

Faux-Populism Then and Now: How Elites Conned People into Supporting Elite Interests in the
1860s and 2020s

by

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Submitted to the Department of Political Science
School of Purchase College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2023

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Introduction:

In today's hyper-partisan America, fervent discussion of political and cultural differences between "conservatives" and "liberals" dubbed "the Culture Wars" mar the political landscape. Compromise is rare, each party primary pulls the discourse further away from the political center. With politicians focusing more on attracting media attention through stunts to win reelection than actual governance and policy, some frustrated voters wonder if the United States should continue to exist: the division and gridlock in the government prevent adequate responses to crises. Politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene, the 2nd most influential member of the Republican Party, openly advocate for a "national divorce", a call for secession. Far from being a fringe movement, discussion about the future of the country and acceptability of political violence has increasingly become mainstream. One cannot sit back and dismiss secession as an impossibility, because the secessionists are counting on your inaction.

In this paper I argue that both the secessionist movements of the 1860s and the 2020s are elite driven economically motivated movements rather than popular movements. First, I recount the political and economic landscape present in the Ante-Bellum South prior to secession, arguing that the movement for secession then was manufactured by slaveholding elites to convince non-slaveholders to act in the slaveholders' interests. Next, I discuss the present day political and economic landscape and discuss the similarities and differences to that of the Ante-bellum South. Finally, I critique secessionist attempts at public-image creation, explain why secessionists are doing so, and propose policies to prevent another crisis like the American Civil War.

Literature Review:

Elite-driven communication refers to the way elites; economic, political, cultural, media and intellectual; communicate with their base, the non-elites in an unequal manner. Political elites use their position to influence their base, through appeals to authority. The views of the elite are given extra weight because of the position of the speaker, because “if someone in power says it, it must be true.” Economic elites use their wealth to influence their base, appealing to desires of emulation. The wealth of the elite is seen as an indicator of success. As people want to achieve success themselves, “what a successful person says must be true.” Cultural elites can exert outsized influence on listeners due to the appeal to emulation as well. The desire to be a celebrity, to have the same fame, possessions, and popularity as one, gives the views of the cultural elite additional support.

Those desiring to be a celebrity will uncritically support the causes their idols endorse. Intellectual elites influence their base through an appeal to expertise. The position of being an expert in a subject matter gives the opinion of the elite the appearance of the backing of the scientific community, regardless of whether the elite is actually a subject-matter expert in the particular field they are discussing. The base is led to believe that “since an expert is saying it, it must be true.” Lastly, media elites use their control over avenues of communication to influence the consumers of this media. By adjusting word choice, or by choosing what information to provide and what to omit, the owners of the avenues of communication can manipulate the thoughts and opinions of their viewers. By portraying opinion as fact and omitting conflicting information, media elites can ensure that consumers of their media will endorse their viewpoints.

Elite-driven communication has been shown to affect their listener’s identities and opinions. In his book, *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics*, Andrew Lewis discusses how the stance of evangelical Christians regarding abortion has changed since the 1960s. Prior to

1960 there was little advocacy regarding abortion. What little support there was came from New Deal liberals, not conservatives. In 1967, Catholic and Lutheran leaders formed the Right to Life League, marking them as firmly Pro-Life. Evangelicals however took a more moderate approach, the Southern Baptist Convention proclaiming in 1968 that “abortion on demand was sinful, but ‘therapeutic’ abortion might at times be allowable.” Evangelical leaders in the SBC continued to advocate for women’s right to choose to have an abortion under some circumstances, opposing a national ban on abortion being enshrined in the Constitution as being a “Catholic” viewpoint, and that doing so would violate the separation of Church and State. Other evangelical organizations, such as the National Association of Evangelicals were more opposed to abortion but still allowed certain exceptions.

However, in the late 1970s, a group of political and religious conservatives struggled to take control of the SBC from the more moderate leadership, leading to the NBC declaring its opposition to federal tax money going to ‘non-therapeutic’ abortion and support for a constitutional amendment banning abortion except to save the life of the mother. By 1988, being pro-life was an (unofficial) requirement for positions within the SBC. Since 1980, over 80% of evangelical pastors supported a constitutional ban on abortion. The theological elites’ pro-life stance has remained consistent. The evangelical base, however, has needed time to catch up with the elites. While in 1980 evangelicals were only slightly more pro-life than non-evangelicals, by 2014 evangelicals were far more pro-life than non-evangelicals. This shift, where elites become polarized and public opinion follows, illustrates that elite control over the media, or in this case, religious conventions and preacher pulpits, shapes public perception of a topic.

In her work, “Contemporary welfare reform and the public identity of the ‘Welfare Queen’” Ange-Marie Hancock describes the formation of a public identity through the

Congressional debates on welfare reform. According to Hancock, a public identity is a set of stereotypes and moral judgements ascribed onto a certain group. While shaped and pushed by political elites and the media for their own purposes, a public image draws on the personal beliefs and biases citizens already have towards that group. The public image is then used and invoked in policies; no longer is the veracity of the stereotypes debated, but instead accepted as fact.

Hancock argues that the public image of the “Welfare Queen” was created from long-standing stereotypes of black female laziness and promiscuity. The impact of this is illustrated in the 1996 Welfare Reform debates. It was not being debated **whether** poor black single mothers were “leeching off of the system” but **assumed to be** the case. Instead, the debates focused on how to “solve this problem.” With both parties, Democrats and Republicans, assuming that welfare was being exploited by greedy and lazy black women, the plight of these groups was ignored in favor of “reforming welfare”, ensuring that those who needed the assistance would not be able to get it. This normalization of stereotypes toward poor black single mothers has led to their further marginalization by society. Women’s rights organizations have excluded them due to the association with crime and lack of morals. Civil rights leaders have excluded them, advocating for black chauvinism and the adoption of other elements of the white dominant culture through respectability politics. In this way, the voices and lived experiences of poor black single mothers were stifled, replaced with stereotypes and a strawman political elites could use to justify their actions that go against the public good.

Chapter One: Elite-Driven Discourse in the Civil War

Despite common belief, the American Civil War was not neatly divided between slaveholders in the South and abolitionists in the North. Despite an increased proportion of abolitionists, slavery was still alive and well in Northern states. Some Northern-born citizens

fought for the Confederacy, and vice-versa. Not all Southerners had slaves, only about 10% of the adult white male population owned 90% of the slaves. Even among Southern slaveholders there were deep divisions: while some slaveholders wanted to secede from the Union before a federal government controlled by abolitionists made slavery illegal, others instead wanted to create a Southern voting bloc, to be able negotiate more effectively. They feared that seceding from the Union would hand Northern abolitionists a supermajority and the ability to make radical changes without Southern opposition. This fear was proven to be correct. Hereafter immediate secessionists will be referred to as “secessionists” and those desiring to remain and form a voting bloc “cooperationists”. Given that slaveholders were a minority of the population in all seceding states, with an average of 36.7% in the lower South (SC, GA, AL, MS, LA, TX, FL), 25.3% in the Upper South (VA, NC, TN, AR), and 30.8% in the Confederacy as a whole, why did the states end up seceding?

With around two thirds of the population being unable or unwilling to own slaves, thus being less affected by a potential abolition decree by the nascent Republican party and the Lincoln administration, why did the states secede? It seems to go against the population’s best interests: risking one’s life in defense of the ill-gotten wealth of the Southern elite. As Mario L. Chason and Jeffrey L. Jensen argue in, “The Political and Economic Geography of Southern Secession,” the decision to secede was not a popular decision but was instead forced upon the people by the political elite, largely comprised of secessionist slaveholders. This was done in several ways.

First, the decision by secessionist supermajorities to determine the fate of the state through a convention, with elected delegates, rather than a referendum affected the outcome. According to Chason and Jensen, secessionist lawmakers knew the unpopularity of their cause:

This is candidly explained by Alfred Aldrich, member of the South Carolina (hereafter, SC) legislature in a letter to one of the state's U.S. Senators, James H. Hammond, about the strategy secessionists should follow: "I do not want to see another attempt to vote a revolution. The thing is absurd & can't be done ... If the question must be referred back to the people ... it will be an utter failure." A month later he reiterated his concerns: "I do not believe the common people understand it, in fact, I know they will not understand it; But whoever waited for the common people when a great move was to be made? (Chason and Lensen, 390)

Should the decision be left to the people through a referendum, where everyone could vote, secessionists believed, they (the secessionists) would lose. Alternate ways of decision making were also rejected by the secessionists as being detrimental to their cause. For example, "William Gist, the secessionist governor of SC, wrote on the 8th of November, 1860, to Mississippi's governor 'do not ask for a Southern Council, as the Border non-acting States would out vote us & thereby defeat action. Let your State immediately assemble in Convention' (as cited in Freehling 2007, p. 446)." (Chason, Lensen, 391). A convention would allow the secessionists to get their way, regardless of the will of the people.

Second, the delegates for these conventions were elected in pre-existing state senatorial and congressional districts. These districts were already biased in favor of slaveholders, who were more likely to be secessionists. Lensen and Chason calculated that "all other things equal, a district where half of its voters are slaveholders will have a predicted RRI score about 25 percent greater than that of the average district in the sample (where slaveholders comprised roughly one-third of the electorate)." (Chason and Lensen, pg 401). Additionally, the geography of slavery gave slaveholders an additional advantage. Plantations and their slaveholding-owners were spatially

distributed through the states, across multiple districts. In comparison, landless, non-slaveholding voters (who are less likely to support secession) were densely populated in urban areas, inside fewer districts. This meant that the votes of the large population of cooperationists in the cities were wasted.

Lastly, the choice to convene a convention and not a referendum led to low voter turnout. Chason and Lensen calculated that “secessionist candidates obtained, on average, only 40 percent of the votes cast in the preceding presidential election. Moreover, on average, there is an abstention of 23 percent in the election of delegates compared to the turnout observed in this presidential election.” (pg 394). However, in districts won by secessionists, “there is an approximately 30-percentage-point difference in the number of votes cast between the 1860 presidential and respective convention election. This is approximately twice the average abstention observed in the counties won by cooperationists.” (Chason and Lensen, pg 394). Chason and Lensen conclude that “as a consequence of this steep decline in participation, particularly in counties won by secessionists, the majorities in these conventions were elected with only 27 percent of the votes cast in the preceding presidential election.” (pg 394). One reason for the high abstention total could have been caused by lack of candidate choice. “In total, 12 percent of the districts of these three conventions were uncontested. Of these, nearly three-fourths were won by secessionists. In the key states of AL and GA, candidates for either side ran unopposed in more than 13 percent of the districts. The share of uncontested races was more than twice as high for districts won by secessionist candidates (16 percent were uncontested) as for those districts won by cooperationists (6 percent)” (pg 395).

Voters in districts unlikely to be competitive, such as districts with a high percentage of slaveholders, or districts where a candidate ran unopposed, may have felt that their votes did not

matter. According to Chason and Lensen, “The average margin of victory was 44 percent, and in only 14 percent of counties was the election decided by 10 percentage points or less.²¹ As a result, the total number of effective votes (i.e., only those votes needed to win the election) across districts electing secessionist candidates was equivalent to only 11 percent of the turnout in the 1860 presidential election. To put this in perspective, the number of effective votes in districts won by secessionists (27,081) was less than half of the number of slaveholders living in those districts (58,058).” (pg 396)

In the border states and Upper South, where slaveholders did not hold a supermajority, secessionist elites failed to establish a convention in the legislature. Instead, voters were asked whether to hold a referendum. In North Carolina and Tennessee, voters rejected the holding of a convention. The secessionists were forced to compromise, conceding that any decision made by the convention would first have to be ratified via public referendum before it became valid. After April 15th however, with South Carolina firing upon Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for troops making war inevitable, voters in the border states needed to decide which side they wanted to support. Voters in Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Virginia ultimately decided to secede via referendum, while Missouri and Maryland remained in the Union.

To summarize, the decision to hold conventions to determine the fate of the state, instead of a referendum, was undertaken to override the will of the people. The conventions, with delegates elected in pre-existing senatorial and congressional districts, allowed for secessionists to win a select majority of districts despite their lower numbers. Had the question of secession been resolved through a referendum, the secessionists would not have succeeded in their aims. The secessionist elite may have rigged the elections to rush their states out of the Union, but how did they convince the masses who opposed secession, to fight for the Confederacy? As a secessionist

leader in NC in a letter to one of the state's Congressmen stated, "You cannot unite the masses of any Southern state much less those of N.C. against the Union and in favor [of] slavery alone" (as cited in Crofts 1989, p. 132) (pg 391). Another secessionist leader, Daniel H. Hamilton, U.S. Marshal for Charleston, SC, wrote "When the battle comes in earnest ... you will find an element of great weakness in our non-slaveholding population. Think you that 360,000 slaveholders, will dictate terms for 3,000,000 of non-slaveholders at the South—I fear not, I mistrust our own people more than I fear all of the efforts of the abolitionists." (pg 1) However, if the decision to secede was forced through against the wishes of most of the population, why was there no strong anti-war movement that may have prevented conflict?

Michael E. Woods writes in his article, "Charleston, City of Mourners: Anticipations of Civil War in the Cradle of Secession," that despite fears of bloody war and countless lives lost being widespread among the population of Charleston, people could not agree who was at fault. Some Charlestonians blamed the "fire-eaters", as the women Woods explores termed the demagogues who spoke most ardently about secession. Charleston judge A.G. Magrath warned that Charleston was a city where "millions of property [sic.] lie exposed to peril . . . where three fortresses bristle with cannon pointed against her", emphasizing and exaggerating the threat that Charlestonians were under. Magrath warned state senators that the North could attack at any moment and urged the state to immediately secede and prepare for defense. South Carolina senator James Chestnut boasted that the Confederate Cause was so just, their power so great, and Lincoln so cowardly that he could "drink all the blood spilled in combat", for it would be less than a thimble's worth. South Carolina Governor Pickens urged secessionists in Baltimore to seize federal forts in Virginia and Maryland to keep Lincoln out of Washington D.C.

While some Charlestonians blamed “fire-eaters” for making a peaceful secession impossible, other Charlestonians instead blamed the North for “forcing” the South into such a position. For example, they claimed that Lincoln and the Republican Party’s hostility to slavery had forced the hand of the South into secession. To these Charlestonians, the radical ideas of the “Black Republicans” threatened their way of life. Rather than face “economic collapse” and the shame of living side by side by free blacks, these Charlestonians would rather form their own nation. The refusal of Buchanan and Lincoln to vacate federal forts, and the refusal to recall Major Anderson from his position in Fort Sumter was “holding a knife at Charleston’s throat”, a provocation to war.

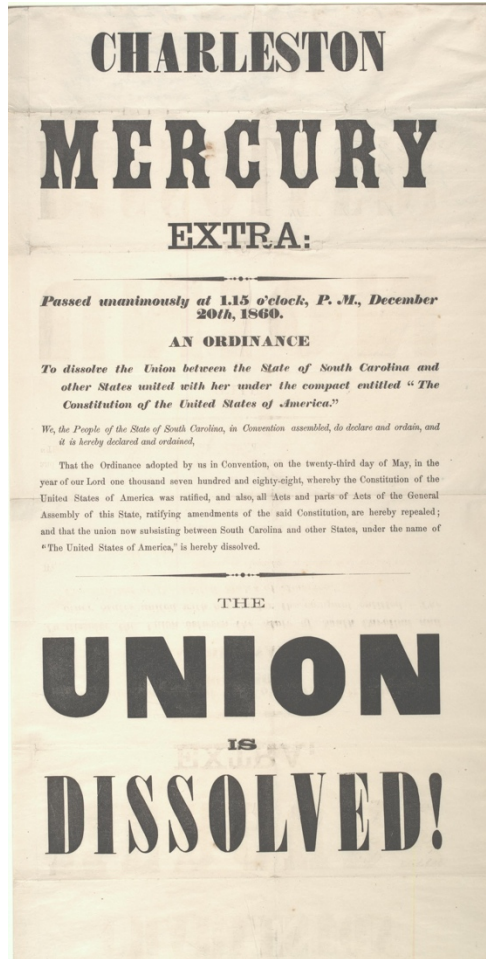


Figure 1 Credit: Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Through newspapers, such as Robert Barnwell Rhett's *Mercury*, Charlestonian elites influenced the masses with nothing to gain from war that war was a necessary evil, that it was Northern aggression that led to their predicament, and that there was no way out except to commit to secession. These manipulations allowed Southern Elites to speed their states out of the Union to ensure that their economic power could not be taken away from them by a hostile Federal Government.

Secessionists emphasized cultural differences between the South and the North to ensure support for secession from poorer Southerners, who would not have benefited economically from such a move, through the creation of a public image. Secession is a type of nationalism, in that a

group of people of a common identity and heritage demand a state for themselves, where they have control over the decisions that will affect them. Southern elites based this shared cultural identity on Southern nobility, as compared to Northern barbarity. Southerners, they said, were of good stock, “handsome, genteel, educated young fellows”. In contrast, the Northerners were “a gang of Irishmen, German, British deserters, and New York roughs”, who are “not worth killing, and yet instructed to kill to the best advantage.” The Jeffersonian ideal of the citizen farmer was invoked: as farmers, they remained committed to the ideals of the founders of the country, while the Northerners toiled away in factories. These images were created to exaggerate the cultural differences between the North and South: one a noble society based on tradition and respect for their forefathers, the other a dirty and impious one, filled with crime and populated by “mudsills”, the underclass whose labor the proper society rests upon. The people of the North, they claimed, loathed the prosperity of the South, and wanted to take it for themselves, and destroy and taint Southern culture. The only way to avoid “moral degradation” is immediate secession, to create a new country which only includes “proper Americans”.

Upon closer inspection, one can tell this framing of the South is not entirely accurate. Instead of being humble farmers, the secessionists sat back and grew wealthy off the forced labor of the ones actually doing the farming. The average Southerner did not own acres of land and live in white-painted mansions like European Aristocrats, the average Southerner was toiling away in factories as well. The average Southerner had more in common with the workers in the North than the Southern elite who held most of the region's wealth. Whether due to racism, the desire to be part of something new and exciting, or the desire to one day live in that white painted mansion on the hill, poor Southerners chose to fight, bleed, and die for the economic and political interests of the Southern elite.

Chapter Two: Elite-Driven Discourse Today

In many respects, the secession discussion in the 2020s mirrors that of the past. Political and economic reforms looming in the Federal Government make elites nervous that their influence will disappear. With fewer voters in support of maintaining the elite's preferred status quo, elites turn instead to leaving the Union entirely, rather than be subject to decisions that would strip them of their oversized influence. Support for secession is gathered through manipulation, emphasizing cultural differences to hide that secession would not be in their supporter's best economic interests.

However, holding on to power despite popular opposition requires undemocratic practices. Much as in the 1860s, the composition of electoral districts has a heavy impact on voter turnout and electoral results as a whole. Gerrymandering, or the practice of drawing legislative districts in ways that serve the individuals drawing them, and their political parties. As Lensen and Chason discovered earlier, the composition of districts allowed secessionists to win a select majority of district races while losing the popular vote. This can be done through "packing and cracking". "Packing" is when one draws the district boundaries to contain as many of the opposing party's likely voters into as few districts as possible. While that party will win those districts, the favored party will be able to win the others. "Cracking" is when one draws the district boundaries to contain as many of the opposing party's likely voters into as many districts as possible, diluting their votes. Such practices are widespread, only 8% of House seats were won by 5% or less in 2022.

While crafting districts to give advantages is important to maintaining power, it is far more important to determine who gets to vote in the first place. In their work, "I Don't Want Everybody to Vote": Christian Nationalism and Restricting Voter Access in the United States", Samuel L.

Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs discuss how the Christian Right drives anti-democratic sentiment through the concept of “worthiness”. Policies that restrict voting rights, like felon disenfranchisement, strict voter ID laws, and a ban on absentee voting and same-day registration are adopted to ensure the “integrity” of the election. “Participation in the political process is viewed less as a right to which everyone should have equal access.” (Perry et al, pg 9). Instead, Christian Nationalists believe that there exists a hierarchy of Americans, with higher quality Americans (read: white Christian men) at the top. In such a worldview, voting is not a right, but a privilege which must be earned. Those deemed “unworthy” must be kept from voting through literacy tests, poll taxes, or laws barring the vote for those with unpaid dues or a criminal record. Lastly, Christian nationalists create “ethnoracial boundaries around civic participation, [which provide] a natural target for voter suppression by explicitly identifying those thought to be most “unworthy” to govern, or worse, trying to subvert the “integrity” of the vote through voter fraud—namely, Blacks and immigrants.” (Perry et al, pg 9)

Entire groups are presumed to be inherently inferior and thus not trustable with the vote. Perry et al found that “Christian nationalism is the leading predictor of believing voting is too easy, even above Democratic party (vs. Republican) identification and political ideology or beliefs about discrimination against whites, Blacks, and immigrants.” (Perry et al, pg 19). They also confirmed that believers in Christian nationalism skew white, male, older, Conservative, and Republican. The Republican Party has long supported curtailing the right to vote. Paul Weyrich, co-founder of the Moral Majority with Jerry Falwell Sr., famously proclaimed that:

Now many of our Christians have what I call the goo-goo syndrome—good government. They want everybody to vote. I don’t want everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of people, they never have been from the

beginning of our country and they are not now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.

Weyrich expressed that reducing the voting populace increases the Christian Rights', and the Republican Partys' influence in the elections. Former Governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee told an interviewer that:

I know that most politicians say we want everyone to vote, I'm gonna be honest with you, I don't want everyone to vote. If they're so stupid—that's right, if they're gonna vote for me they need to vote, if they're not gonna vote for me they need to stay home. I mean, it's that simple ... But in the big picture, there are people who vote and they have no idea what our Constitution says.

To Huckabee, voting is only important if the person votes for him. Reducing the ability to vote benefits him as long as the voters being made ineligible were not going to vote for him anyway. Voting populations are selectively prohibited from voting based on ethnicity, location, and gender. For example, people who live in the city tend to be poorer, blacker, and vote Democrat. People who live in the country tend to be whiter and more religious, and vote Republican. People who live in the suburbs tend to be whiter, wealthier, and higher educated.

Ensuring enough polling places are available for the demographic that supports you while ensuring too few polling places are available for the demographic that typically votes for the opposition increases your chance of winning. Banning early voting, same-day registration, and absentee ballots ensures that people without transportation, ill or disabled people, or people who cannot afford to spend hours waiting in line to vote cannot have their voices heard. Voter ID laws

ensure that people who cannot afford the time and money to acquire an ID cannot vote. Raise the hurdles high enough, and people who are eligible to vote will not bother trying to.

Such policies are technically illegal, but ever since the 2013 *Holder v. Shelby* decision that gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965's ability to mandate federal oversight of election policy changes, enforcement of the law has become slow and expensive. Instead of the DOJ rejecting discriminatory election practices preemptively, it is up to non-profit organizations to sue the state in court to stop the execution of practices in place. Even when the courts find a voting map unconstitutional, it matters little if the map has already been used in an election cycle to elect an even more unrepresentative legislature. The prevalence of gerrymandering, "packing and cracking," and the ability of legislatures to pass undemocratic election policies without fear of consequence because the court decisions to determine if their actions were constitutional take years to decide, has led to low voter turnout, distrust in our institutions and democratic system, and a government that is not representative of its people.

Much like Charleston's *Mercury*, the media plays its role in disseminating propaganda to the masses, through newspapers like *The New York Post*, television channels like *Fox News*, radio broadcasts like *Focus on the Family*, and social media platforms like Twitter. These media outlets, owned and operated by elites, deliver handpicked messages to their consumers to influence their views and grasp on reality. In her paper, "Cultivating Authoritarian Submission: Race and Gender in Conservative Media", Ashleigh Campi discusses how leaders of the Christian Right, hosts of Fox News, and the politicians they showcase establish an authoritarian relationship with their followers through their narratives of "redemption". "A 1996 study of US evangelicals found that a vast majority of evangelicals cite belief in the Bible (48%) and a personal relationship with God (44%) as sources of religious teaching, while only 6% rely on the church. 33 By the 2000s, one in

five adults consumed evangelical Christian media, which was carried by one in five radio stations in the country” (Campi, 465). Preachers tap into the shared background belief in redemption through submission to ‘proper authority.’ According to the preachers, the “right order of things” is for children to obey their parents, women to obey their husbands, and both to obey God”, who coincidentally issues all orders through the preachers. Through shared admission of sins and failings, believers can recommit themselves to God to receive salvation. This provides elites a massive audience of people already conditioned to believe their preachers unconditionally.

Media consolidation over the last few decades has allowed a handful of individuals to control all legacy media. In his paper, “Crying, ‘Wolf!’ The Campaign Against Critical Race Theory in American Public Schools as an Expression of Contemporary White Grievance in an Era of Fake News”, Keith Benson mentions that “in the 1980s for instance, roughly fifty media corporations had access to America’s radio and television media markets. In 2021, however, AT&T, Comcast, National Amusements, Disney, News Corp and ViacomCBS control over 90% of the media the nation consumes.” (Benson, 2) Radio station ownership has also contracted since the lifting of the forty-station limit. “Clear Channel Communications for instance, owns over 1500 radio stations nationwide reaching 110M listeners each week, while Viacom’s Infinity Radio owns over 180 radio stations in the nation’s largest markets.” (Bensen, 2) As for print media, “from 2004–2019, two thousand newspapers were lost and at present, over 60M Americans across 1530 counties live in communities with just one local paper, and many remaining smaller community newspapers, merged with national media corporations like Gannett and Advance Media” (Bensen, 2). This consolidation of media in the hands of a few elites grants these elites tremendous power on what information arrives at the viewer. Even if the owner of the media conglomerate is not

spreading false information, the omission of relevant facts can influence viewer perceptions of an event.

With legacy media increasingly dominated by a select few companies, hundreds of thousands of Americans move towards alternative sources of information. Americans are self-selecting news media based on ideologically partisanship, creating a “media-silo” where the information encountered already matches and reinforces existing opinions. “The success of PragerU and other such conservative news sites online, exacerbates a modern problem of American citizens getting policy information and their “news” based on what aligns with their personal ideology, masked as objective and accurate; where what constitutes news and factual information is blurred into whatever one wants to hear; and what information that does not align with one’s values, thus, is therefore not accurate and untrue” (Bensen, 4). Bensen then discusses how falsehoods about what critical race theory is and its prevalence in the American public school system have been so effective at stirring up white rage. “The politics of white grievance is a reliable and lasting force shaping contemporary racial politics in the US. And though not all white citizens are motivated by a sense of grievance or racism, whiteness—societal favor gained through belonging to the white racial group—is a material benefit from which all white people enjoy motivating significant segments of white voters to vote in protection of whiteness” (Bensen, 6). With increased immigration from Black and Latino nations and the non-white population reaching 40% in 2019 from 25% in 1990, some white Americans are afraid they may lose their position at the top of the social hierarchy. Non-whites, and the whites who accept and welcome diversity, become the enemy that must be defeated to maintain the status quo.

In their paper “Clear and Omnipresent Danger: Digital Age Culture Wars and Reactions to Drag Queen Story Hour across Diverse Subreddit Communities”, Alyssa J. Davis and Heather

Hensman Kettrey discuss how the internet has made geographical location less important to feelings of grievance. Through an analysis of 1658 comments from 6 different threads on 4 very distinct subreddits (r/Books, r/Houston, r/Rainbow, r/The_Donald), Davis and Kettrey discovered among the r/The_Donald commenters a sense of outrage and fear unrelated to geographical location. Regardless of whether the commenters lived in Houston (where the events discussed occurred) or somewhere on the other side of the country, commenters acted as if Drag Queen Story Hour was being hosted in their community. Alternatively, through the internet, the entire world becomes the community of those participating in it.

The community of cultural regulation in our sample (r/The_Donald) perceived DQSH to pose a clear and omnipresent threat to dominant American norms that they believed to be in decline. Members of this overwhelmingly homogenous community harkened back to a time when they believed their values rightfully characterized the nation, relied on old cultural threat narratives that aimed to incite fear of danger posed to children, and proposed plans for reclaiming influence on national values while insinuating that any such plans would be unsuccessful due to a larger political conspiracy against them. In essence, this group felt that DQSH represented an ominous threat looming against them and they laid the rhetorical groundwork for a defense to dismiss any failure to reclaim power as being the result of an uneven battlefield. (Davis and Kettrey, 41-41)

In this way, messages that “their culture is under attack”, “the opponent is so irredeemably inhuman and evil they cannot be negotiated with”, and “secession is the only option” are delivered to their pawns. Emphasizing differences and exaggerating threats as a reason for independence allows elites with something to gain (or lose) to create the illusion of popular support for secession.



Figure 2 National Divore

Social media posts, like the one above by influential Republican politician Marjorie Taylor Greene, broadcast rhetoric of secession and division to tens of millions of people. Television channels like the entertainment channel “Fox News”, serve to spread this message of secession to their millions of daily viewers, potentially reaching a demographic unreachable through social media. This image of Fox News personality Sean Hannity discussing the call for secession by Marjorie Taylor Greene serves to both support her proposal and legitimize secessionist rhetoric. By giving extremist positions a platform, Hannity and Fox normalize talks of secession. While one could argue that it is the role of television networks to broadcast newsworthy material, even if the channel does not support the ideas being presented, when listening to Hannity’s show it is clear he is in support of such a proposal.

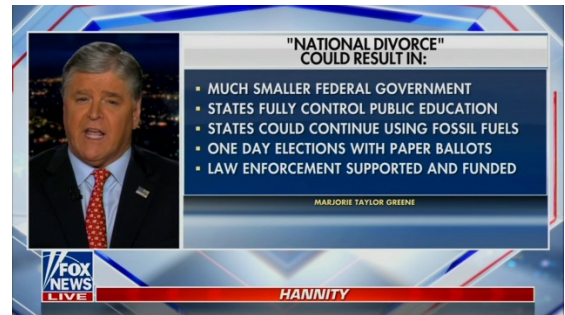


Figure 3 Hannity Divorce Attorney

Such rhetoric has found an audience. In 2022, a poll by the University of Maryland and the Washington Post found that 38% of Americans believed that "violence against the government can at times be justified," up from 23% in 2015 and 19% in 2010. Republicans (40%) and Independents (41%) were almost twice as likely to find political violence justifiable as Democrats (23%). White Americans (40%) were more than twice as likely to find political violence justifiable compared to Black Americans (18%). Similarly, a poll by CBS News and YouGov found that 68% of

Americans believe that the violent events on January 6th, 2021, were a sign of increasing political violence, rather than a one-off event.

Chapter Three: How to Prevent Civil War

As in the 1860s, in the 2020s elites turn to cultural appeals to gather support from the masses who would not benefit economically. Instead of North and South, the public images created are that of “Red America” and “Blue America”, split by party affiliation. Republican and Republican dominated states are “Red America”, and Democrats and Democrat dominated states are “Blue America”. According to the secessionists, Red America is populated by hard-working, god-fearing, personally responsible Americans who support law and order. Blue America on the other hand, is a collection of failing states who steal from the people through high taxes, and spend on unnecessary programs, and lazy, godless people who hate order and police, believe in radical ideas like a gender spectrum and want government to take care of them because they are incapable of doing it themselves. Of course, “Blue America” wants to destroy and taint “Red America”, and the only way to protect “proper American culture” is to secede and create a state with only “real Americans”.

Reality on the other hand, tells a very different story. States in “Blue America” are the country’s primary wealth producers, subsidizing all but two “Red America” states, these being Texas and Florida, Florida being reliant on tourism. It is Red America that needs to be subsidized by Blue America. Red States had 44% more per capita murders than Blue States in 2019, 23% more per capita murders when comparing the last 21 years together. Even excluding major cities, which tend to vote Blue, murder rates per capita in Red States were 12% higher than Blue States over the last 21-year period. It is Red America that is crime-ridden, not Blue America. Blue

America has seen its productivity climb from \$118,000 per worker in 2008 to \$139,000 per worker in 2018, while Red America's productivity has remained at \$110,000 per worker over the same time period. It is Red America that is less productive, not Blue America. In standards from education, life-expectancy, wealth, and (lack of) maternal mortality, Blue America outperforms Red America. Economically, the secession of Red States would be a disaster for poor Americans in those states, no longer receiving money from Blue States for federal aid programs. The cultural differences promoted by elites are based on incorrect claims, leaving the only major cultural difference as tolerance for differences. It is tolerance for different religions, ideologies, cultures, sexual orientations, and gender identities that sets Blue America apart from Red America, and resistance against the coming of a more tolerant, diverse society that motivates poor Americans to support policies like secession that only benefit elites.

Secession is a drastic measure, one that is not taken lightly. It is a last ditch effort, when all other measures have been exhausted. Southern slaveholders rushed their states out of the Union because popular opinion in the more populous North was against them. Attempts to enshrine slavery in the Constitution had failed. The 1857 Dred Scott decision, invalidating past compromises keeping slavery out of the West, had incensed Northern abolitionists, including poorer whites fearing that an expansion of slavery would leave them unemployed. The newly founded Republican Party was more vocally abolitionist than any major party before them, and with control of the House, Senate, and the Presidency, was able to act on party platform promises to curtail the spread of slavery. The political and economic power enjoyed by Southern slaveholding elites was in imminent danger.

The Republican party of today is in the same position the slaveholding elites of 1860 were then. It cannot raise enough votes to remain in power legitimately, losing the popular vote in all

elections since 2000 except for 2004 (wartime incumbents rarely lose), but winning the Presidency in 2000 and 2016 through institutional procedure, not popularity. Republican controlled states require increasingly undemocratic voting procedures and gerrymandered district maps to maintain control, as an increasing majority of voters disapprove of their rule. A historic gap between the rich and the poor, as well as plummeting quality of life and soaring cost of living has led to increased hostility to economic and political elites. Voter's desire governmental policies and institutional reforms to ease their struggles, but these reforms would directly weaken the power of these elites. For example, laws that require media outlets to provide both sides of a debate equal coverage or make it easier to sue outlets for false information would weaken Rupert Murdoch's ability to provide biased reporting and to serve as the propaganda arm of the Republican Party, hence his opposition to such laws.

Economic elites, such as the CEO and board members of Exxon-Mobile, would be forced to spend billions of dollars to clean up oil spills and other hazardous waste under stronger environmental protection laws, which explains why the company funds politicians and parties to oppose such legislation. As public opinion increasingly moves toward the adoption of renewable energy sources and away from reliance on fossil fuels for power, those whose wealth depends on the continuing demand for oil, gas, and coal grow nervous that their wealth and influence on politics will be diminished. Environmental policies such as a carbon-tax, or requirements for the installation of expensive high-quality filters for emissions directly cuts into the profits of the owners, which explains the willingness to fund candidates who would oppose such legislation. A well-worn strategy of these elites is the so called "State's Rights" strategy, in which elites argue that certain areas of interest are out of the federal government's jurisdiction and should be left to the states. This strategy works when the state government the issue is being relegated to is already

controlled by the elites or their bought lawmakers, who will pass or remove legislation as suits their interests. For example, arguments that access to healthcare should remain a state issue to decide directly benefits the owners of private healthcare companies to whom the elites in the state governments would deliver state contracts. Political reform legislation would break the ability of a minority of elites to control local, state, and federal government against the will of the majority, costing those elites huge amounts of money and even more power. Based on the calls for secession, these elites seem desperate to avoid such a scenario, and want to create a new country where they will maintain control over the government.

The solution to these attempts to subvert our democracy comes down to education and removal of falsehoods. Additionally funding for public schools for ethics and civics courses would make future generations of Americans more resistant to manipulation. Courses that explain and debunk secessionist arguments can help Americans to understand these topics fully, not just repeating the same talking points. More importantly, codes of ethics need to be instituted for broadcasters that punish spreading known falsehoods and making it easier for individuals or the government to sue broadcasters who do so. Another important change we can make to prevent a civil war is to remove money from our political system. Enforcing anti-bribery and corruption laws to remove and punish both lawmakers who accept bribes and those who offer them weakens the elite's power to affect policy. Lastly, the right to vote must be expanded. Increasing the pool of voters not only gives representation to people currently without it, but dilutes the power of bad faith actors. As the number of voters go up, the political leverage of the secessionists goes down.

Conclusion

In this paper I have illustrated how the calls for secession in the 2020s by political elites like Marjorie Taylor Green share similarities with the secessionist movement in the 1860s that ultimately culminated in the American Civil War. Furthermore, I discussed how both movements serve to solely benefit elites. As such justifications fail to convince non-elites to fight and die for the economic well-being of the elites, I discussed how the media is used to manufacture the appearance of public support. Lastly, I also discussed how in both movements, undemocratic actions, like rigging elections, are taken to give their movement the appearance of legitimacy.

This paper lacks hard statistics on the impact of gerrymandering and voter suppression in the 2020s. Admittedly, as there has not been a vote for secession in the 2020s as in the 1860s (yet), statistics on public support for secession are scarce. The conclusions arrived at in this work are based on polls by the University of Maryland and the Washington Post, as well as polls by CBS News and YouGov. Polls were conducted by phone from a random national sample. Support for secession likely varies wildly depending on age, race, gender, location, political affiliation, education-level, religion, media-consumption, and political affiliation.

More research can be conducted on support for secession among subgroups of the American populace. Polling and regression models can be used to substantiate claims made in this paper. Furthermore, research can be conducted on how elite-driven communication was used in the build-up to the American Revolutionary War.

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