

A LITTLE THOUGHT EXERCISE ABOUT THE RIGHT WING AND THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF OUR TIMES

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Some Background:

This is a thought exercise meant to help us prepare for the long pro-democracy and antiracist struggle ahead of us. It's not a statement of position, but a discussion guide.

The first image provides an overview of the most dominant sectors of the right wing, created by Political Research Associates, a Boston-based progressive political think tank founded by pioneering lesbian feminist political scientist, Jean Hardisty. PRA monitors and reports on the political right wing, and is a critical source of information and analysis for these times.

The discussion is meant to be about political dynamics and the political culture, opportunities and threats, not the details of the individual right wing actors. If that's of interest to you, please visit Political Research Associates online at www.politicalresearch.org. They have decades of experience in this work and a website loaded with helpful analysis, definitions, tools, and details about groups that may be directly affecting you in your work.

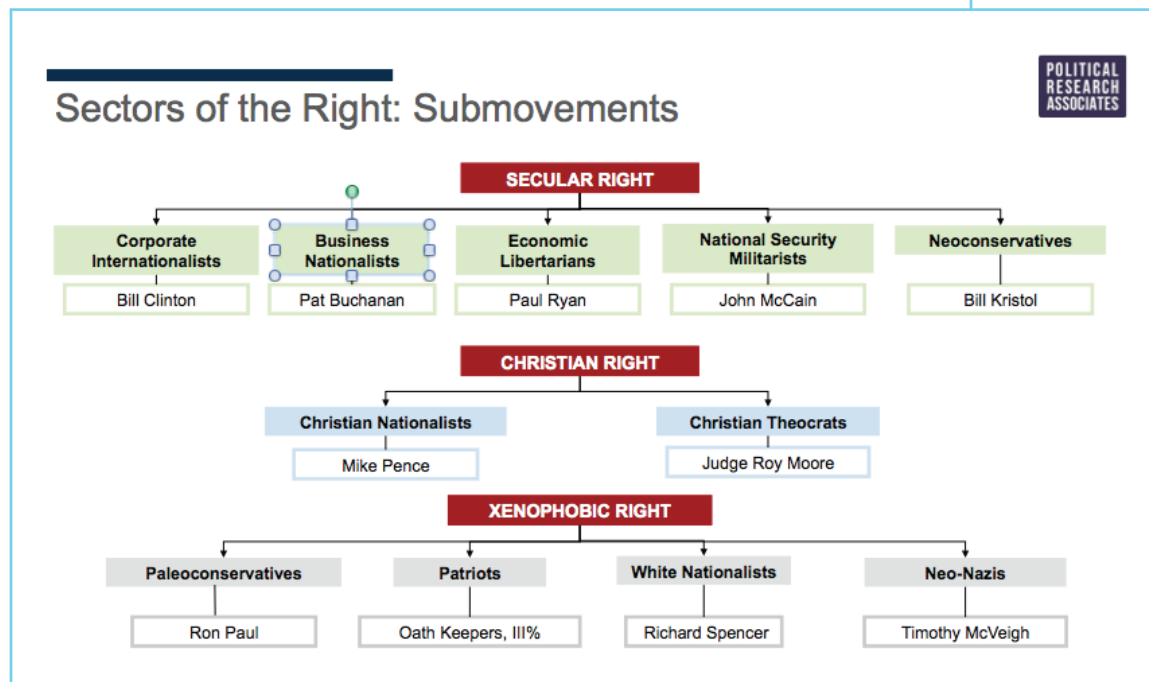


CHANGELAB

GUIDE TO THE DISCUSSION:

ChangeLab is beginning with **six basic assumptions** about the formally organized political rightwing:

The first assumption is that we don't all need to have detailed knowledge of the right to fight the right or even to just fight the good fight. It may be useful to know of the primary organizations and leaders on the right, and even, perhaps, more useful to know what theories guide them since those theories speak to intent, but it isn't necessary for every one of us to have this knowledge, and which details are useful is best determined within specific situations. That's why we included the following image for your information, but don't include a detailed discussion of rightist factions in this document.



The second assumption is that contemporary political struggles have been shaped by the dynamic tension between the right and the left here in the United States. (We'll leave out the world for the moment, but you're encouraged to bring global struggles into your discussion.)

Here are some examples of right wing influence:

- Tough on crime public policy started as project of the right, and frames much of the contemporary struggle over mass incarceration and police violence.
- Anti-immigrant racism as a political strategy is being driven from the right, and along with right wing efforts to destroy labor unions is setting the stage for a general roll back of worker protections and wage regulation.
- School privatization, rolling back public funding for libraries, our postal service, etc., and other forms of creeping neoliberalism such as the establishment of free trade zones are projects of the right.
- Anti-LGBTQ activism is driven from the right. In fact the right politicized anti-queer hatred as a political wedge strategy.
- Restrictions on family planning and abortion access are projects of the right.
- The rollback of voting rights, affirmative action, and property tax limitation are related projects of the right aimed at limiting rights and opportunities for black citizens.

The third assumption is that the right poses a very real and present danger. Historians seem to agree that there has never been a successful revolutionary take over of a democratically organized state from the left. That's not to say it could never happen, nor that transformative change isn't possible, but a left wing takeover is something for which there is no historical precedent, making the difficulty of this proposition something of great seriousness.

However, while we're contemplating that uphill climb, the catch is, there have been coups from the right. In fact, right wing coups happen with some frequency. The threat of fascism appears very real, and the more unstable society becomes, the greater threat fascism or at least some sort of dictatorial take over seems to pose.

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How have these and other projects of the right helped to create the framework of current struggles of the movement for black lives, the DREAMERS, worker justice, same sex marriage, and others?

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Do you agree with this assumption? If so, what are the strategic implications?

This leads to our **fourth assumption**:

Whatever else we may disagree about, unity in opposition to rightist theories and movements is a constant and necessary goal of leaders of progressive social movements in the United States. Even if centering that goal in terms of direct opposition (as in research, reporting, and counter-organizing) may not be practical or desirable for all sectors, anti-fascists suggest that our theory and practice in service of any of our constituency-determined goals should at least inoculate us against rightist appeals.

To do that, some suggest we should be mindful about how the right is appealing to its base. Right wing movements are often orchestrated by elites at the top, but in order to be successful at influencing the mainstream, they need to build a popular front, and it is at that level that we may be best positioned to defeat them while serving our own goals.

This brings us to the **fifth assumption**: populist movements on the right in American history and those that are active today are most successful when they appeal to people by exploiting the central tenets of liberalism embedded in “our” culture:

- Freedom
- Liberty
- Free markets = free people
- The supremacy of the individual/power to the people

But why are concepts like freedom, liberty, and individual rights drivers of *anti*-democracy on the right?

The conception of **freedom** on the right is rooted historically in the immigration dreams of European (male) settlers who came to North America in the hopes of experiencing freedom from exploitation and unfettered class mobility. But the



If you agree, how do we inoculate our base against right wing appeals, but in a way that doesn't push us out of position relative to the experiences that are motivating our folks to come to struggle?



achievement of these freedom dreams have historically been facilitated by the establishment of what amount to external or internal colonies of workers – banana republics, slavery, undocumented workers and others excluded from the legal protections enjoyed by citizen workers, all of which, in the North American context, required a monopoly on territory and access to natural resources, resulting in genocidal warfare.

Liberty is framed on the right in terms of liberty from tyranny, mainly by governments, foreign and domestic. This way of thinking about liberty centers the right to privacy in general, and non- interference in (patriarchal, hetero-normative) family life (including the education of children), and local autonomy (think states' rights), all of which is best facilitated if government is small.

This whole liberty thing is also part of the reason that the right is so rabidly and effectively anti- communist. It's not just because communism is basically anti-capitalist, but because communism is based on ideas that are illiberal (as in, not liberal) to the extent that communism and other forms of collectivism, at least in theory, put the collective good, often expressed in terms of the interests of the nation state, before the right of the individual.

Because of the two ideas above, it makes sense to the right that **free-markets = free people** and a free or at least freer society. If you're the exploiter (or your freedom dreams involve becoming one) and not the exploited, government regulation of commerce is not necessarily your friend.

The **supremacy of the individual** — the idea that rights of individuals trump all else — is the foundation of American individualism. It is the belief, also embedded in law, that no act of government may abrogate (overturn) the rights of individuals. This makes dealing with reparations for aggrieved groups next to impossible. And this is part of the reason that right is so durably racist. Racial justice rests on the hope of winning what amount to reparations for aggrieved groups, or at least that's the broadly held perception.

This is why the contest over programs like affirmative action, busing, school integration, and "redistribution schemes" like requiring equitable distribution of property tax revenues are so important to the right.



*If we agree that the right is animated by these concepts, how are they playing on the left? If we agree that we do, all of us, share membership in one culture, even if it is a deeply divided one, how do these same concepts — **especially liberty, freedom, and individualism** — play out among those leaning to the left, especially those on the left of the political spectrum who are American-born?*

POLITICAL DYNAMICS:

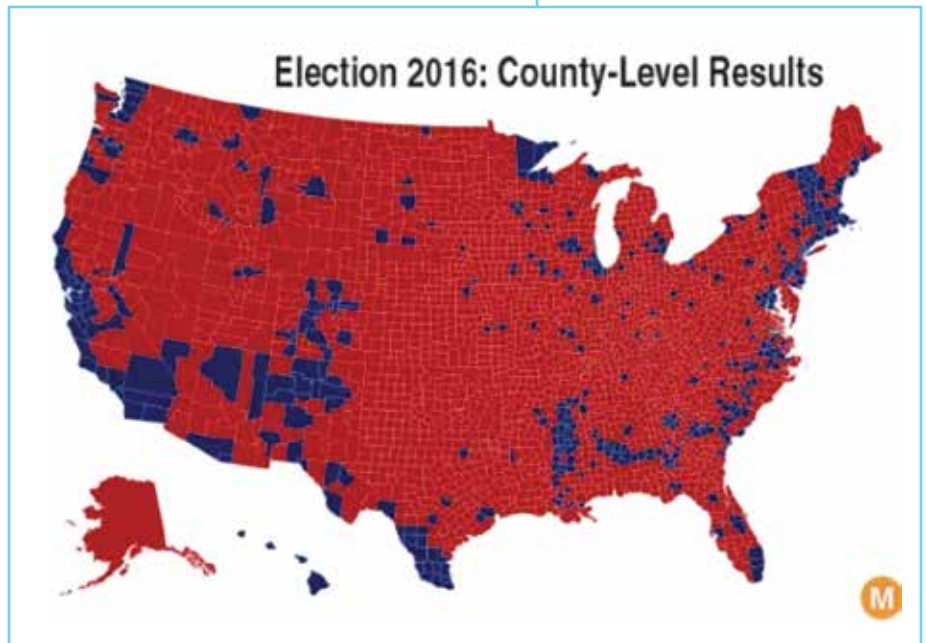
Many who study the right suggest that the right has grown in influence, especially since the Reagan era, by winning what some refer to as the battle for political position. By winning the strongest position folk mean that they've managed to maneuver themselves into the greatest position of influence over the mainstream or what many call the "middle" compared with all other radical movements. This has allowed them to redefine the middle and therefore push other radical movements out of position relative to the mainstream and into the margins.

That process of winning position involved splitting coalitions on the left by exploiting internal divisions that are rooted in popular forms of prejudice and fear, especially fear of tyranny by unpopular groups via our government.

Example:

The fight over the Affordable Care Act (ACA) gave a huge boost to the tea parties. By jumping into the fight over the ACA, tea partiers succeeded in building their base and making their network one of the most influential political forces in our country without ever gaining a majority of support outside of the GOP base.

In that fight, the tea parties exploited fear (in part of our black President who became a symbol of minority/anti-democratic rule on the right), and promoted the idea that the ACA, which they demonized as "Obamacare," would facilitate a government-led violation of privacy and of private (both individual and free market) control over our healthcare decisions. They convinced their base that this would invite the possibility of tyranny, or in fact amounted to same.



The fight over inoculation of children rose in the space created by exploiting this fear of government overreaching and violating individual rights and freedoms to reference something even more of this moment.

By dominating the debate at the grassroots level, the tea parties were able to win the battle of position in the Congress. They scared conservatives, and inspired the Republican base to believe the fight over the ACA was a fight for freedom and liberty versus tyranny and a loss of local and individual autonomy, effectively giving Congressional Republicans political cover and isolating more moderate voices in the party. This along with the reality of the ACA, which was that it was to the right of the majority in the electorate (just over 50% of voters still favor a single payer plan, including about a quarter of Republicans), made it difficult to rally grassroots support for the ACA from the left.

The combination of the right's divisive and scary rhetoric, along with their appeal to very particularly American ideals of freedom, liberty, individual rights, and the notion that the foundation for all of this is in free markets, allowed a plurality of policy makers to win compromises that weakened the plan.

Another outcome may have been that the combination of issues being promoted from the right, opposition to Obamacare, and the government bail out of elites, etc., positioned them as the anti-elite, pro-liberty and freedom voice of rebellion by the next election. The Republican take-over of Congress was driven by the tea parties at the grassroots level.

These were fights to influence government decisions while also pushing other voices into the margins. There were other forces at work here (again, we reference the fact that the majority of us wanted and still want a more progressive plan), but the right played a key role, and those American freedom memes were what animated them as much as anti-communism, racism, and other chauvinistic beliefs.

This suggests that fights for power and influence should be viewed as three-way fights. We asked anti-fascist political analyst and researcher, Tarso Ramos (Executive Director of Political Research Associates), to describe the three-way fight and got this response:

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If the right views “us” as elites, how do we reposition ourselves to compete with the right, both for base, and for influence over government?

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Racism was obviously part of the appeal of the tea parties and other insurgent right wing factions after the Obama election, and much has been said and written along those lines. Why? Racism is an illiberal idea, while the freedom and liberty memes the right so often exploits are strongly liberal ideas. How do they manage this contradiction, and how should we respond?

“In basic terms, the concept of the three-way-fight reminds us that we're not just contesting the state. The Right is also acting on the state, and acting on us. For instance, immigrant rights activists who set out to negotiate "comprehensive immigration reform" with the state found the goal posts constantly moved – in reaction to the Right's pressure on (and partial seizure of) the state, and effective demonization of our people as illegals, etc. If our strategies don't take the Right into account we're not being clear-headed about power and are far less likely to succeed in our efforts.”

And here's the **sixth assumption**: Exploiting white racism has been critical to the right's success because race is at the center of American politics. Where racial dynamics are concerned, white people define the middle. So, if we agree to that, fighting the three-way fight around issues of race means fighting not just against white racism, but to split white public opinion and win white support for our side.



Do we agree with this statement?



How do we build base in communities of color while also achieving this?