

The Logic of Connective Faction

How Digitally-Networked Elites and Hyper-Partisan Media Radicalize Politics

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Recent disruptions to many democratic systems have been marked by the sudden circulation and mainstreaming of initially fringe far-right issues and ideas. This development occurs at a time when media and party systems have experienced rapid transformations. Ideological cleavages are increasingly emerging not only between but also within many political parties. Meanwhile, highly ideological and digitally networked media organizations create informational networks that feed into partisan politics. To understand how these developments are connected, we examine a case from the United States, where the topic of “Critical Race Theory” (CRT) diffused from being a far-right talking point into mainstream politics. We construct an original dataset of right-wing and mainstream news sources to analyze the role of Republican politicians in spreading this agenda item ($n = 1,941,742$). We then examine what distinguishes these Republicans from their co-partisans in terms of their ideological behavior in Congress and modes of connectivity. We find that a particular faction of Republican elites—who are particularly extreme in Congress and more connected to digital right-wing media—play an outsized role. The combination of ideology and connectivity, predicts whether a Republican Member of Congress will help spread the “CRT” agenda. We refer to this mechanism as an emerging “logic of connective faction” and discuss the implications for Congress, the Republican Party, media systems, and political actors beyond the United States.

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

The rise of illiberal politics and the phenomenon of “democratic backsliding” across various national contexts (Bennett and Kneuer 2023; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Štětka and Mihelj 2024; Svobik et al. 2023) has coincided with the increased visibility and circulation of highly ideological agenda items, especially from the far-right.¹ In many democratic media systems, such far-right ideas are incrementally seeping into the various arenas of mainstream discourse (Klinger et al. 2023; Knüpfer, Schwemmer, and Heft 2023; Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti 2024). Though not all of these ideas directly influence governance, they often play a crucial role in shifting the boundaries of political debate. Over time, such shifts have enabled once-fringe ideas to spark political disruptions, drive ideological realignments, and, in some instances, lead to substantial political upheavals and policy changes (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Müller and Gebauer 2021; Startin 2015).

In previous eras, two principal institutional arenas for political contestation in democratic societies were media organizations and political parties. Media organizations not only served as an “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 that determined which actors received public attention and which issues, frames, or ideas circulated in public forums.

A common explanation for the increased mainstreaming of fringe or radical issues highlights the weakening of these traditional gatekeeping mechanisms (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Wallace 2018), positing that the fading power of media and party institutions has allowed previously marginal ideas to permeate mainstream consciousness. Yet, this is only part of the picture, alongside another critical shift: these institutions are not merely failing to block fringe ideas but, in some cases, are actively incorporating them (de Jonge and Gaufman 2022; Ripoll Servent 2022). Media organizations and parties are no longer distinct gatekeepers standing

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.

outside the fray; instead, they are often the very channels by which radical ideas and narratives gain traction (Maurer et al. 2023).

This shift points to a profound transformation within media systems, where new mechanisms now enable the circulation of once-marginal ideas, even as traditional gatekeeping is weakened or bypassed. As media systems have evolved into more “hybrid” forms (Chadwick 2013), new avenues have emerged for information circulation and for forging connections between political actors and the informational ecosystems they tap into. This hybridization is especially pronounced on the political right, where alternative media and influencers create parallel informational networks that often antagonize traditional journalism, and where “populist” actor types have been highly effective in using digital affordances to channel affect and discontent into political mobilization and party platforms (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Törnberg and Chueri 2025; Wells et al. 2016; Zhang, Chen, and Lukito 2022).

In tandem with these media system shifts, many political parties are also experiencing increased radicalization and internal fragmentation, with ideological realignments both between and within parties (Blum and Cowburn 2024; Cowburn 2024b). In many democratic 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). The trend is especially notable on the far-right, where party organizations and supporters demonstrate a heightened receptivity to blending novel organizational and mobilization strategies with the demands of party politics (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfner 2018; Blum 2020; Cowburn and Theriault 2025).

Previous studies show that interaction with hyper-partisan media can significantly impact political elites. 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). Furthermore, in a highly networked information ecosystem, these media can bridge divides between mainstream party elites and more radical actors at the party’s periphery (Klinger et al. 2023). In effect, the boundaries between parties and media networks have grown increasingly indistinct.

Taken together, these factors shape a new landscape of political communication, with novel dynamics through which information circulates and political interest manifests. Within this landscape, the nature of both parties and media environments has fundamentally changed. Emergent concepts such as digital surrogates (Knüpfer and Klinger 2024), connective action within digital networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), movement media (Cammaerts 2015), and extended party networks (Albert 2020; Desmarais, La Raja, and Kowal 2015; Koger, Masket, and Noel 2009) illustrate how two of the primary arenas of political contestation have been reconfigured. While ample research examines these media and party transformations, few studies integrate these factors to analyze how transformations in media—such as the increased connectivity among ideological actors and content—interact with the rising intra-party contention discussed above. Against this backdrop, we ask:

RQ: *Through what mechanisms do fringe ideological issues move onto the official party platform, influence mainstream discourse, and ultimately shape policy outcomes?*

Literature Review: How Fringe Issues Go Mainstream

Recent scholarship identifies several avenues through which initially fringe ideas transition into mainstream consciousness and, as a result, become normalized or implemented as policy. Examples of these dynamics are not limited to a particular country context and often directly involve an interplay of digital tools, disruptive political actors, and established media or political institutions. We outline several salient examples in the following section.

Since the 2016 U.S. 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 mainstream amplification (Lukito et al. 2019). Meanwhile, the mainstreaming of conspiracy-driven movements such as QAnon and #SaveTheChildren has been primarily driven by digitally enabled modes of connectivity in conjunction with elite and mainstream media amplification (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 far-right 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), with legacy media shown to be incrementally mainstreaming far-right issues and actors (Maurer et al. 2023; Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti 2024). These trends are also observed in the Benelux countries, where digital media have provided new avenues for political communication by far-right 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 radical policies discursively (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). This 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; Lewandowsky and Wagner 2022).

In these European multiparty systems, pressure from the radical right has commonly emerged in the form of new 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 directly make gains in elections, and externally pressuring center-right parties to prioritize their policy concerns and

positions, moving them ideologically to the right in the process (Gagatek 2024; Wagner and Meyer 2018). 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).

Rather than forming a new party structure that is highly unlikely to succeed at gaining power due to the dominant two-party system, reactionary actors on the political right—first in the form of the Tea Party and then coalesced around the singular figure of Donald Trump—instead pressure the Republican 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 coalesce around a preferred 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). Yet, intra-party conflict has continued unabated (Cowburn 2024a), as evidenced in the historic fifteen-round election and subsequent ousting of House speaker Kevin McCarthy (Reilly 2023).

One consistent 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 actors 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. Yet, as salient as these dynamics have become, the potential connection between them remains underexplored.

Furthermore, in many of the examples cited above, far-right fringe ideas are often wrapped within larger topics that need not be immediately recognizable for their ideological underpinnings, including strategies such as dog whistles or double-speak (Lukito et al. 2023; May and Czymara 2023) are recurrent markers of far-right communication practices, especially when these are aimed at a larger public rather than ideologically aligned audiences. This complicates the way we would identify and trace such dynamics, as meanings shift and are contingent on receptive audiences.

In order to outline and trace such dynamics, we define “going mainstream” in the sense that ideas or topics that are previously deemed as radical and only appear in discursive fringes are taken up and further amplified by established institutions. For our purposes, this can be media organizations who cater to a mass or “mainstream” audience (as opposed to ideological niches) or established political party platforms. We therefore not only need to consider a variety of actor types—running from ideological information networks, mainstream media, to political parties—but also consider examples where specific issues or ideas can be explicitly

identified as markers for far-right ideological interests. To do so, we provide an empirical case study that meets these criteria.

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

We empirically examine an exploratory case study from the U.S. wherein right-wing activists and partisan media initiated a fringe idea and saw it go mainstream. To do so, we focus on an issue-topic that enables us to collect data from before it was prevalent to better trace its spread across various actor types. The emergence of “critical race theory” in the far-right sphere served as a catch-all, filled with racialized animosity and strong appeals to White identity, with an underlying claim of victimization of Whites, supposedly under threat by progressive curricula and racial equity programs and was designed to engage Republican partisanship (Carbone, Harell, and Soroka 2024; Smith et al. 2025). Given the tactics and nature of far-right communication outlined above, it is crucial to distinguish between what we therefore refer to as a strategically chosen “floating signifier”² of “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

² 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).

theory—centers how individuals’ identities and characteristics combine to structure both discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

Yet, in previous 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 making White people, especially White children, feel guilty and responsible for the actions of previous generations (Rufo 2021b). As Smith et al. (2025) demonstrate, this strategic act of re-framing is 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 research further suggests, the term “CRT” significantly lowers 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.

It is, therefore, this redefined labeling of critical race theory, deliberately labeled in parentheses here as “critical race theory” (“CRT”), that we examine.³ 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.⁴ We recognize that our approach has the potential to exacerbate misperceptions about the nature and definition of critical race theory, but believe that the misuse of the term under the guise of “CRT” is sufficiently problematic to warrant scholarly attention. The emergence of the topic from seemingly nowhere to become 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 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. This sudden uptick coincided with a 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

³ 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).

⁴ 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.

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 research question outlined above, our three empirical research questions focused on this specific case study read as follows:

RQ1: Through what media & elite channels does the “CRT” issue emerge and spread?

RQ2: Who or what is driving the issue’s uptake by political elites in Congress?

RQ3: Which features distinguish “CRT Republicans” from other Republican elites?

Data & 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 Sources – 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 2022. 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	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, showing the importance of elite political actors in disseminating information from RNS to mainstream sources. Having shown the centrality of elite political actors in this dissemination process, 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 differences in terms of connectivity among these Republican elites.

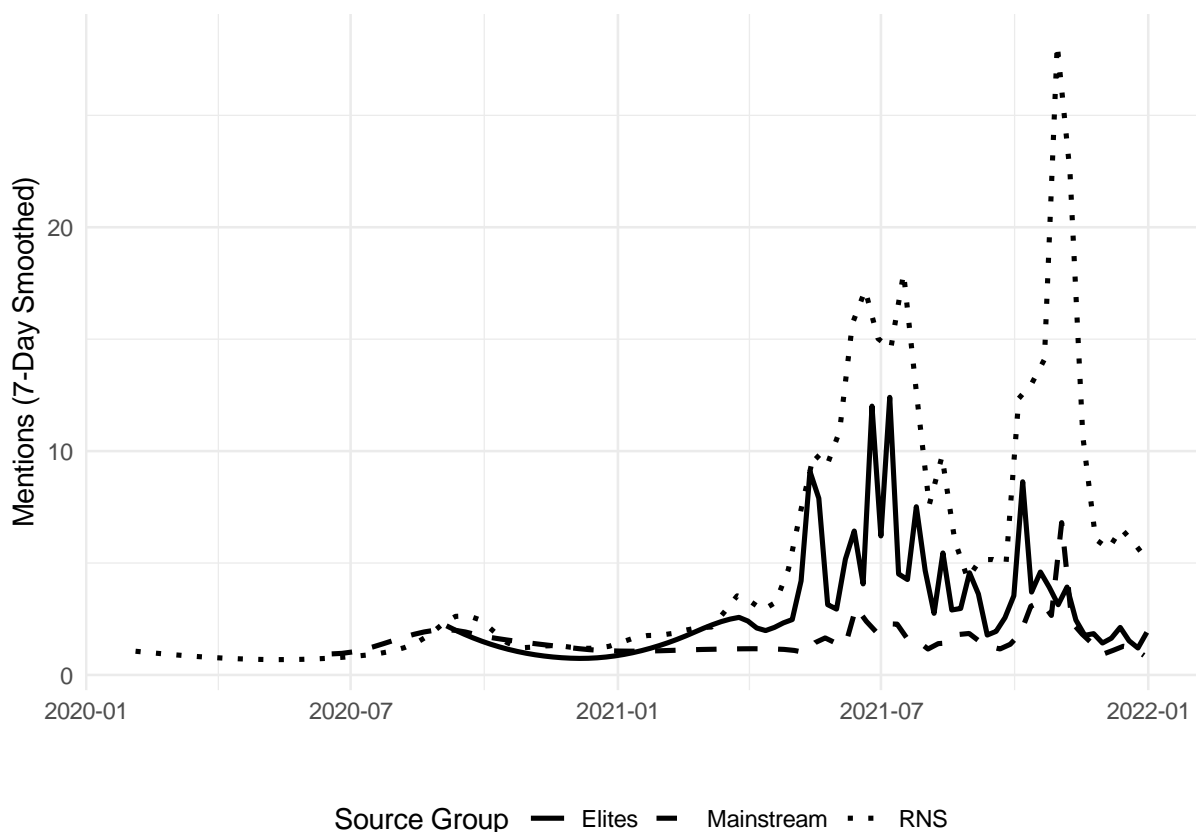
RQ1: Emergence and Spread of “CRT” across Actor Types

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. RNS sites discuss CRT first, with mentions emerging in spring 2020 and surging in early 2021, followed by a major spike in November 2021, likely linked to Glenn Youngkin’s gubernatorial victory in Virginia. Republican members of Congress began engaging with “CRT” discourse in spring 2021, with mainstream media following shortly thereafter, though at consistently lower levels. In the supplementary material (Figure A.1), 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.

Figure 1: Temporal Trends of “CRT” by Source Group



The use of the term by Republicans in Congress and the mainstream sources aligns closely with a series of campaigns in Republican-leaning states to outlaw the teaching of “CRT” in schools, widely understood as being a backlash to DEI initiatives often introduced in response to protests for racial justice in the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd and many other Black Americans by U.S. police forces (Carr 2022; Schwartz 2021). Electorally, the perceived success of this approach in the 2021 Virginia Governor’s race led many Republicans to deploy the term as a “potent midterm weapon” (Wilson 2021) in 2022, further serving to mainstream the term.

Table 2: Mainstream Media Mentions of Political Elites & Right-Wing News Sources (RNS)

<i>Mentioned?</i>	Political Elites		RNS	
	<i>n = 351</i>	%	<i>n = 351</i>	%
No	129	36.8	311	88.6
Yes	222	63.2	40	11.4

To better understand what drove mainstream media coverage, we analyze the “CRT” content of our three mainstream sources (*The New York Times*, CBS, CNN) in more detail. We use Open AI’s GPT-4o model to identify references to political elites⁵ and subsequent keyword searches to identify the mentions of right-wing news sources in mainstream media content. Almost two-thirds (63.2%) of the mainstream newspaper articles or television transcripts that referenced “CRT” also mentioned at least one political elite. This finding aligns with our expectations about mainstream news coverage and reliance on institutional power in both the agenda setting and framing capacities of their political news content. Conversely, the RNS in our dataset (“Fox News”, “Breitbart”, “Daily Caller”) were mentioned in around one-tenth (11.4%) of all mainstream stories that referenced “CRT”. The full figures are shown in Table 2. Based on these findings, we argue that the adoption of “CRT” by political elites is a major factor connecting this fringe issue to the mainstream. Accordingly, we turn our attention

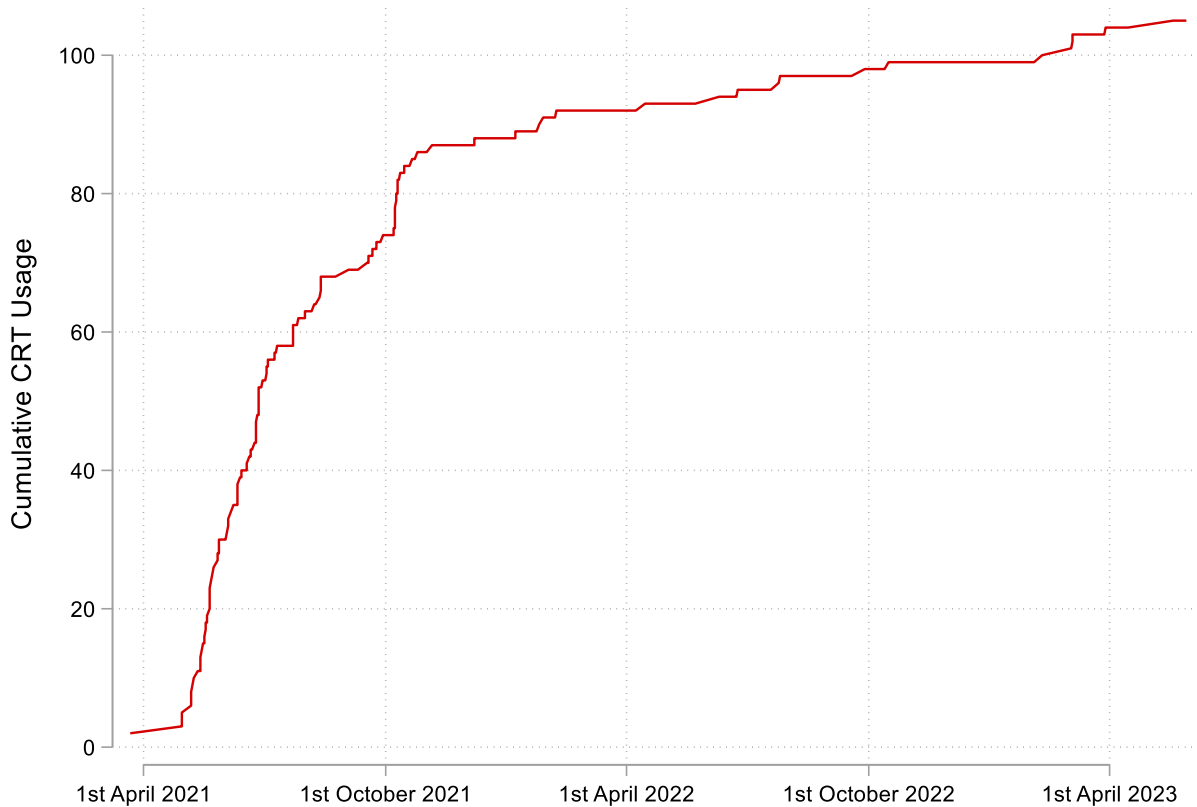
⁵ Prompt: “Extract US politicians. The returned text should be a pair of name and title separated by a dash. For example, Barack Obama-US President. Each pair is separated by a comma. If the text does not explicitly mention any of them, then return NA”. ChatGPT-4o is shown to have a high validity for this type of task (Mens and Gallego 2025).

to issue uptake by the group of political elites who serve as a key conduit between RNS and mainstream news sources: congressional Republicans.

RQ2: “CRT” Issue Uptake by Congressional Republicans

To identify the use of the term “Critical Race Theory” among members of Congress, we 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 (Figure A.2), Democratic members of Congress barely mention the term in our data, with only three Democrats (Jamie Raskin, Yvette Clarke, and Jackie Speier) ever referring to critical race theory. Conversely, Republicans saw a huge uptick in usage between the spring and autumn of 2021, with a steady addition of new uses thereafter. By the end of our period of analysis, more than 100 Republicans in Congress had referenced critical race theory. Given this obvious partisan asymmetry, we focus our attention only on Republican elites.

Figure 2: Republican Member of Congress Use of CRT



RQ3: “CRT Republicans” and “Non-CRT Republicans”

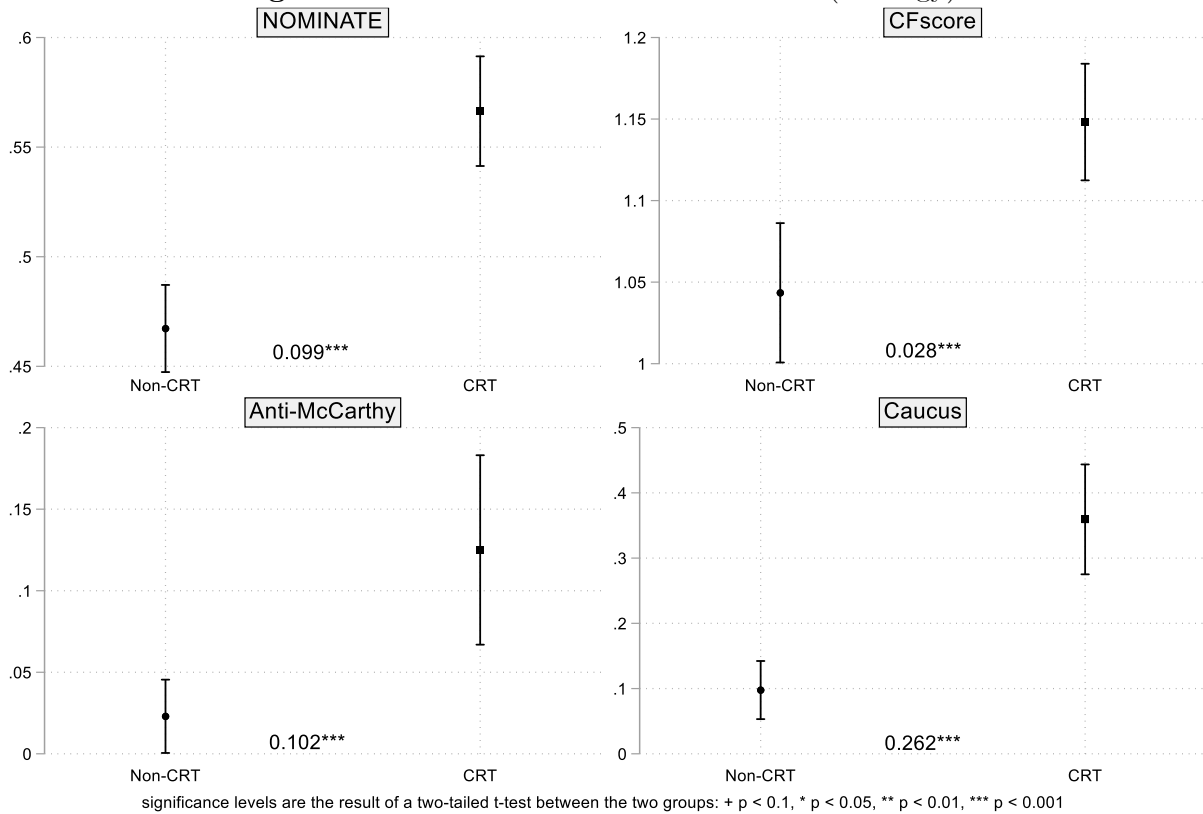
Next, we look to identify differences between those Republicans who talked about “critical race theory” in their weekly newsletters or Twitter feeds and those that did not. To do so, we create two groups, those Republicans who ever mentioned the topic on either feed (“CRT Republicans”) and those who 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. Members of these caucuses are coded as 1 and non-members as 0. Both caucuses are identifiable 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 that do and do not talk about critical race theory, we next analyze the differences in their engagement with different media sources. To do so, we use a number of 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 for here as the previous analysis established that they featured “CRT” heavily. Explicitly referencing these sources therefore provides a potential indicator for members of Congress’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 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,

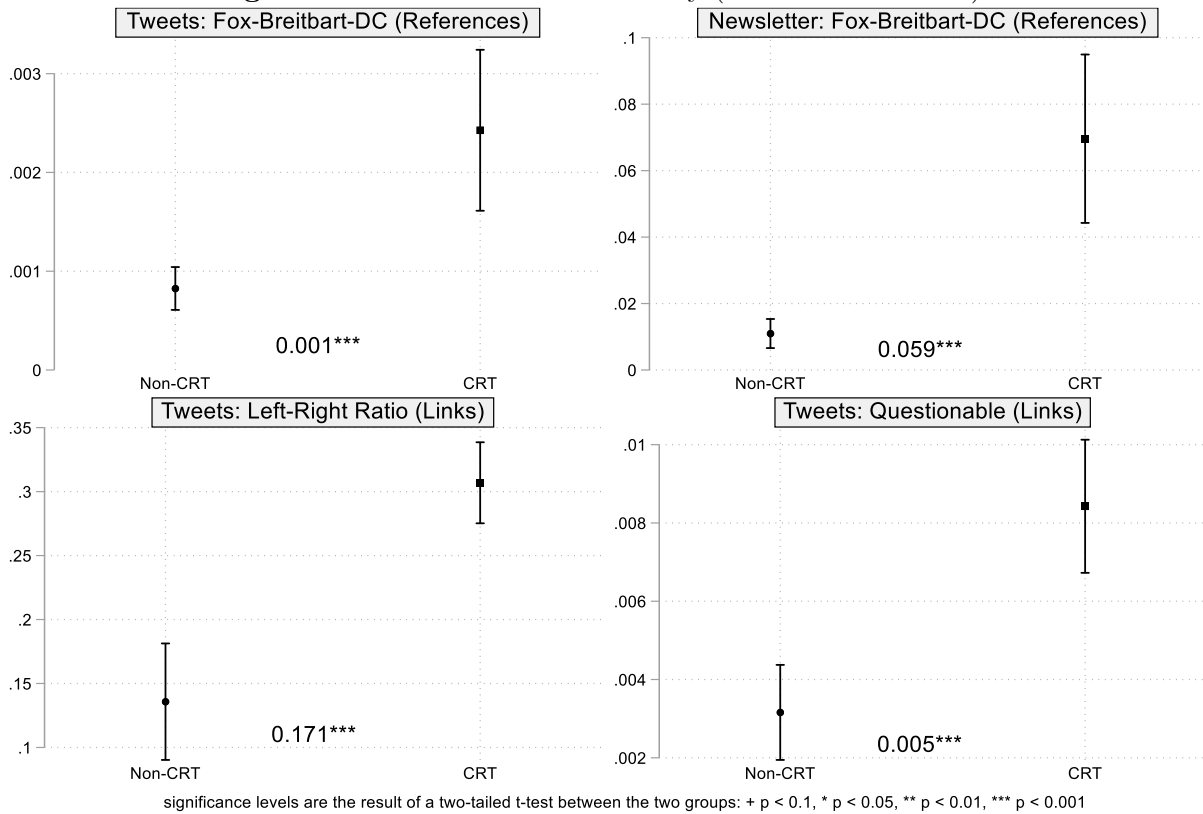
and, as explained in more detail in the supplementary material, we draw on the Media Bias Fact Check’s 2020 list of ideological media sites⁶ to create a similar *Left-Right Ratio*, which counts hyperlinks in Tweets to domains classified as either left, center-left, center, center-right, or right, divided 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 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). There clearly is more connectivity here, in other words, whereby CRT Republicans use digital platforms to connect (link to and amplify) content from these sites and the informational environments they represent.

⁶ 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).

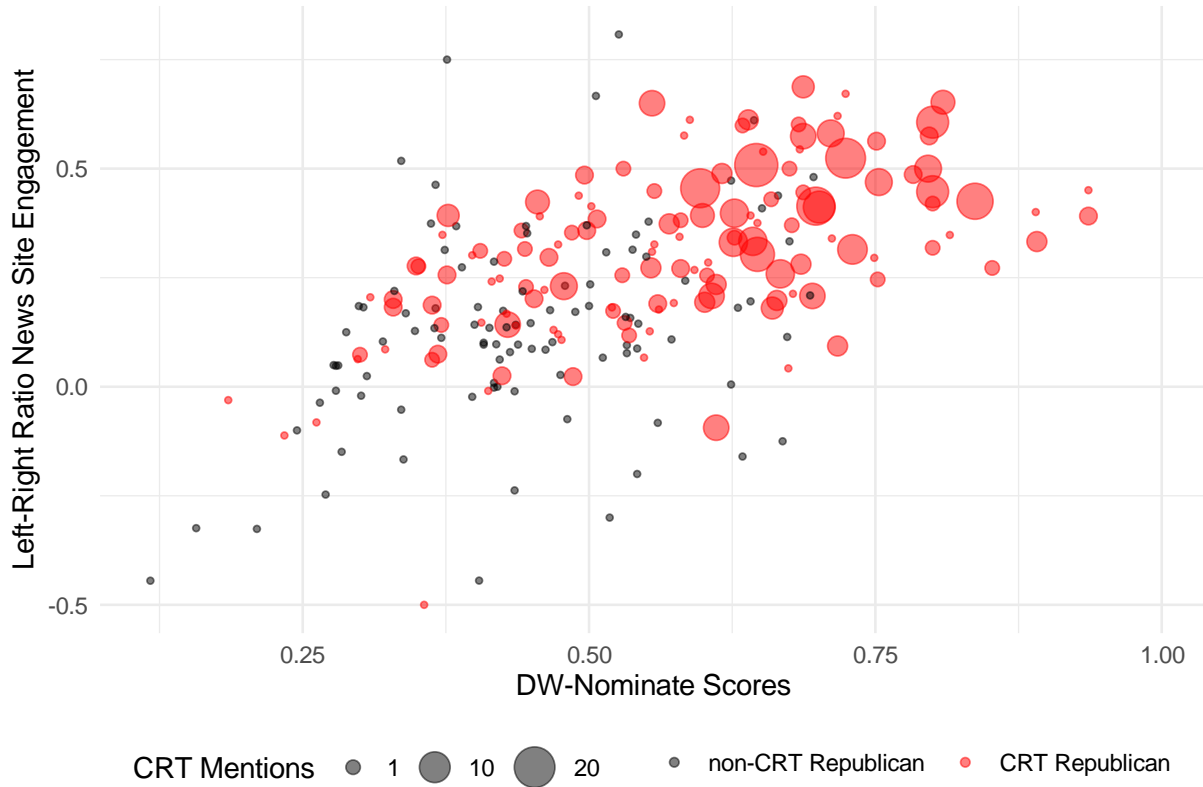
Figure 4: Differences in Connectivity (References & Links)



The above metrics provide a clear picture on both sets of factors: CRT Republicans are distinct both in terms of their ideological preferences and behavior, as well as in terms of the connectivity they exhibit in engaging with more ideologically extreme media. We next wanted to understand how these factors interact. 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 featured “CRT”.⁷

⁷ 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.⁸

Platform-Level Connectivity

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

⁸ In the supplementary material, we 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.

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 networking affordances these tap into, via the emerging possibilities of the “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 data on 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. Table 3 provides an overview of the 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 3: Platform Links on Members of Congress Websites

Platform	Non-CRT Republicans		CRT Republicans		Difference	
	<i>n</i> = 128	%	<i>n</i> = 123	%	<i>n</i>	%
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 4, we group these platforms into what we might refer to as “mainstream” and “alt-tech” platforms. 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 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.

Table 4: Mainstream & Alt-Tech Platform Usage

		Non-CRT Republicans		CRT Republicans	
		<i>n</i> = 128	%	<i>n</i> = 123	%
Mainstream Platform	<i>n</i> = 1,103	580	52.6	523	47.4
“Alt-Tech” Platforms	<i>n</i> = 28	4	14.3	24	85.7

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 member’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 while this undercounting might 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.

Discussion: The Logic of Connective Faction

When we initially set out on our research around this topic, we sought to explain by what mechanisms a single, initially fringe and ideologically extreme issue might circulate within contemporary media environments. Our hunch was that hyper-partisan news media play an important role in this. Yet, though we found some degree of variation between right-wing news sources and mainstream media, we quickly uncovered that political elites played a crucial role in connecting the two. Importantly, however, we also found heterogeneity among elites, even at an intra-party level. What distinguishes those who push a far-right agenda issue from those

who may not? Again, the initial hunch seems obvious: ideological interests are surely at work in explaining these behaviors. Yet this too only appears to be part of the story, with digitally-enabled connectivity between political elites and the networks of hyperpartisan media environments, which provide an alternative informational ecosystem, serving as a further indicator for adoption.

In observing this interplay of organizational structures (parties), with ideological interests and modes of connectivity, we believe that we are seeing a more institutionalized version of dynamics previously observed in the context of movement actors and digitally-enabled modes of “connective action”. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 748) observed in their seminal piece on the concept, the adoption of networked digital media has meant that new logics come to apply “to life in late modern societies in which formal organizations are losing their grip on individuals, and group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks.” Here, communicative network ties between individual actors form networks which operate “through the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united ‘we’” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 748).

If this logic is true for citizens and movements, then we might expect similar dynamics to unfold where formal organizations—such as political parties, or parts thereof—have come to outsource most of their communicative organizational capacities to digital platforms and modes of connectivity. We would suspect that such effects would be especially likely to emerge in organizations where old structures have been deliberately circumvented by novel actors, or in systems that have enabled the emergence of new organizational formats that draw more deliberately on these affordances.

We therefore believe that the current form of hybrid and “disrupted” media systems (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Chadwick 2013) can provide access points for fringe topics and ideas into wider circulation via highly ideological and networked political elites who may receive outsized attention and influence as a result of these mechanisms. Under these

communicative conditions, in other words, ideologically-incentivized actor types and hyper-partisan media organizations become co-producers of political agenda items, causing new mechanisms and logics of interaction to emerge between the typical players involved in political communication processes (Cowburn 2024b; Cowburn and Knüpfer 2024; Yang 2025). We term the mechanisms that we highlight here a “logic of connective faction”, by which we mean that within political parties, it may be highly digitally-networked or communicatively-connected ideological factions that provide key entry points for fringe or illiberal issues and ideas, and by which these are subsequently elevated into the wider information ecology.

We refer to this as a “logic”, because we believe there are likely a number of complex mechanisms at work, which may differ strongly on an individual level, but emerge as an overall trend at a meso- or even macro-level perspective. Here, individual party members may make use of similar forms of communication technologies, which can come to co-determine how they might behave. Such adoption would not be a unidirectional mechanism. Instead, the logic might also lead a particular type of actor who is already prone to communicate and act in a specific way, to choose particular ways of communicating and engaging which are likely to allow for the type of political signaling and topic dissemination that they are interested in.

This logic, in turn, forces us to rethink the usual forms of connectivity and directionalities of information flows between elites and media organization, highlighting a clear need to distinguish both between types of media ecologies (e.g. hyper-partisan versus mainstream). It also requires us to distinguish more clearly between different sets of elites and what might drive their individual or collective behaviors. Different “logics” may well be in place here, by which they respond to diverging audiences and publics or may be more or less incentivized towards pushing particular issues in order to obtain or maintain visibility.

As we have previously observed elsewhere (Authors Redacted 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. In fact, as we have observed via the case study featured here, these forms of connectivity may well function as mechanisms by which reactionary and exclusionary politics manifest and unfold productive power (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfner 2018).

Conclusion

Our case study shows how a topic initially only circulating in right-wing and far-right fringe media ultimately shaped elite political discourse and mainstream media coverage. As a political project, “CRT” introduces a radical and disruptive set of ideas into U.S. 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 this process of mainstreaming radical ideas, 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 the success of “CRT” in gaining wider traction is directly connected to ideological preferences as well as modes of connectivity to digitally networked, ideological information environments.

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? Our research cannot answer this question and merely uncovers a degree to which these two factors align. Future studies might therefore trace individual dynamics over time to tease these dynamics out more. Yet, we also believe that we are dealing with a chicken-and-egg dynamic in which both sets of factors impact one another in mutually reinforcing ways.

One further limitation of this work is that it is based on a singular case study. It is entirely possible that the dynamics we observe in regard to “CRT” may be distinct or even unique. In future studies, we would be highly interested in testing cases marked by similar patterns of sudden mainstream visibility of erstwhile fringe topics. Recent discussions around “DEI,” equating Black Lives Matter with “Antifa”, the trajectory of the “stop the steal” campaign, or various forms of moral panics and anti-trans agitation come to mind.

Relatedly, we are limited by our focus on the United States. The claims we derive from our observations of 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 from radical to extreme right information ecosystems and factions within parties or the party system. In multi-party parliamentary systems, connective factions might also constitute the majority of a given 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 Sweden, Germany, and Spain, where disruptive actor types within existing 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 if the dynamics we observe here also might apply within the countries they study. Based on our observations here, we believe that a logic of connective faction is likely to manifest wherever

ideologically extreme parties or factions outsource organizational capacities to their digital surrogates.

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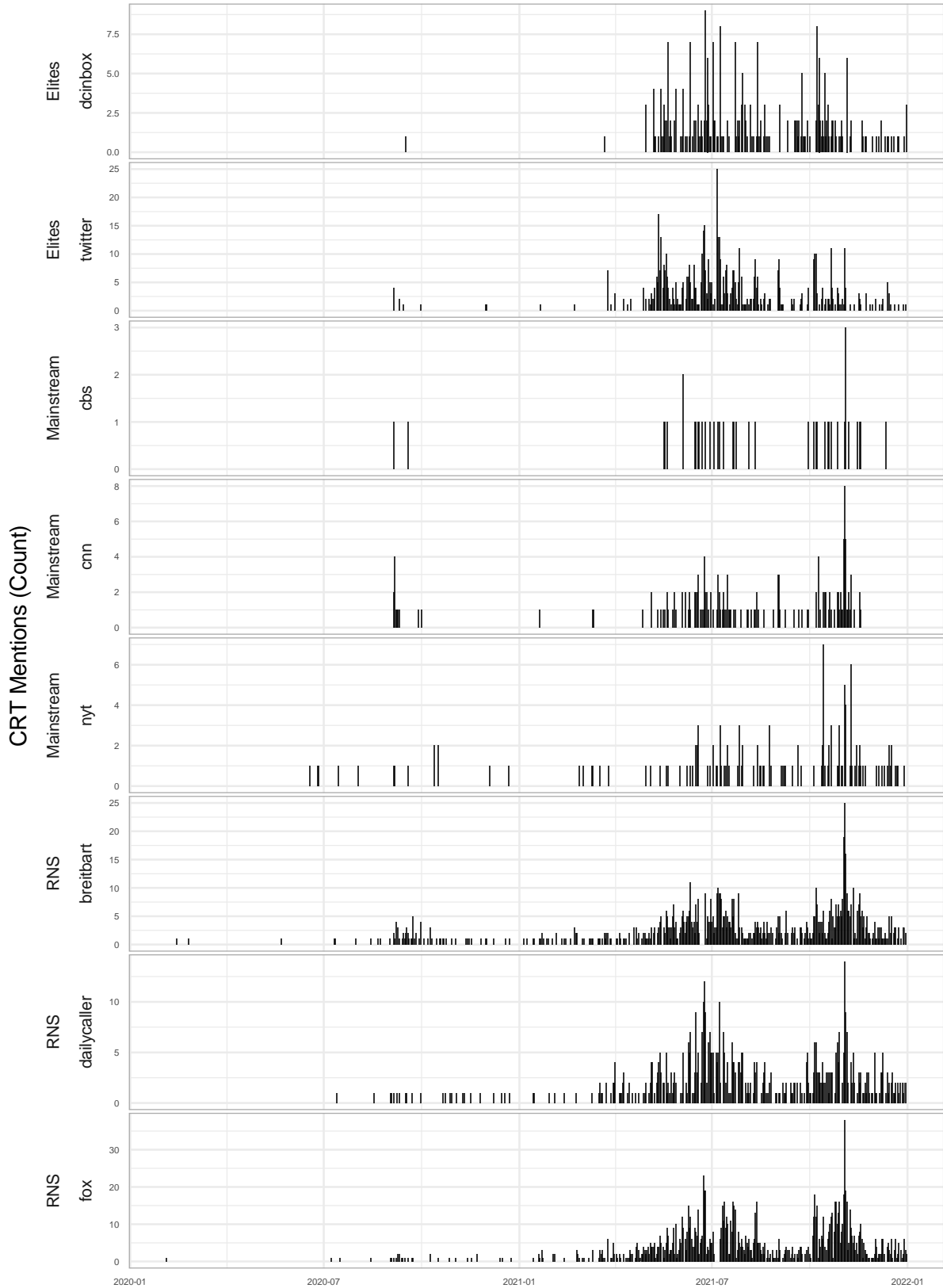
Supplementary Material

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 members of Congress).

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

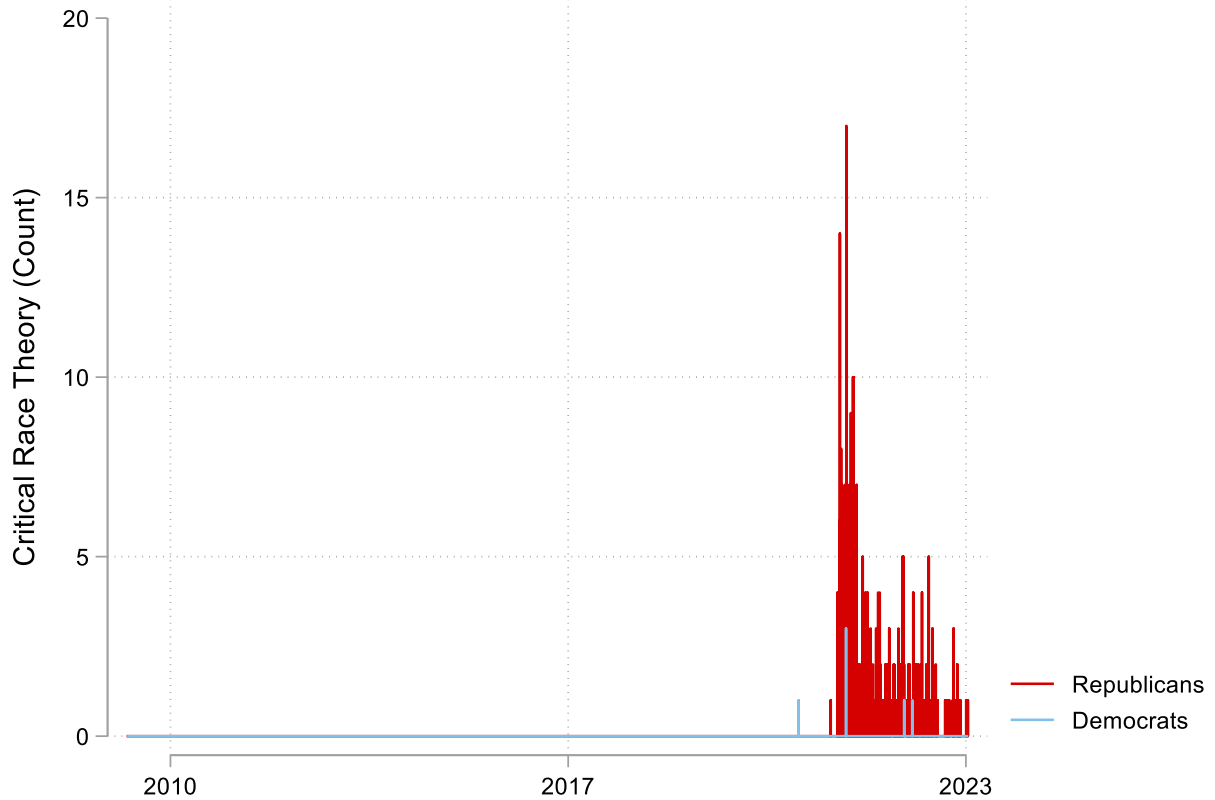
In Table A.2, we present the correlation matrix of the key variables in our dataset.

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)

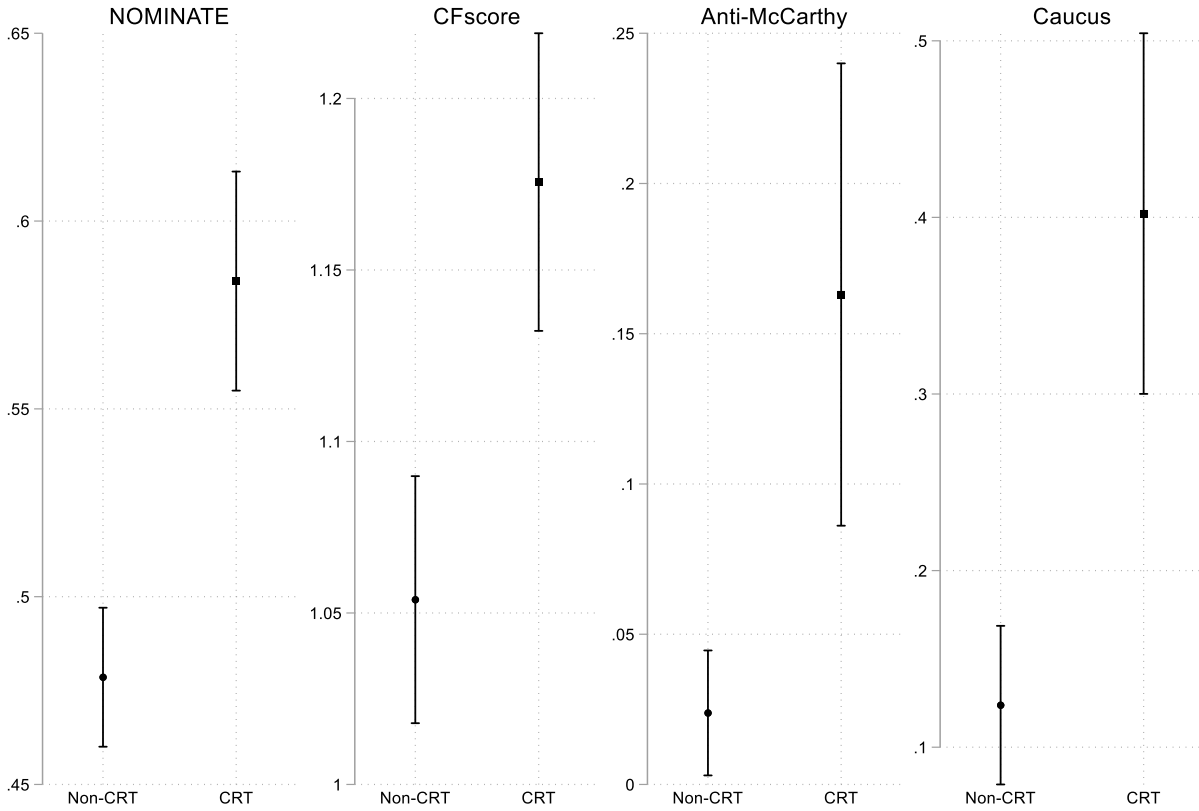
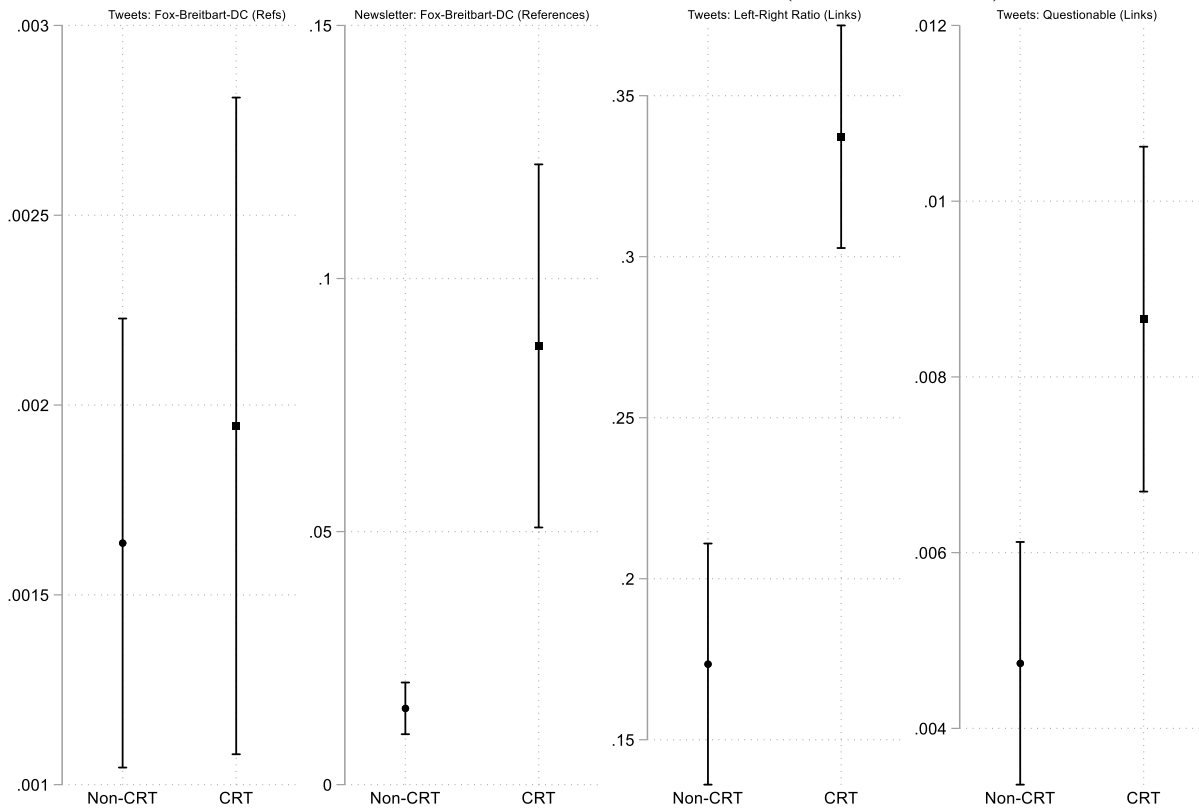


Figure A.4: Connectivity Robustness Check (DC Inbox Only)



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)

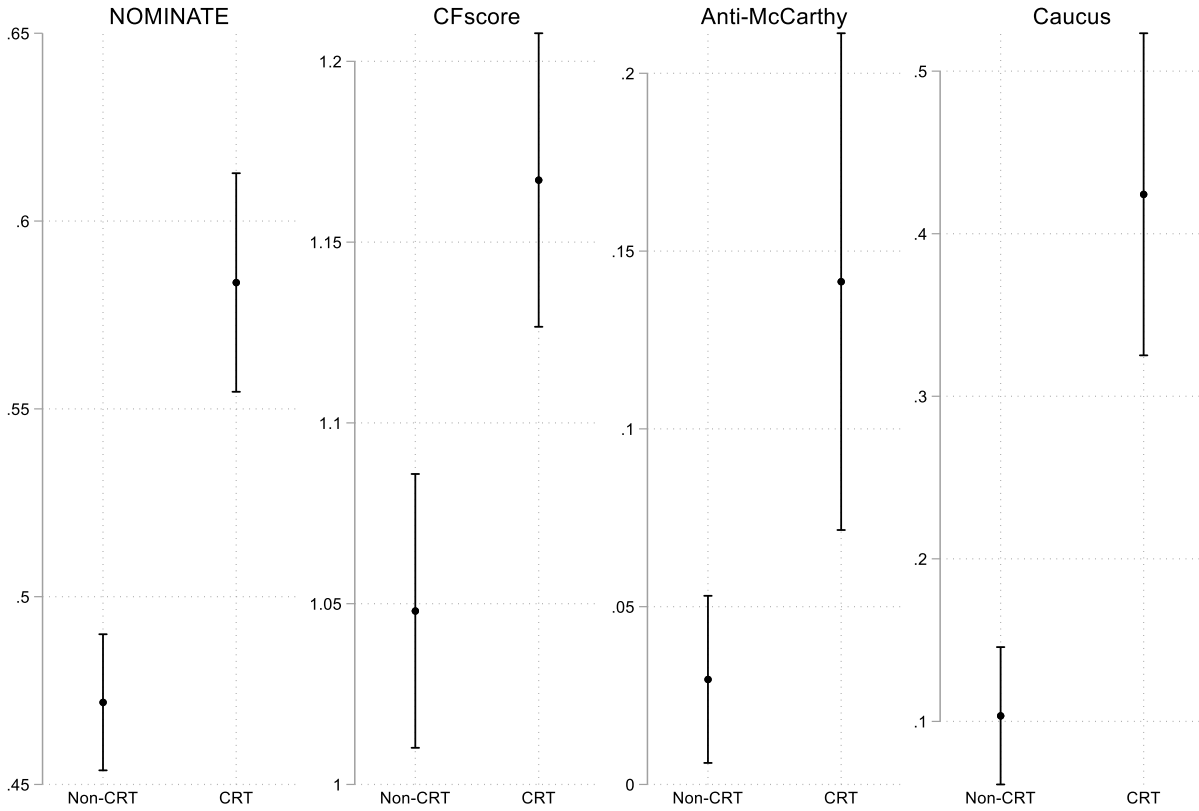
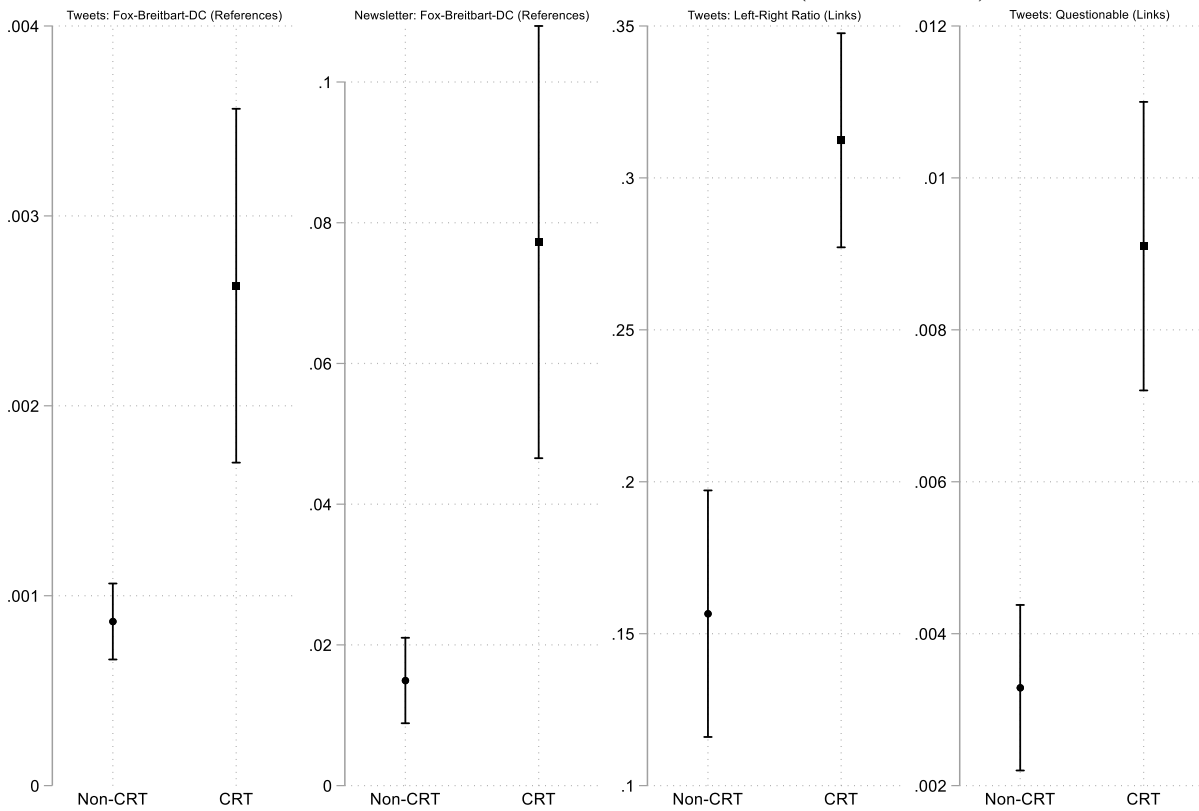


Figure A.6: Connectivity Robustness Check (Twitter Only)



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)

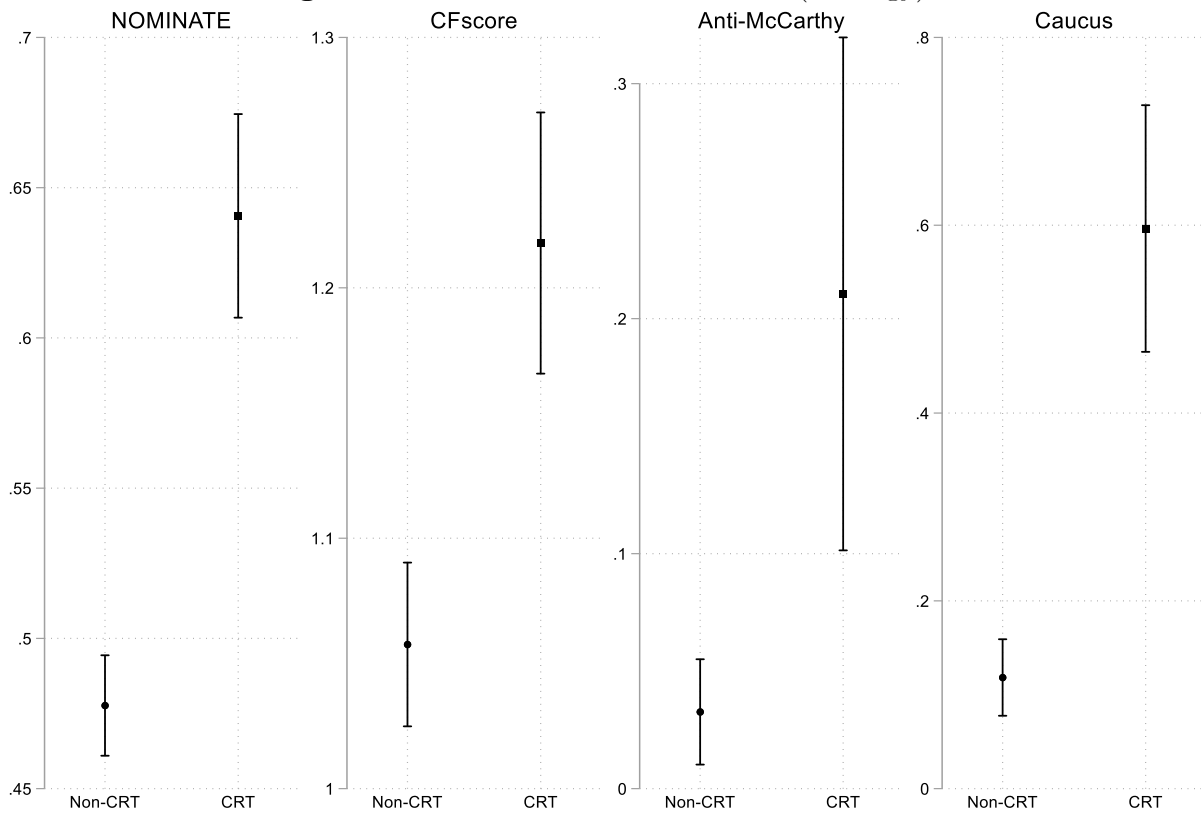
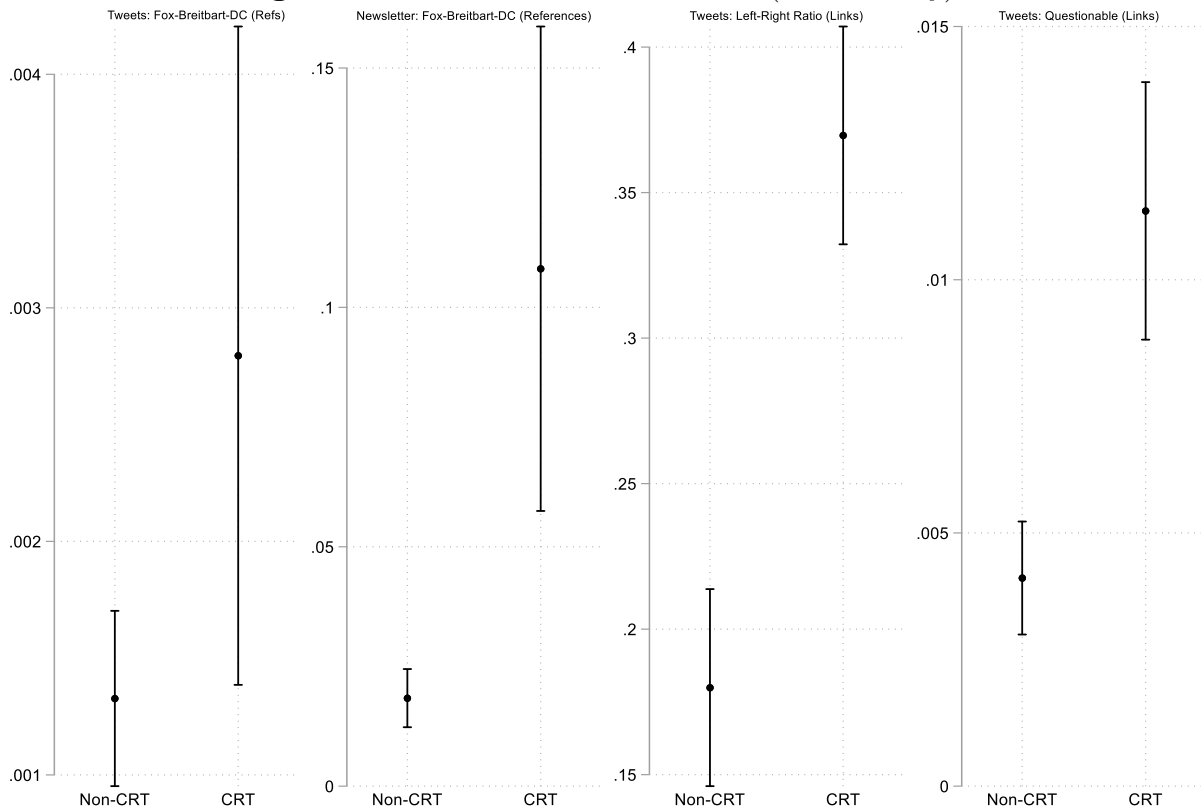


Figure A.8: Five or More Uses of CRT (Connectivity)



Named Plot

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 Members of Congress Ideology & Connectivity

