a series of alternative operationalizations: solely using the DC Inbox newsletter mentions, solely using the Twitter mentions, and requiring that the member of Congress used the term at least five times (sixty-eight members of Congress were defined as CRT Republicans according to this definition). We present our results both in terms of ideology and connectivity below. In almost all instances, the differences identified in the main paper are also observed with these alternative constructions of CRT Republicans.

In Figure A.3 and A.4 we present our results solely using the congressional newsletters. To count as a CRT Republican in these figures, a member of Congress must have used the term "critical race theory" in one of their congressional newsletters. In Figure A.3 we present the differences in terms of ideology and in Figure A.4 we present the differences in terms of connectivity.

Figure A.3: Ideology Robustness Check (DC Inbox Only)

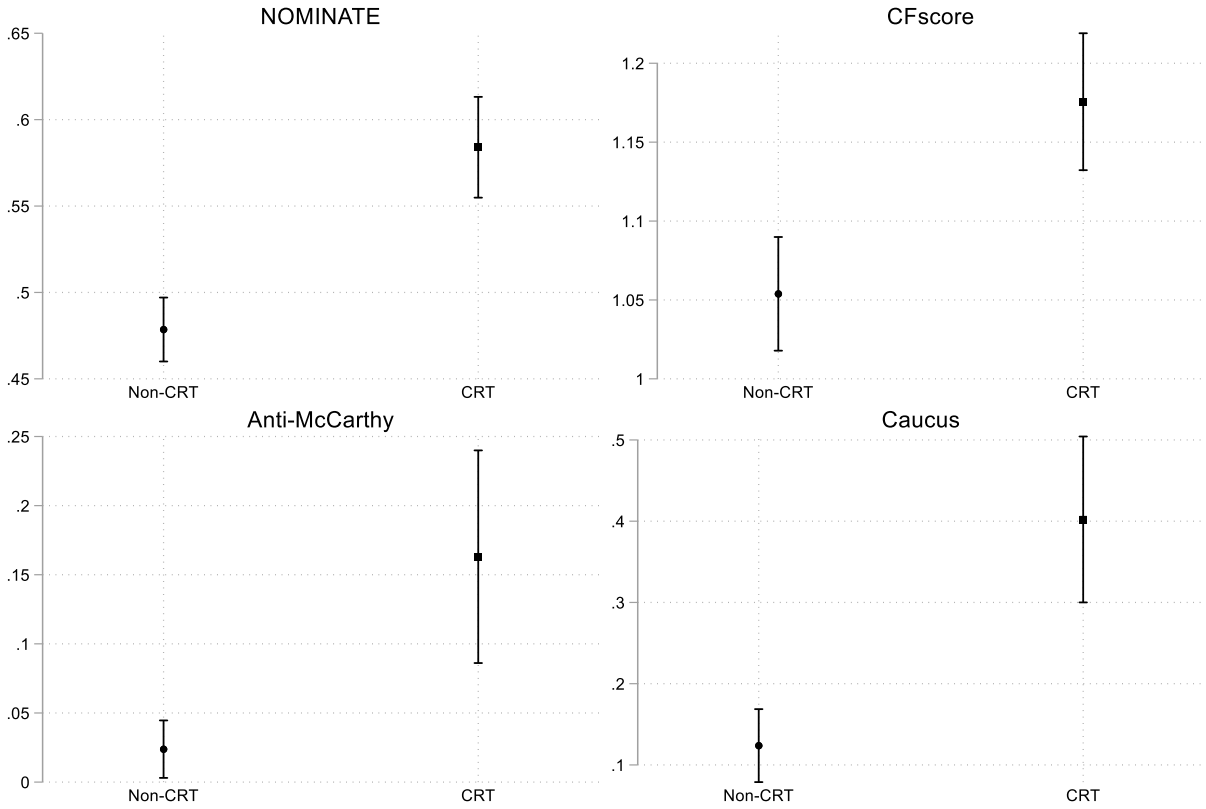
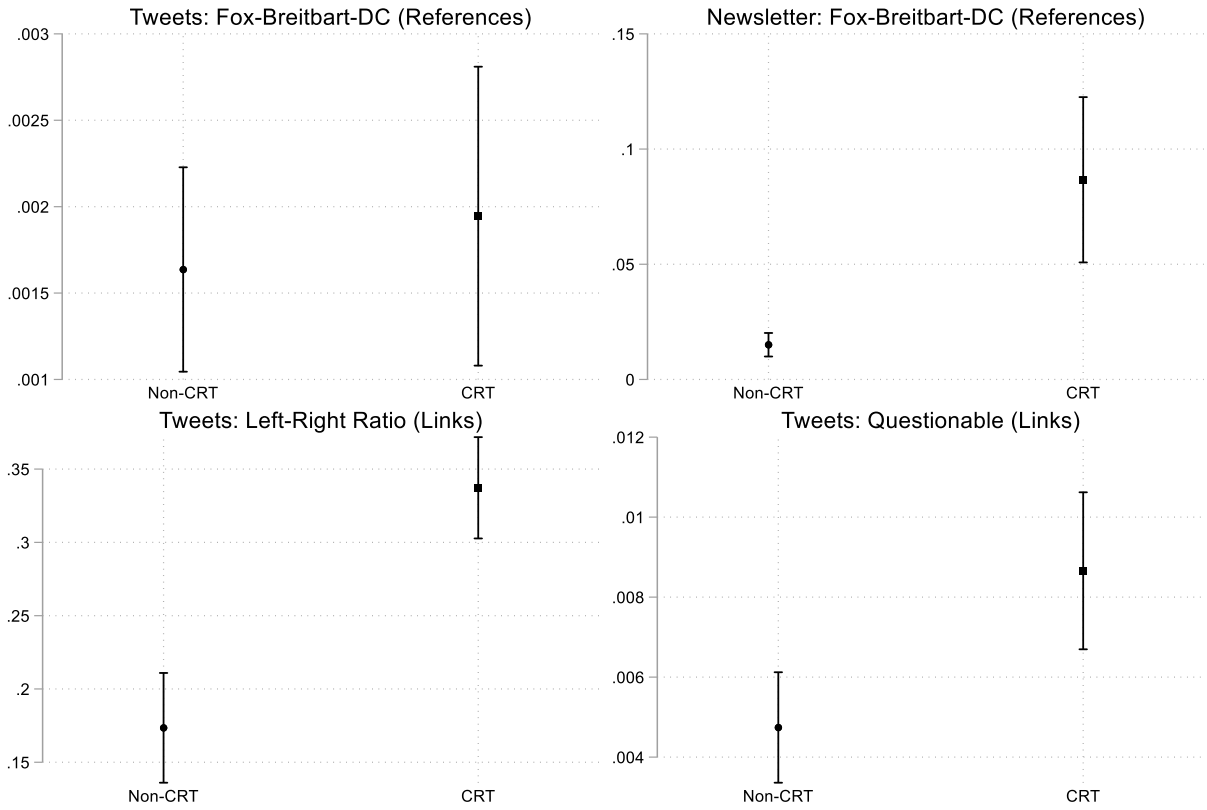


Figure A.4: Connectivity Robustness Check (DC Inbox Only)



In Figure A.5 and A.6 we present our results solely using Twitter data. To count as a CRT Republican in these figures, a member of Congress must have used the term "critical race theory" in a tweet. In Figure A.5 we present the differences in terms of ideology and in Figure A.6 we present the differences in terms of connectivity.

Figure A.5: Ideology Robustness Check (Twitter Only)

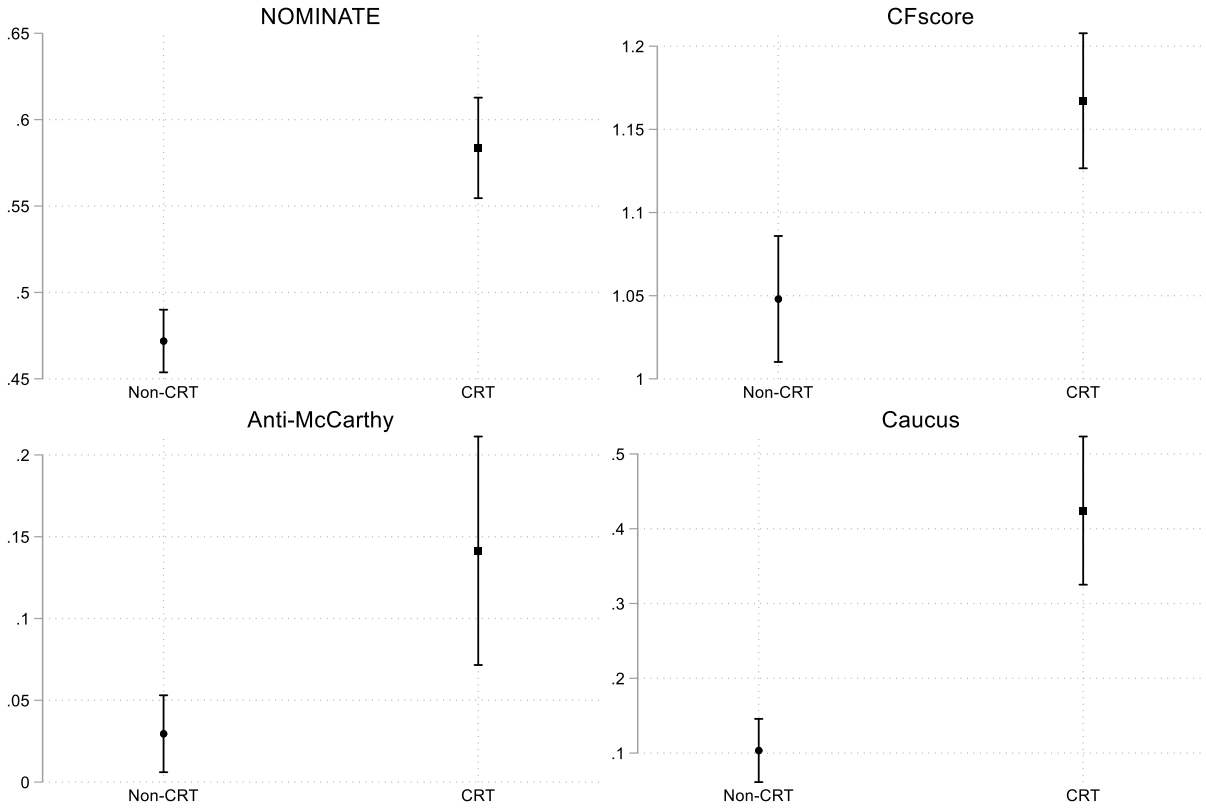
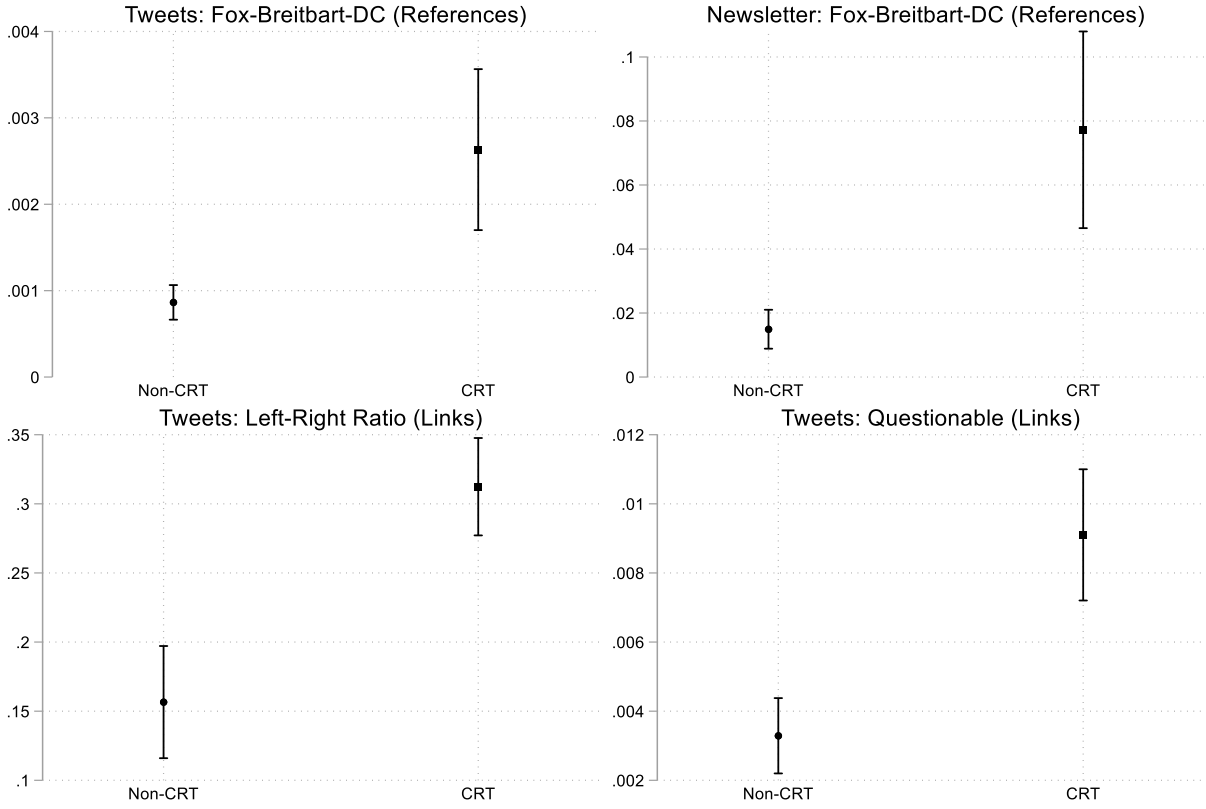


Figure A.6: Connectivity Robustness Check (Twitter Only)



In Figure A.7 and A.8 we present our results for five or more uses. To be considered as a CRT Republican in these figures, members of Congress needed to use the term "Critical Race Theory" in five unique communications (newsletters or tweets). In Figure A.7 we present the differences in terms of ideology and in Figure A.8 we present the differences in terms of connectivity.

Figure A.7: Five or More Uses of CRT (Ideology)

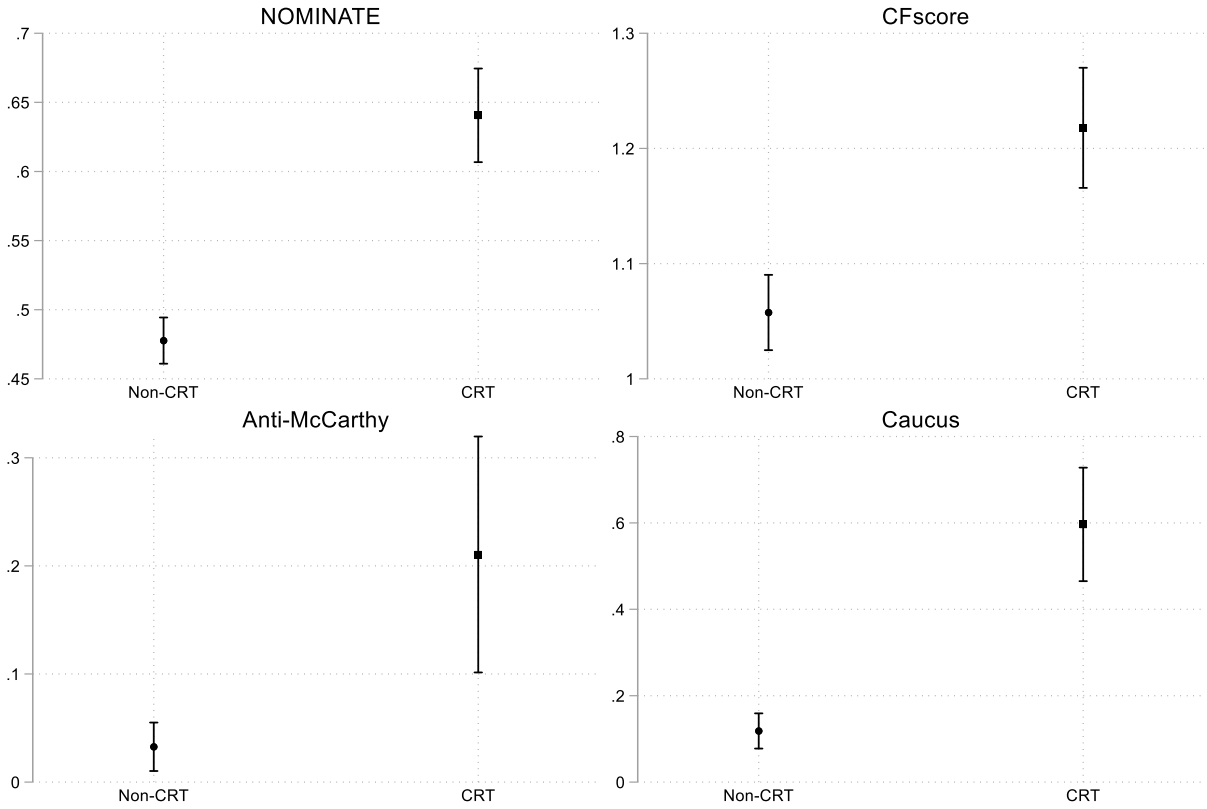
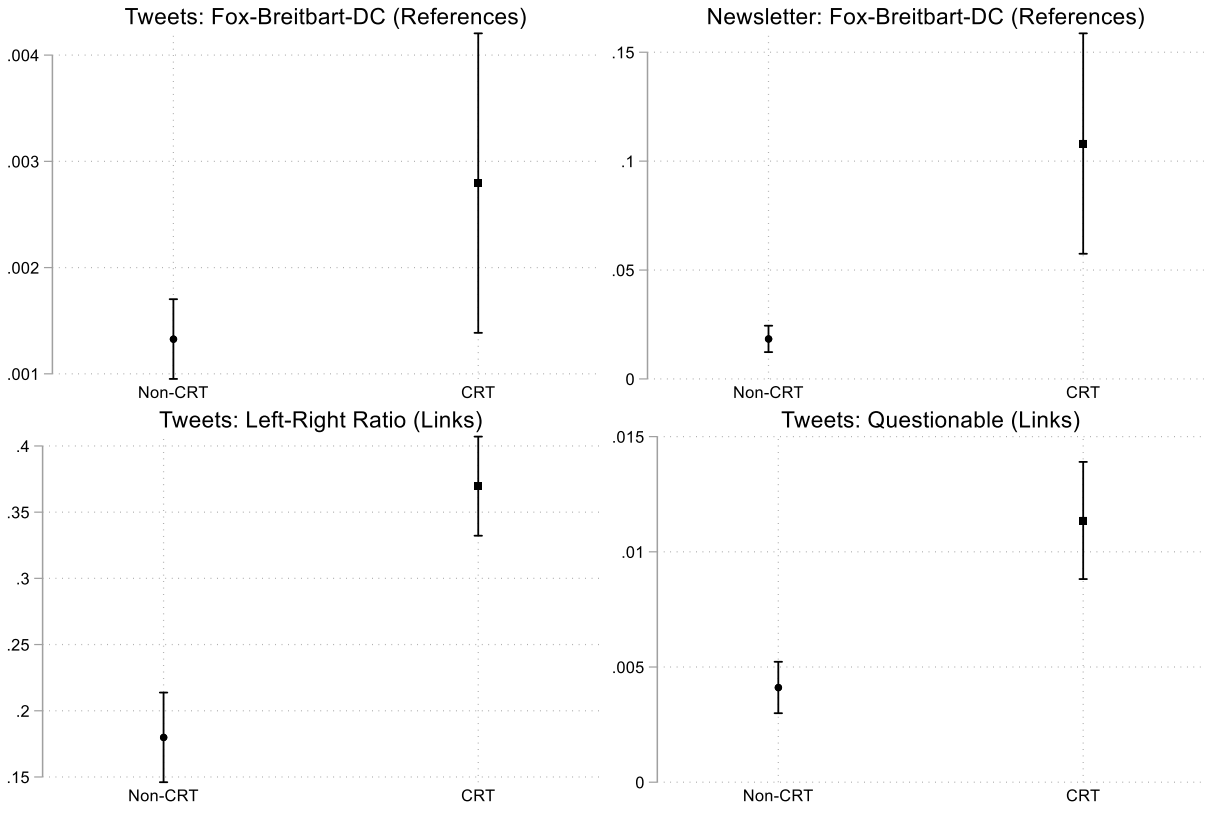


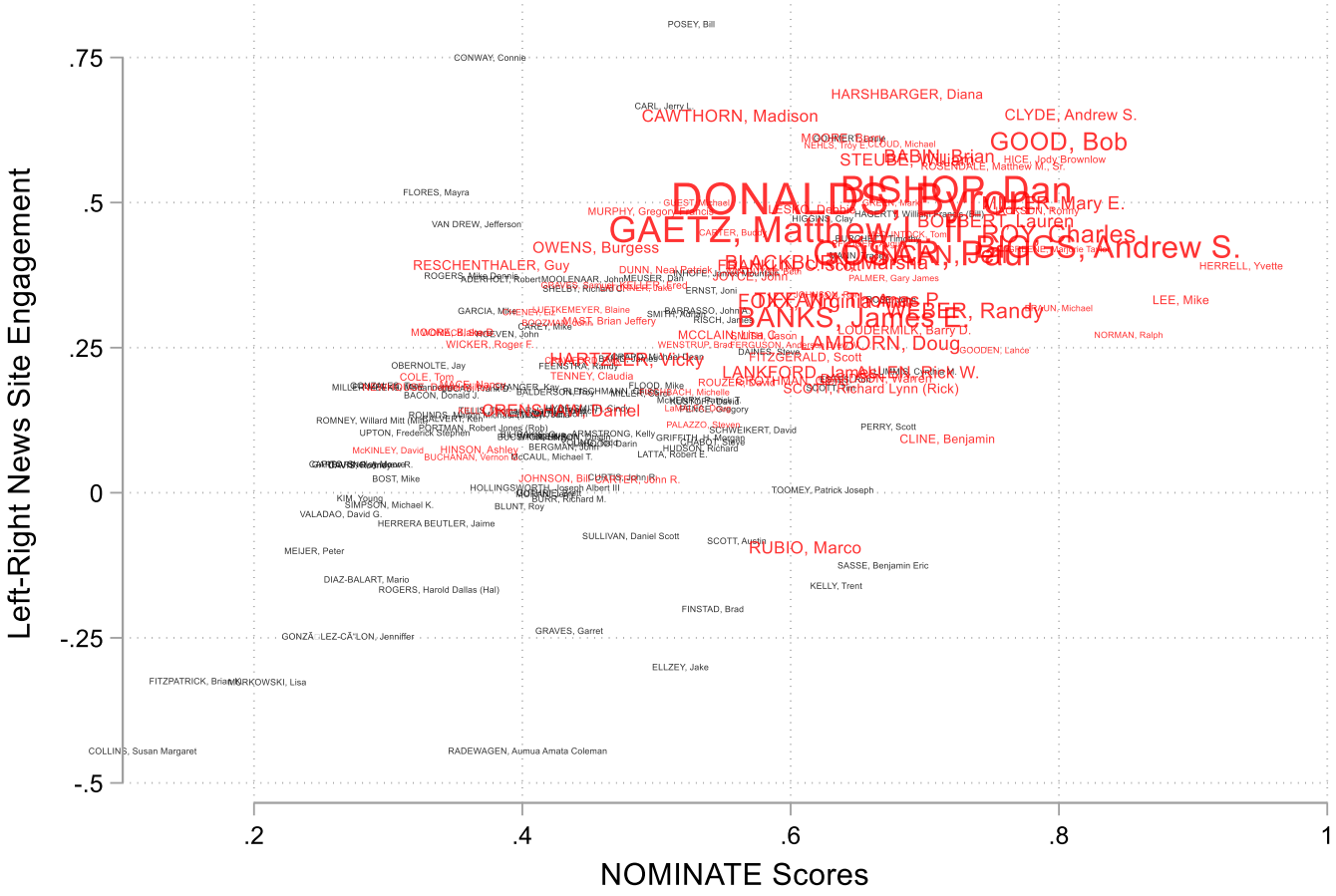
Figure A.8: Five or More Uses of CRT (Connectivity)



In Figure A.9 we present a version of Figure 5 from the main manuscript with the names of all Republican members of Congress included. This enables readers to position individual members

in terms of their ideology and connectivity. We present the version without names in the main plot for ease of interpretation.

Figure A.9: Republican MoCs' Ideology & Connectivity



In Figure A.10, we show the differences in mentions of CRT and Non-CRT Republicans restricted to CRT articles only. As discussed in the manuscript, these differences are even more pronounced than in Figure 8 when we restrict our data in this way.

Figure A.10: Mentions of CRT & Non-CRT Republicans in Articles (CRT Articles Only)

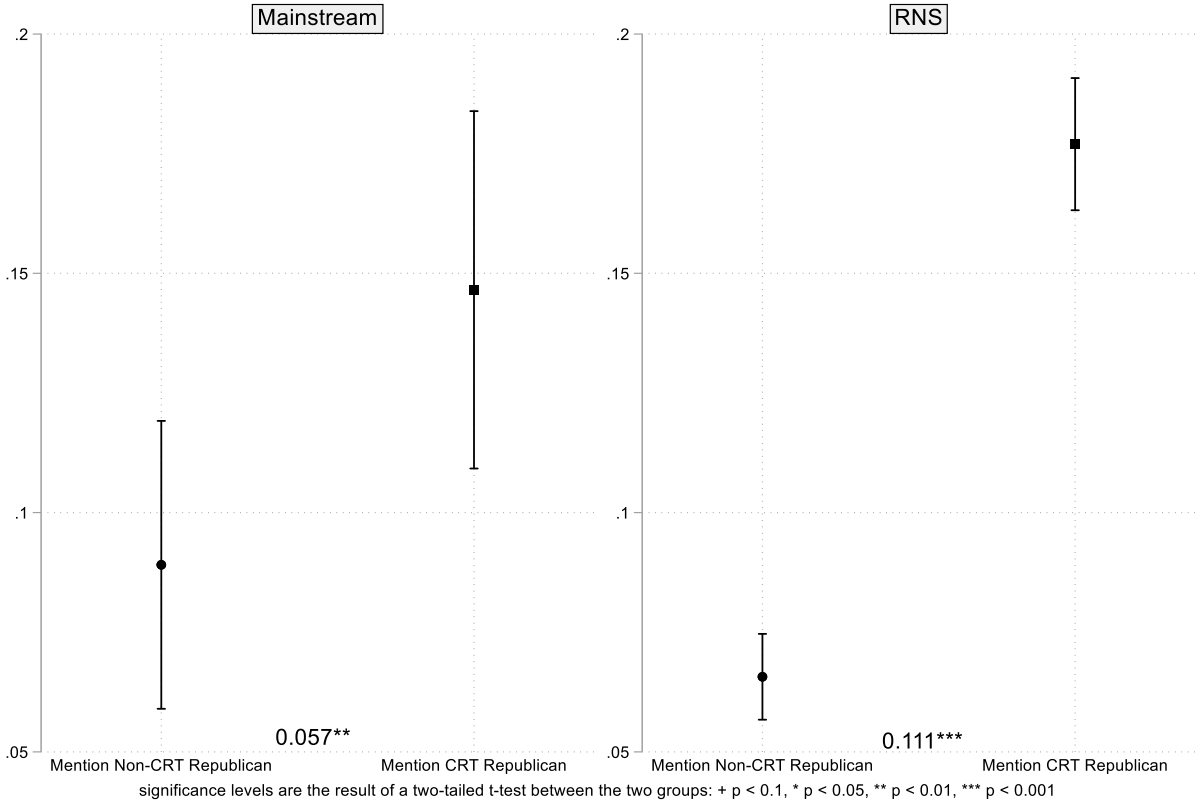
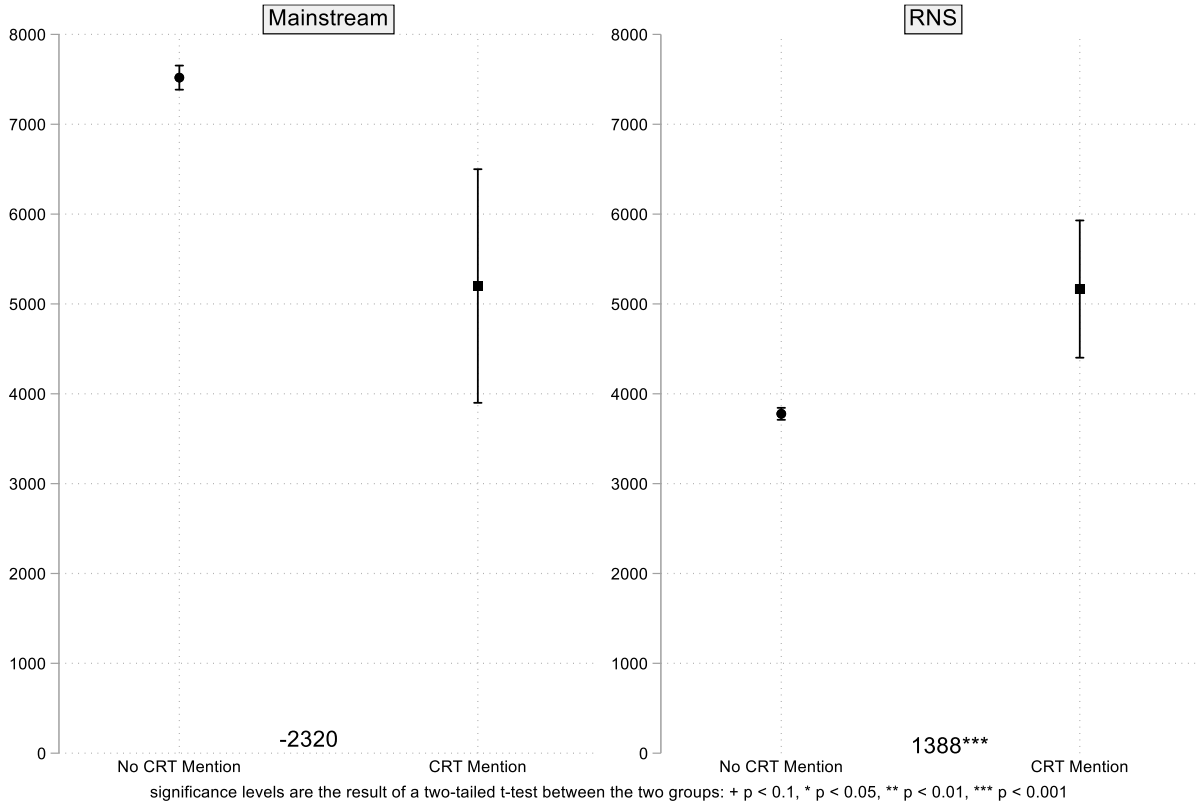


Figure A.11 shows the descriptive difference for mainstream and RNS sites in Facebook engagement when they mention CRT. In the main paper we present these as coefficient plots, including an additional time trend in the data to control for the expanded use of Facebook over time.

Figure A.11: Facebook Engagement with Mainstream and RNS Articles Featuring CRT



Full Regression Models

Table A.3: Full Regression Model For Twitter Engagement

	Engagement	Retweets	Replies	Likes	Quotes
CRT	0.179***	0.198***	0.179***	0.069**	0.330***
	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.037)
Date-Time	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Constant	-5.140***	-4.827***	-6.839***	-4.664***	-6.029***
	(0.036)	(0.039)	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.058)
Observations	912,507	912,507	912,507	912,507	912,507
Number of MoCs	236	236	236	236	236

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A.4: Full Regression Model For Facebook Engagement

	Facebook Engagement
CRT (Mainstream)	-0.302**
	(0.126)
RNS	-0.684***
	(0.013)
CRT x RNS	0.687***
	(0.147)
Date-Time	-0.000***
	(0.000)
Constant	12.833***
	(0.417)
Observations	1,143,898

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Full Platform Data

Table A.5 provides the full details of the website findings broken down by platform, wherein we again distinguish between the counts for non-CRT and CRT Republicans. The final columns provide an initial indicator of the differences between the groups based on the total counts each of the platforms we found links to received.

Table A.5: Platform Links on MoC Websites

Platform	Non-CRT Republicans		CRT Republicans		Difference	
	n = 128	*%*	*n = 123*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Facebook	127	99.2	118	95.9	–9	–3.3
Twitter / X	128	100.0	120	97.6	–8	–2.4
Instagram	110	85.9	101	82.1	–9	–3.8
YouTube	108	84.4	100	81.3	–8	–3.1
Threads	51	39.8	40	32.5	–9	–7.3
Vimeo	5	3.9	1	0.8	–4	–3.1
Flickr	3	2.3	5	4.1	2	1.8
Rumble	2	1.6	13	10.6	–11	9.0
LinkedIn	4	3.1	3	2.4	-1	–0.7
Truth Social	2	1.6	5	4.1	3	2.5
Gettr	0	0.0	6	4.9	6	4.9
Reddit	0	0.0	1	0.8	1	0.8

In Table A.6, we group these platforms into what we might refer to as "mainstream" and "alt-tech" platforms. In this categorization, as in the main manuscript, we consider Facebook, Twitter / X, Instagram, YouTube, Threads, Flickr, Pinterest, LinkedIn as being "mainstream" based on their widespread adoption beyond communities on the (far-)right. The distributions here are very similar, suggesting that these platforms are widely used by CRT and non-CRT Republicans alike, and we do not identify significantly less usage of mainstream digital spaces by CRT Republicans. However, as Table 4 shows, out of the twenty-eight websites that linked to profiles on what we characterize as "alt-tech" platforms (Rumble, Truth Social, and Gettr), which are known for deliberately providing spaces for far-right ideologies, eighty-six percent were found on the homepages of CRT Republicans. In Figure 6, we show the difference between these groups among CRT and Non-CRT Republicans in t-tests.

Table A.6: Mainstream & Alt-Tech Platform Usage

		Non-CRT Republicans		CRT Republicans	
		n = 128	*%*	*n = 123*	*%*
Mainstream Platform	*n = 1,103*	580	52.6	523	47.4
"Alt-Tech" Platforms	*n = 28*	4	14.3	24	85.7