

Who Are We to Argue? How Conservative Media Mobilize Identity in Science-Hostile
Discourse

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Abstract

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Conservative hostility toward the science advocacy of Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci has hampered efforts to tackle the crises of climate change and COVID-19. However, the discursive processes that establish and mobilize links between partisan identity and attitudes toward science communication remain poorly understood. This research utilized political discourse analysis on 400 articles from conservative media, 200 of which referenced Thunberg in the title, and 200 of which addressed Fauci. The analysis of these "least similar cases" revealed that conservative media portrayed Fauci and Thunberg as agents of the political left, using science as a tool to dominate the right in a populist, binary struggle over which group should embody American identity. In both instances, conservative media leveraged aspects of conservative identity to morally justify rejecting the messaging of Thunberg and Fauci. While most conservative content

avoided direct engagement with the science advocated by Thunberg and Fauci, a subset that did represent conservative identity as respectful of scientific expertise. I describe a discursive method of justifying the rejection of the work of experts while avowing respect for science as an "epistemology of moral discernment," in which conservatives present the moral character of a science communicator as a criterion for assessing claims of truth. I conclude that "selective science hostility discourse" is best understood as a strategy for morally legitimizing politically motivated rejection of the truth claims and policy recommendations of science communicators.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teenage climate science advocate Greta Thunberg and seasoned epidemiologist Anthony Fauci, each of whom called for science-based policy to address the looming global crises of climate change and COVID-19, respectively, were celebrated worldwide for their factual and eloquent appeals. Many hoped that their skills as science communicators could persuade lawmakers and members of the public of the necessity to take action, as individuals and as governments, to address these crises according to experts' recommendations. However, both these cases had political implications. Conservative resistance to efforts to curtail the effects of climate change had hampered efforts to strengthen environmental policy for decades (Skocpol, 2013). Conservatives were also less likely to support or follow public health policies intended to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Behr, 2022; Conway et al., 2021; Jackson, 2021). Therefore, conservatives were the most pertinent of the publics that pro-science people hoped that Thunberg and Fauci's communication could persuade.

However, not only did many conservatives refuse to heed either communicator, but many also responded to them with significant hostility. Neither Thunberg's moral appeal to act on the advice of scientists lest her generation bear the brunt of climate change nor Fauci's vast experience and careful communication were well received on the right. This hostility toward science communication had consequences. The United States had the highest excess mortality rate of any high-income country (Wang et al., 2022), and mortality rates in the United States were consistently highest among Republicans (Wallace et al., 2023), suggesting that conservative hostility to COVID-19

contributed to the nation's high rate of excess COVID-19 deaths. While the percentage of Republicans who viewed climate change as a major threat grew slightly in 2020, it never exceeded 30%, and has since trended lower than it was before Thunberg became prominent (Kennedy, 2023). This failure of factual communication from high-profile and charismatic science communicators to weaken partisan resistance to science-based policies in response to significant threats to human health and well-being is concerning, especially as partisan identity remains associated with science-informed policy outcomes.

While the issue might seem simple on the surface—one group of people was misinformed about the strength of the science presented by Fauci and Thunberg—the phenomenon exhibited some remarkable features not easily explained. For one thing, the distance between the responses of the left and the right to these communicators was startling. How could two publics, living side by side, exposed to the same set of messages from the same people, react so differently to those messages? How could the differences in responses to that messaging cleave so neatly along the political divide between left and right? And what could explain the passion with which those publics responded to each other and those communicators? What could account for the willingness of many on the right to bet their health and lives, and the health and lives of their families, on the belief that Fauci was wrong about the risks of COVID-19 and the measures that could mitigate those risks? What could explain the vitriol that greeted Greta Thunberg, a youth, in response to her clear articulation of scientific consensus about climate change and her moral appeal that the crisis not be offloaded onto her generation? And as the daily news cycles continued, how could each piece of emerging

information during the pandemic be so rapidly and predictably interpreted through partisan lenses as wrong? How could every move Thunberg made in her efforts to draw attention to climate change be met with the same open contempt?

It seemed that more than simple belief could be at work. There was nothing inherently political about the scientific findings that Fauci and Thunberg advocated. The relatively simple action of carbon holding heat in the atmosphere and the subsequent effects of warmer air holding more water vapor, thereby compounding the problem, were noted long before they gained political significance. The mechanism by which COVID-19 spread and the symptoms it caused were indifferent to the identities of those affected. The efficacy of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 bore no obvious partisan significance. Yet during Thunberg's ascendance to fame and throughout the unfolding of the pandemic, partisans came to express impassioned opinions regarding the validity of the scientific arguments involved, regardless of the input from experts.

Statement of the problem

Beliefs regarding politically salient science hinder the government's ability to respond to specific crises. These beliefs are also highly correlated with partisan identity. What, beyond that relationship to partisan identity, can we be certain of? For one, as previously stated, such attitudes are selective; they do not necessarily reflect a universal hostility toward all mainstream science but instead center on scientific issues that appear to affect the partisan group in question in some way. Therefore, our area of inquiry focuses on partisan reactions to that body of science that has simultaneously

engaged partisans and divided their stated beliefs along political lines. Operating under the assumption that partisan identity is linked to stated beliefs about politically consequential science, the question arises: What, aside from a lack of knowledge, can explain that relationship?

Aims and objectives

Because partisan hostility to science communication presents significant obstacles to policy development in response to specific crises, and because our understanding of what motivates such hostility remains incomplete, the aims of this research are:

- To advance understanding of what, beyond a knowledge gap, is involved with partisan hostility to specific science issues.

Also, because the correlation between political identity and hostility to science communication that disadvantages that identity group is so strong, it stands to reason that partisan hostility to certain science is motivated by partisan considerations that go beyond the dispute over science. Therefore, the aims of this research are:

- To build a greater understanding of how science-hostile partisan discourse fits within the context of a broader political struggle for power.

Finally, this research aims:

- To demonstrate a research agenda on the intricate connections between partisan identity and selective science hostility discourse.

To further those aims, my objectives included:

- To identify media outlets where conservative discourse in response to the work of two broadly disparate science communicators could be observed.
- To analyze 400 samples of that discourse to see how conservatives presented the relationships between their shared identity and their responses to communicators of politically consequential science.
- To identify the roles these discourses played within a larger framework of partisan contest over power.

Central argument

The central argument of this research is that selective science hostility discourse is better understood as a political strategy than as an expression of simple belief about science. While I do not pretend to know what conservatives are “truly” thinking as they engage in discourse about science, I argue that science-hostile discourse leverages constructions of conservative identity to build narratives that morally justify hostility toward science communicators whose messages run counter to the interests of conservatives. Accusations that a partisan group is engaging in motivated reasoning destabilize the claims to legitimacy upon which populist efforts to represent the “true people” depend. Therefore, those who wish to curb the political gains of the opposing partisan identity group by refusing to accept the science communication that advantages the opposition must be able to argue that they have good reason for doing so.

I contend that conservative media content creators build narratives that allow conservatives to explain why they, and they alone, have the unique power to tell “good” science from “bad” science. I find that these conservatives explained that conservative

identity included respect for science, and that their hostility to certain science communication was a defense of “good” science. I also find that conservative content creators foregrounded and reinterpreted certain legitimizing traits and characteristics that they believed distinguished conservatives from their political opponents and tied those characteristics to specific reasons for rejecting science communication that disadvantaged their group. Ultimately, I contend that these discursive techniques are more likely to represent a strategy of legitimation in a struggle over whose political identity embodies the true America than a straightforward manifestation of beliefs about science.

Literature Review

There has been a great deal of research on the subject of the nature of the relationship between conservative identity and what is called “science denial,” defined as “the employment of rhetorical arguments to give the appearance of legitimate debate where there is none, an approach that has the ultimate goal of rejecting a proposition on which a scientific consensus exists” (Hoofnagle & Hoofnagle, 2007, p. 1). The existence of such a relationship is well-established (Behr, 2022; Bugden, 2022; Collins et al., 2021; Dunlap et al., 2016; Mann & Schleifer, 2020). What drives this relationship is a matter of considerable debate, falling roughly into three perspectives: deception models, structural models, and self-deception models. Before describing and problematizing these perspectives, I want to explicate two important concepts. The first is what is meant by “identity” in this research and how that relates to the concept of “culture.” Secondly, I want to clarify what, rather than classic “science denial,” I believe to be the

appropriate object of study when exploring partisan discourse hostile to politically relevant science.

Individual and Collective Political Identity

That hostility to science and political identity are related is a common theme in science denial research. However, “identity” is a term that, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue, is applied so broadly that it is at risk of losing analytical value. Bilgrami (2006) has attempted to rectify this by clarifying what “identity” means in discussions of “identity politics.” For Bilgrami, identity is an intensely held, reflectively endorsed sense of self relative to politics that appears intrinsic to the person and to which the person is committed. That is, identity is only political identity if it pertains to politics; one may be a Seahawks fan, but “Seahawks fan” does not (typically) figure into political identity. Furthermore, political identity can only arise from intensely held identifications; if one is an American living in a southern state but does not “feel” Southern, being a Southerner is not part of one’s political identity.

A politically relevant dimension of selfhood is only part of identity in the political sense when its possessor strongly endorses it; someone may “feel” Southern but also feel strong ambivalence about the political aspects of Southernness. In that case, a person’s identity may encompass Southernness, yet that person’s *political* identity will not. Features of subjective identity also seem intrinsic to those who hold them, as in the case of one who identifies as a revolutionary long after a revolution has ended. Finally, political identity is collective, or shared. That is, identity includes the categorization of the self as a “type” of person, which implies collectivity. Political identity, therefore, involves the identification of the self as a “type” of political person or a member of a

group or groups. In sum, subjective political identity is constructed from dimensions, often shared by a group, that its members view as intrinsic to their identities and which they value and believe guide and legitimize their political actions.

In this dissertation, I frequently use the term “culture” in the political sense to describe the characteristics of individual political identities that members of political identity groups believe are common to all and definitive of the collective identity. Culture in this context is distinct from ideology in that it can be described by answering the question, “what are we like?” as opposed to ideology, which can be described as “what do we believe should be the laws and philosophies that guide our group?” Ideology is, of course, part of culture, but culture is a term that allows for ambiguity regarding the details of ideology while retaining the sense of sameness shared by its members. Indeed, in PDT, collective identity relies on such vagueness to allow members to overlook the particularities on which they disagree. Therefore, I use culture as a term for the traits and characteristics of a collective identity, especially concerning values, beliefs, and commitments that the collective wishes to make the dominant practices of society.

Science Denial vs. Selective Science Hostility Discourse

The term “science denial” is, in one sense, too broad and, in another, far too narrow. It is too broad because it fails to reflect that science denial is not usually applied universally to all science. Instead, the term typically describes the denial of science that has political implications. As such, it can create the impression that there are sectors of the population that are hostile to all science, without providing evidence that this is the

case. This can contribute to a lack of focus on one of science denial's most salient features: its political specificity.

The term is too narrow in that it attempts to increase understanding of certain popular anti-science attitudes but interrogates only a fraction of the discourse involved in expressing those attitudes. Specifically, science denial research tends to focus on pseudoscience (Hansson, 2017, 2018), counter-experts and contrarians (Dunlap & McCright, 2015), denialist blogs (Elgesem et al., 2015), think tanks (Dunlap & Jacques, 2013; Goldenberg, 2013), conspiracy theorists (Bar-On & Molas, 2021; Fuchs, 2021), and other authors and disseminators of quasi-scientific discourse. However, this discourse occupies a small percentage of the conservative public. It is well established that most people spend little time thinking about science until it becomes a top priority on the public agenda (Anderson & Huntington, 2017; Belkhir, 2012). When science does rise to prominence on the public agenda, the publics involved in the discussion of science expand and change, as large numbers of previously uninterested individuals, who are poorly versed in leading scientific arguments, join the discussion (Helmuth et al., 2016). Science-hostile discourse is most consequential during these times, which Helmuth calls "focusing events" (2016, p. 10), because this is when opinion publics are formed and mobilized, and when the impacts of public opinion formation exert the greatest influence on policy. As such, discourse during these focusing events is critical to political outcomes and warrants greater attention.

Not only is science-hostile discourse more consequential during focusing events, but there is reason to believe that the nature of the discourse about politically relevant science at times of heightened attention differs from that of the climate denialist

community. Climate skeptic “blogosphere” members tend to be highly educated and knowledgeable about science and use scientific terminology in discussions of climate change (Matthews, 2015; Sharman, 2014). However, an analysis of Twitter discussions about climate change following extreme weather events found that everyday users who embraced a conservative identity were more likely to resort to sarcasm and incivility while disputing science (Anderson & Huntington, 2017). Likewise, as Thunberg’s celebrity drew a more diverse group of participants into discussions of climate change on Twitter, the discourse shifted away from science and toward evaluating Thunberg herself, with the most popular comments focusing on Thunberg’s personal traits or those of her followers (Jung et al., 2020). By overlooking the discourse among people who only enter science debates at moments when they are politically relevant, researchers may overestimate the importance of pseudoscience and other forms of scientific disinformation in building identity-related public opinion. For these reasons, I call the entire body of discourse that attempts to stymie action on politically disadvantageous science *selective science hostility discourse*. It is that discourse that is the subject of this research, although I use the terms “science denial” or “denialism” when referring to the extant body of research that centers on those terms.

Three Models Of “Science Denial”

Here, I review three leading schools of thought on why conservative identity groups reject specific scientific truth claims. I argue that these leading schools of thought do not adequately explain how mistaken beliefs could be so highly and uniquely related to conservative identity. One weakness that I believe is common to all three is that partisan rejection of science communication derives from misperceptions, what

some researchers have termed the “knowledge deficit gap” or “the assumption that ignorance is the basis of a lack of societal support for various issues in science and technology” (Simis et al., 2016, p. 401). All the following models focus on ignorance but differ in the primary causes of that ignorance, including who is responsible for it. I argue that ignorance alone, whether from external deception or self-deception, is insufficient to explain selective science hostility discourse.

Political Economy And Targeted Deception

Political economy theorists have observed for decades that organized actors with financial motives are prolific producers of disinformation about science (Dunlap & Jacques, 2013; Dunlap & McCright, 2015; McCright et al., 2016; Oreskes & Conway, 2011). Generally, these accounts explain that such disinformation affects conservatives more than others because these large economic interests, especially the fossil fuel industry (Frumhoff & Oreskes, 2015), align with conservative politics, develop their messages in conservative think tanks (Dunlap & Jacques, 2013), and launch them in conservative media (Colleoni et al., 2014). The failure of some conservatives to appreciate the gravity of climate change, according to this perspective, is due to the deception of the conservative public.

There is no question that financially motivated elites have done much to promote climate pseudoscience, undermine the public understanding of the degree of scientific consensus that exists regarding climate change, and promote “counter-experts” to contest climate science. However, this overly simplistic model overlooks several key complexities. It rests on the assumption that conservatives are influenced exclusively by conservative elites through their media and does not consider why conservatives do not

encounter more credible scientific information from other sources. The model also overlooks the audience's agency in choosing and prioritizing what to attend to and when. Furthermore, the fossil fuel industry's efforts do not explain hostility to COVID-19 as effectively as they do resistance to climate science, since large financial interests had a stake in the production of vaccines and access to the Republican president. Indeed, a successful vaccine could have benefited that president's re-election efforts.

Structural Communication Environment Differences

A second perspective acknowledges the significance of disinformation in promoting unsupported views on science but takes an additional step to clarify why mainstream science communication is less likely to engage conservatives. These accounts typically concentrate on structural problems within communication networks, such as densely networked media systems on the right (Benkler et al., 2018; Farrell, 2016), social media algorithms that drive echo chambers and filter bubbles (Colleoni et al., 2014; Jasny et al., 2015; Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020; Pariser, 2012), and social self-segregation into like-minded silos (Williams et al., 2015). According to these accounts, individuals are insulated from mainstream science communication by their media consumption and social inclinations, enabling elites to dominate the narratives that penetrate the conservative public sphere.

There is a wealth of research that has documented the asymmetries between the media ecosystem of the right, which is dense, isolated, and self-reinforcing through content-sharing practices, and that of the center and left. It is also well-established that media consumption behaviors on the right differ from the mainstream and left in that highly partisan conservatives distrust mainstream media (Bauer & Nadler, 2018) and

repost political media content at a higher rate. However, a considerable body of research has found that, while networks effectively increase exposure to science disinformation, they are less effective at keeping mainstream information out. Media “echo chambers” have been found to allow crosscutting information in (Brundidge, 2010; Guess et al., 2018; Hargittai et al., 2007) and filtering social media algorithms do not isolate partisans from counter-attitudinal information (Choi & Lee, 2015). This body of theory does little to explain how attitudes hostile to science communication are maintained under these circumstances. Furthermore, this perspective tends to underestimate the agency of audiences, who choose to pay attention at certain times and not others, and who do not necessarily care deeply enough about a topic to take a stand on it simply because elites promote it.

Self-Deception

Most researchers view the above factors as contributing to partisan disbelief in conventional science, but they also credit the audience with playing a role in shaping their views. These researchers conclude that self-deception is at work in constructing anti-science attitudes. Motivated reasoning and selective exposure models rest on the assumption that people avoid information and arguments that don’t support their ideology or their social loyalties to their political identity groups (Kraft et al., 2015; Lewandowsky & Oberauer, 2016; Pasek, 2018). Conspiracy theory models are based on the idea that people enjoy entertaining alternative theories of what scientists are up to in ways that satisfy their need to see patterns in world events or to assign blame for misfortunes onto unseen villains (Fuchs, 2021; Kou et al., 2017; Uscinski & Olivella, 2017). These self-deception theories suggest that conservatives find pleasure or

comfort in pro-attitudinal information and discomfort in counter-attitudinal information, leading them to select for the former and avoid the latter. However, this body of work shares with the other two perspectives an inability to explain how misperceptions, however formed, often fail to be corrected by evidence and education.

The Knowledge Deficit Gap

The above perspectives place misperception at the center of their theories; people object to science-informed policies because they hold inaccurate beliefs as a function of their partisan positionality. Whether those beliefs stem from disinformation consumed without reflection or whether individuals have actively participated in building and defending inaccurate beliefs, the central problem of science communication in these instances is assumed to be its inefficacy in correcting such beliefs. Consequently, much of the work done on conservative hostility to certain scientific information has been pragmatically oriented toward “solving” the problem (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014; Nisbet, 2009). Many proposed solutions involve enhancing science communication to circumvent partisan barriers. Yet, efforts to rectify inaccurate beliefs routinely fail. Studies have found that when individuals holding unsupported views are confronted with evidence that would likely revise the opinions of disinterested parties, they often remain unmoved in their opinions or even become more entrenched (Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Furthermore, the more educated a partisan is about science, or the more they claim to know about it, the stronger this effect is (Dunlap et al., 2016). If conviction is impervious to evidence, then it suggests that the person holding that conviction is motivated by factors that extend beyond the truth or

falsity of claims of scientific truth, complicating the task of correcting errors of perception.

A few scholars have argued that attempts to correct misperceptions about science are often unsuccessful because they are rooted in the assumption that “scientific knowledge communicated to publics stands alone to encourage understanding and support of science” (Simis et al., 2016, p. 401). Given societal norms of critical thinking, when “individuals interpret information in a rational and objective manner, many experts believe that public audiences' conclusions will support science” (Simis et al., 2016, p. 401). The issue with this perspective, these scholars note, is that it does not account for all the factors people consider when deciding what stance to take on scientific matters.

Theorists have observed that people’s responses to science communication do not depend entirely on how well those experts are understood; rather, people “typically also take into account their own goals and needs, knowledge and skills, and values and beliefs” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017, p. 3). The implication is that belief alone does not always account for the *performance* of belief; that is, people may say they believe something about science due to other priorities that go beyond those that concern science communicators. This, in turn, suggests that examining what people claim to believe about science may not capture a complete picture of all the factors involved in creating that belief. Therefore, those interested in what motivates motivated reasoning, as it were, should consider factors important to individuals who are science-hostile that lie outside the boundaries of the scientific dispute itself.

For these reasons, this research asks what, beyond inaccurate messages, may be involved in conservatives taking stances that are hostile to science that disadvantages their political identity group. This means learning what concerns, values, goals, and other priorities might influence these expressed attitudes and to what end. The question itself suggests one obvious supposition: that partisans take such stances because the science in question disadvantages their identity groups. However, drawing such a conclusion without further inquiry risks overlooking the opportunity to discover the anxieties and priorities that could underpin selective science hostility and, therefore, to find other ways to help conservatives address them or to disconnect science from association with them. Furthermore, such a simplistic conclusion overlooks some other key questions. A political group that dismisses and attacks science simply because that science disadvantages it risks its legitimacy and may also threaten the positive self-image of the members of that group. It is hard to imagine that conservatives describe themselves as refusing to accept things solely because they dislike their implications. So, what do conservatives believe they are doing? How do they understand their own positions toward science? What do they perceive as the relationships between being conservative and taking a shared, hostile stance toward mainstream science communication? Within the answers may lie other opportunities to engage with conservatives who might be more receptive to arguments concerning legitimacy than to those about science.

Case Selection

The overarching goal of this research is to gain insight into the relationships between political identity and expressed attitudes about science that is politically

relevant. To do that, I chose to study how conservatives responded to messages from science communicators about politically relevant science. The esoteric, specialized language and concepts that appear in scientific studies and publications are often inaccessible to the general public. Furthermore, the journals and books that report scientific work are often prohibitively expensive and difficult to access for people not involved in academics. For this reason, almost all information that reaches the public about the workings of science comes from science communicators, people who form the “crucial link between the world of knowledge production and the general public” (Weingart & Guenther, 2016, p. 2). These people not only translate the complex language and concepts of scientific research into terms that laypeople can comprehend, they also often relay or interpret the policy or behavioral recommendations that proceed from those findings. For instance, a 2024 article in the journal *Nature Mental Health* reported that interactions between the brain and the gut could affect mental resilience to stress (An et al., 2024). *NPR* and other news outlets published stories about the study (see e.g., Stone, 2024) , which in turn altered the behavior of consumers, who started seeking out “probiotic” foods (Abdul Manan, 2025). Had journalists not amplified and simplified that study and others like it for the public, it is questionable whether the probiotic industry would exist today.

Therefore, when setting out to study partisan responses to politically consequential science, I chose to examine how conservative media responded to the sources from which the contested science information came. At times when policy-relevant science is high on the public agenda, the scientific case is often presented by one or two high-profile individuals whose comments reach the public through mass

media. Two good examples are Al Gore and Rachel Carson. Tennessee senator Al Gore became an early spokesperson for climate science by filming *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2007 (Elsasser & Dunlap, 2013). Rachel Carson became a central figure in the debate over the use of pesticides after she wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962 (Jasanoff, 2007). In both cases, pro-industry voices hoping to fend off negative consequences for their industries were forced to produce messages in response to the messaging of Gore and Carson (Elsasser & Dunlap, 2013; Jasanoff, 2007). This discursive competition was carried out in the public sphere, because public opinion would determine the legitimacy of governmental policy. Moments in which discourse coheres around one or two major science communicators, therefore, offer unique opportunities to observe how partisan science denial discourses engage with science communication.

Thunberg and Fauci: Least Similar Cases.

Most studies on public responses to science communicators have been conducted on a single case. Such studies have focused on responses to science communicators from Darwin (Horenstein, 2009) to Stephen Hawking (Grego, 2013). Many useful insights have been derived from these studies, but it is hard to determine how much of the results are owing to the peculiarities of the cases. Studies indicate that much of the opposition to Darwinism stemmed from religious concerns. Rather than concluding that religious individuals are generally opposed to science, it is more accurate to suggest that the theory of evolution posed a particular challenge to creationist beliefs among orthodox Christians. For this reason, a pairwise study design was chosen; specifically, a comparison of least-similar cases. In such studies, the researcher carefully identifies the object of study, which represents the boundaries of

the phenomenon under investigation, and then attempts to find two cases within that range that differ in all ways except for some independent variable. For instance, Bennett (2015) offers the example of a study attempting to identify whether it is society or something intrinsic to teenagers that causes teenage angst. From the range of teenagers, then, a researcher will try to find two populations as dissimilar in all other aspects as possible. If teenagers exhibit similar emotional tendencies in a rural, traditional tribal society and a highly urbanized society, one might generate a hypothesis that the explanation for teenage angst lies within some aspect of teenagerhood. A more general discussion of least similar cases can be found in Bennett (2015). Therefore, I chose to study the cases of two strikingly dissimilar science communicators who were greeted with science denialism in recent years.

Admittedly, the range of science communicators who have been rejected by partisans after explaining politically relevant science to the public at times when that science was politically significant is not extensive. Fortunately, the primary communicators about science in two of the most consequential and politically charged issues of the last century, climate science and COVID-19, were about as different as they could be and still be considered science communicators. Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci both communicated about the work of scientists and made recommendations based on that information. Both received wide media attention, and in both cases, their messages were greeted with conservative hostility. But beyond those similarities, they were as different as chalk and cheese. Thunberg was a female of 15; Fauci was a male nearing 80. Although both were white, Fauci was American, and Thunberg was Swedish. Fauci was neurotypical; Thunberg was not. Fauci was a highly

credentialed science expert who communicated in sober, unemotional terms; Thunberg was an activist who communicated with fierce anger. Thunberg communicated a set of facts that had been discussed for decades prior to her advocacy; Fauci communicated emerging facts about a previously unknown virus.

Indeed, while Fauci was a very traditional science communicator, Thunberg was such an outlier that it is essential to inquire whether she can be considered a science communicator at all, especially because she was not herself a scientist. However, science communication is the “dissemination of scientific knowledge outside the circle of specialists” (Bischi, 2021, p. 7). Although it is typically associated with scientists who communicate with the public, other practitioners include journalists, NGOs, high school science teachers, and, most pertinently, individual activists. Fährnich and colleagues described activists as “‘alternative’ science communicators” (2020, p. 2) who “mobilise scientific knowledge with the intention of affecting political discourse” (2020, p. 3). Thunberg acted as a science communicator who effectively advocated and amplified scientists' work in the public sphere.

Differences in the way conservatives respond to Thunberg and Fauci are to be expected, given the manifold differences between the two. Indeed, as noted in the previous section, the misogyny, ableism, and agism that researchers have noted in conservative responses to Thunberg are unlikely to appear in responses to Fauci. It is in the similarities between the two cases that useful insights may be gleaned about what, beyond mere misperceptions promoted by partisan media or elites, may motivate conservative identities to express hostility to messages from communicators of politically unfavorable science. Many paired studies of least similar cases are conducted

to test a hypothesis that a phenomenon is caused by an independent variable that the two dissimilar cases share. However, it is possible (although somewhat controversial) to begin with disparate cases that produced a common outcome and then compare the cases to identify the similarities that explain that common outcome (Bennett, 2015). Those studies are useful for generating hypotheses about causal relationships that can then be tested by other methods. This is, of course, an inductive mode of inquiry. However, I propose a retroductive approach to a pairwise study of least similar cases that identifies similarities between cases and then explores the systems or structures that could explain those similarities. For that reason, and for others explained below, I use Political Discourse Theory as a framework for my analysis of partisan discourse hostile to the messaging of Fauci and Thunberg.

Political Discourse Theory

When shared discourse is uniquely associated with a political identity group, the Political Discourse Theory founded by Laclau and Mouffe (2014) provides analytical tools to help explain that phenomenon. The fundamental assumption of PDT is that all understanding of reality is constructed through discourse, which primarily accomplishes this by establishing differences between elements. In other words, discourse informs us what is blue by also telling us what is not blue, namely, what is orange. This process of identification through differentiation is politically significant because, for Laclau, the primary project of the political is the construction of political identity; without multiple political identities, politics cannot exist (Laclau, 2005). As political identities are discursively produced by their differences from other political identities, the main

objective of political discourse is to identify or even create differences between political identity groups.

How this differentiation is carried out defines the nature of a political system. One of the most important of PDA's analytical concepts is Laclau's "logics of equivalence and difference," which concerns how societies approach the competing demands of groups within those societies. Whereas societies that adopt the logic of difference function by acknowledging multiple different groups, each with associated demands, societies that adopt the logic of equivalence assume that all "true" members want the same things, and those whose demands differ are Other. Laclau claimed that the logic of equivalence was the foundational logic of populist movements, in which discourse is used to erase differences between demands of the sub-groups that comprise the ingroup and juxtapose their putatively unanimous demands against those of an antagonistic Other. One of the most important functions of populist discourse, then, is the production of antagonisms where they may not naturally exist.

In populist political cultures, this is done to create just two identities, such that an ingroup is presented as a nation's "true people" while an outgroup is depicted as threatening that natural order. Since that claim depends on the definitions of the signifiers that denote true citizenship and the essential nature of a political body, contests for power involve a struggle for the authority to define the meanings of these signifiers. For instance, the group whose understanding of patriotism (typically aligned with the traits the group professes to embody) becomes the accepted definition captures political legitimacy for as long as they can uphold that definition.

A key part of differentiating between the ingroup and the outgroup is characterizing the demands that each makes of society and defining those of the ingroup as legitimate, while those of the outgroup are deemed illegitimate. Therefore, PDT suggests that as groups within a discursive contest attempt to interpret that contest along pre-existing identitarian lines, they will provide clues about the priorities and values that motivate their discursive positions. Furthermore, discourse is conceived as both establishing meanings and manipulating political outcomes while pursuing specific power arrangements. These strategies are manifested through discursive techniques that interpret current events in terms consistent with a populist worldview, suggesting attitudes and courses of action with political potency. Therefore, PDT also suggests that the narratives constructed in interpretations of disputed topics will include clues to how the discourse serves the larger aims of the political group.

Operationalization: Political Discourse Analysis

However, because Laclau and Mouffe did little to operationalize PDT as an analytical tool, later scholars have drawn on discourse analysis methods from other theoretical perspectives to build the research technique known as Political Discourse Analysis (Jørgensen & J. Phillips, 2002). PDA utilizes the concepts of Laclau, Mouffe, and others who followed in their tradition to develop “logics of critical explanation” (Glynos & Howarth, 2008, p. 9), with the goal of making social processes more intelligible (Nymalm, 2020, p. 48) and, once the processes are understandable, to criticize them, as PDA is a species of critical research. PDA does not seek to test theory or produce generalizable explanations based on causal relationships. Rather than relying on induction or deduction, the objective of PDA is *retroduction*, or the formation

of a plausible hypothesis such that when “a surprising, anomalous, or wondrous phenomenon is observed (P),” the phenomenon ““would be explicable as a matter of course’ if a hypothesis (H) were true” (Glynos et al., 2009, p. 10). Once that hypothesis is articulated, the actors' relationships in the described phenomenon can be scrutinized for contests over political power, and alternatives can be imagined. Ultimately, PDT is critical and pragmatic, aimed at not only explaining social phenomena but also identifying phenomena that are potentially or presently oppressive and considering other possibilities.

Laclau did not outline a set of discursive practices that construct identity along a logic of equivalence; however, some PDT theorists have drawn on Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, in which she identified five discursive strategies for constructing “us” and “them” (Wodak, 2015). Because “us” and “them,” as Wodak described them, are conceptually similar to the ingroup and outgroup produced by a logic of equivalence, Wodak’s five strategies serve as analytical categories that can reveal the meanings underpinning constructed antagonisms. These strategies include *nomination*, *predication*, *legitimation*, *argumentation*, and *intensification*. By analyzing how these strategies are used, it is possible to discern what motivates a discourse, what outcomes it is intended to produce, and how members of the identity group understand their role in achieving that goal. This research draws on the first three of these strategies, as they construct antagonistic identities relative to the constant shifting of human events. Each of my three analytical chapters centers on one of these strategies and will explicate each further; here, I will provide a brief overview of them.

In brief, nomination is the practice of categorizing actors by giving them names that align them with the ingroup or a hostile Other. For Laclau, this represents a populist move that simplifies and organizes society into the ingroup and the Other, with each defined by the demands they are perceived to make of society. When an emerging issue confronts society, the individuals involved are often named in ways that work to create or preserve the identities of the ingroup and the Other. For instance, Nymalm noted that when the economic success of China threatened the identity of America as exceptional, US media names for China, such as “Red China” and “dictatorship,” heavily emphasized communism. This was part of a strategy to present China’s success in pursuing global dominance in trade as stemming from brutality against its own citizens (2020, p. 92). By emphasizing Chinese communism, China was presented as equivalent to global regimes such as Vietnam and North Korea, already understood in America as tyrannical and unprincipled. In this way, China’s success could be understood not as the result of successful competition between equal nations but as ill-gotten gains arising from the excesses of communism, thus protecting the American sense of being the world’s moral and economic leader.

While nomination assigns names to entities so they can be understood as equivalent with the ingroup or the Other, predication assigns traits and characteristics to the named entities. Naturally, these two strategies overlap considerably, often co-occurring. However, while nomination categorizes actors into ingroup or outgroup, predication serves as a strategy for positioning the ingroup relative to the outgroup in ways that assign a position to the ingroup from which to challenge the outgroup. Predication also suggests what the ingroup can or should do relative to the Other. For

instance, in Nymalm's analysis of media texts responding to the rise of Asian economies, Japanese people were predicated as "arrogant," "ruthless," and "treacherous," as opposed to the "generous," "fair," "good-hearted," and "idealistic" American (2020, p. 93). These descriptors positioned America as a moral actor disadvantaged by its own principles, which, in turn, enabled a discourse that America should take a less principled stance toward the "unfair" Japanese who had encroached on the United States's rightful position as the world economic leader through treachery. The third strategy of equivalence that this research focused on is argumentation, which involves presenting evidence to support the claims made about each group. This often includes an element of legitimation, in which normative evaluations of the ingroup and outgroup are defended. To apply PDT tools to the studies of selective science hostility toward Fauci and Thunberg, I set out to locate similarities between the cases in the practices of nomination, predication and argumentation present in conservative discourse responding to each.

While PDT takes self-representations in text as a core object of study, as I do here, and respects the actors who make them, it is important to note that PDT analysis does not merely cobble together self-representations, taken at face value to illuminate social practices. Instead, the researcher, informed by PDT concepts such as those outlined above, strives to uncover the rules and objectives that underlie those practices, which may not even align with the subjects' self-representations. It is the researcher's responsibility to interpret elements found in self-representations using concepts that can bring the central features of a discursive practice into focus. This requires an iterative, cyclical approach to analysis, involving multiple readings of texts to continuously

develop a hypothesis until it can adequately explain the phenomenon under study. In the next section, I describe how this process was conducted for this dissertation.

Data and Method

The site I chose to examine partisan discourse in response to the messaging of Thunberg and Fauci was conservative media content addressing either Fauci or Thunberg. For a detailed account of the methods and data selection processes involved in this study, see Appendix A. In short, I chose to study how conservative media responded to communication from leading science communicators because media that ferry communication between the public and authority are the principal sites of the public sphere (Habermas, 1992). At times when politically relevant science is high on the public agenda, partisan media are likely to be an important site of opinion and action formation in response to messaging from science communicators in mainstream media.

I also chose conservative media¹ as a site of study because partisan media is known to be a site of identity construction and maintenance (Huber, 1995; Nadler, 2022; Peck, 2019). It stands to reason that as conservative content creators developed responses to science communication, they would establish cognitive associations between conservative identity and the common discourses constructed in response to science messaging. Whether conservative media constitute a counter-public is

¹ While many researchers describe this media as the media of the “far-right,” I choose to call it conservative media, because ideas that once were associated with the fringes of conservatism have become increasingly mainstream. Indeed, many such ideas are at the center of the Republican party platform at present. To term the highly interconnected web of conservative media sources “far right” can give an erroneous impression that there is a clear demarcation between the ideas of was once considered the fringe and the ideas of mainstream conservatives, and therefore that “far right” ideas can be regarded as inconsequential curiosities.

debatable, but they present themselves as a public sphere for a marginalized population (Hemmer, 2016). Counter-publics are spaces where subaltern populations develop their identities, needs, strategies, and language, enabling marginalized individuals to understand and communicate their situations (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1992). Because conservative publics view themselves as sub-altern (Asen, 2000), conservative media assume the counter-public role of providing a sphere in which to discuss and develop conservative identities, opinions, needs, and strategies.

Equally important, conservative media form a dense network of outlets produced by a widely diverse array of actors, ranging from disinterested professionals to volunteer bloggers who are passionately committed to the success of the conservative movement. While a few large outlets provide relatively neutral news content intended for general audiences (Trifiro et al., 2021), mixed with partisan shows featuring pundits, panels, and analysts, most conservative media content in the “long tail” is created by conservatives for conservatives. Conservative media engaged in counter-public style discourse are rich sources of “backstage” discourse between conservative true believers (Freed, 2012), as opposed to “frontstage” discourses that conservative media outlets might expect to be read and judged by progressives or centrists (Chapelan, 2021; Dowd, 2017). As Faris et al. observed, “claims aimed for ‘internal’ consumption within the right-wing media ecosystem” (2017, p. 15) tend to use different, more hyperbolic, and culturally specific language than media for general audiences. The smaller outlets that produce such unvarnished internal discourse offer a good opportunity to see people who are well-versed in conservative identity and the language and symbols that carry

weight on the right propose, modify, or select and amplify responses to communicators of unwelcome science.

For this reason, while many studies of conservative media limit their focus to a small selection of the largest and most influential outlets, such as Fox and Breitbart, I included conservative media outlets of all sizes in the study. I did this because this is not a media effects study in which one might concentrate on the conservative outlets with the most extensive reach and influence. Instead, this study examines how conservative media construct meaning around science. Meaning-making is most evident in media content that expresses opinions and analyzes news events. Larger outlets, such as Breitbart and Fox, tend to avoid editorialization in their news content, although their pundits often produce opinions and analyses (Trifiro et al., 2021). Therefore, analyzing the news content of larger organizations is of limited value in elucidating interpretive discourse, especially since this study focuses on overt rather than latent communication about science and identity. Content from Fox, Breitbart, and other major outlets was included in the study if it contained analysis or opinion; however, legacy-style content from these outlets or any other site was excluded. The smaller outlets in the conservative media ecosystem's long tail tend to focus on analyzing news produced by others rather than producing news themselves (Trifiro et al., 2021). This makes smaller sites, such as blogs, an excellent place to investigate how conservatives interpret news about science, including how conservative identity and science are linked.

Data Collection And Sampling

A detailed account of the methods used in this project is provided in the appendix. Here I provide a summary. To find textual articles that responded to messaging from either Thunberg or Fauci, the unit of analysis was a textual article from any conservative media outlet that mentioned Thunberg or Fauci in the title. This way, I could ensure that the articles I assembled focused on responses to the communicators rather than referencing them in passing while discussing other topics. To keep the two data sets as similar as possible, the articles were selected from the 12-month periods beginning with the first month in which each science communicator trended upward in conservative media. For Thunberg, this was mid-March 2019, and for Fauci, it was January 2020. The articles were drawn from the entire corpus of conservative media articles produced within the 12-month sampling frames that included the search terms in the title.

Data Collection

A list of conservative media was compiled using MIT's Media Cloud list of right-wing media and Poynter's Media Bias Fact Check's (MBFC) lists of right-biased media, as well as questionable media and conspiracy/pseudoscience media that MBFC identified as being right of center-right. The list was then reduced to 933 outlets that were in English, focused on American politics, and had not been miscategorized as conservative. Each outlet was then searched for articles with title references to either Thunberg or Fauci within the designated time frames. This resulted in a corpus of 3,606 articles on 394 websites that had at least one story from March 15, 2019, to March 15, 2020, with Thunberg in the title, and 9,299 articles from 494 websites that had articles

published in 2020 with Fauci in the title. PDFs were generated from the URLs of each story. The complete list of URLs is in the appendix.

Sampling

Sample Size. The sampling methods used for these studies are described in depth in Appendix A. In brief, there is no widely agreed-upon formal calculus for determining sample size in qualitative research (Sargeant, 2012). However, samples tend to be smaller than those used in quantitative research, and some critical discourse analyses are conducted on just a handful of texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Since my research questions were quite broad, I began with sample sets of 100 articles from each dataset. I believed this number of articles would suffice to provide a good representation of the discursive themes that appeared across each 12-month span, allowing me to observe how the elements of discourse production were employed in response to multiple turns of the daily news cycle. A set of 200 articles was also manageable, especially since many texts are relatively short, but I was prepared to expand my sample set if I felt I had unresolved questions at the end of the first round of analysis.

Since I did not set out knowing what I would find, the first set of codes I created encompassed everything I observed that was relevant to PDT, including evidence of fantasmatic themes, metanarratives, and more. After coding the initial 200 articles, however, additional codes still emerged, largely because I had coded for more themes than I would ultimately use. Once I established a clear understanding of the range of themes available for analysis, I chose to focus on those related to the logics of equivalence and difference, which theorists have noted are most relevant to the production and management of identity. I then revised my coding scheme to focus on

the logic of equivalence, drew a second sample set of 100 articles from each dataset, and coded them while also recoding the original set of 200 to apply the revised codebook.

Sampling Method. Several factors complicated sampling. A traditional method of sampling news content is to use a constructed week sample in which the data are sorted by the days of the week on which they appeared; then, one or more dates are randomly chosen from each weekday set, and all the data from those dates are included in the final sampling frame. This method assumes that the most important variable to control for in random news sampling is the influence of weekly news cycles. However, this did not suit my research for several reasons. For one thing, the publishing schedule of blogs can be quite erratic, with content published multiple times daily on some large sites and less than once a week on others. Furthermore, an important practice of conservative media is curation; conservative media stories are frequently reprinted on other conservative websites, sometimes days or even weeks later. This means that the date on which a sample was found in the data does not necessarily correspond with the day it was first published. As such, there was no discernible consistent cycle associated with days of the week in the data.

Another issue was that, while the peaks and valleys of attention over time in the Fauci data were fairly evenly distributed across the year, following a slow ramp-up from January to early March, the Thunberg data had a single significant peak. Attention was moderate for the first six months, including the Fridays for Future school strikes through June and the August yacht trip across the Atlantic to attend the UN Climate Session. Then, there was a huge spike in attention in the few days following Thunberg's Sept. 23,

2019, address to the UN, resulting in an attention-over-time graph that resembled the Washington horizon on days when Mt. Rainier is visible. A constructed week or month scheme would have risked drastically under-sampling the data responding to that speech had the randomly chosen dates missed the period from approximately September 23-27. Additionally, a key aspect of my project was to examine how conservative media implicated identity while their responses to science communication during moments of heightened public attention. As such, a random sample drawn from the entire corpus would naturally reflect moments of heightened attention in ways that constructed weeks or months would not.

A third factor that complicated the sampling scheme was that the first sampling plan, developed after the Fauci data had been compiled but before the Thunberg data was prepared, involved identifying three key topics of discussion from each data set, analyzing the articles related to each topic, and comparing their similarities and differences. This approach had the advantage of focusing on moments of heightened attention while providing simplicity. The Fauci sample was collected first, and all stories related to three different topics—hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), an inexpensive anti-malarial drug that Trump believed would treat COVID-19 but that Fauci refused to endorse; holiday advisories against large gatherings; and bans on international travel—were categorized. These three topics were selected because they received nearly equal attention and were evenly spread across the year, with travel bans occurring in late January and HCQ becoming a prominent issue in March and remaining so through the summer. The holiday gathering advisories occurred over the holiday season. Since the plan was to begin with samples of 100 from each data set, samples of 33 were taken

from each topic set, totaling 99 articles. These were coded while the Thunberg data was being compiled and cleaned. However, when the Thunberg data was ready for sampling, it became evident that attention was clustered around one main peak so distinctly that attempting to repeat the sampling process would be futile.

Therefore, 100 articles were drawn at random from the Thunberg corpus and coded using a random number generator in R. Random numbers ranging from 1 to the total number of articles in each database were listed and drawn in order until each sample set included 100 articles (one was randomly chosen to bring the Fauci total to 100). Because the corpus included more than 12,000 articles, it was impractical to “clean” the data sets before sampling; therefore, unsuitable articles were discarded as they were drawn. Reasons for excluding an article included lack of overt opinion or analysis, and stories credited to the AP or other major news services. Additionally, articles containing only video or audio content were excluded, as were stories that were exact duplicates of previously coded articles, ensuring that each story was coded only once. However, it is common for conservative media producers to run large excerpts or entire articles found elsewhere and add commentary. In those cases, only the additional commentary was coded.

Coding

Coding and analysis were conducted using Atlas.ti. The first set of codes consisted of a mix of codes derived from PDT and those that emerged from the data itself, following a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). This set of codes was applied to an initial selection of 100 articles from each data set, as described above. In the second coding round, the subcategories that emerged during the first

coding round were formalized. Codes were created for subcategories only when they were too numerous or complex to analyze without formally accounting for them. Others were analyzed based on code comments and memos. The first set of 200 articles was re-coded, and a second set of 100 articles from each data set was coded using those subcategories. The final coding scheme, including operational definitions, can be found in the appendix.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted through coding, journaling, writing research memos, and commenting at the paragraph and document levels. As insights emerged, they were recorded in research memos and a free-form project journal, which was used to document the process and develop ideas. While coding for indicators of how conservative identity was made equivalent in media content responding to science messaging, certain functions of that practice became clear. I tracked the development of my understanding of those functions through code, document comments, memos, and journal entries until I had created an account that remained robust, as all the articles were read and revisited with no new insights emerging. By the time I had coded and analyzed about 150 articles in each set, no new codes were arising from the data; thus, after completing the analysis of all 400 articles, I was satisfied that I had reached a point of saturation, a “point at which there are few or no new items or themes” (Lamont & White, 2008, p. 48) a traditional stopping point for qualitative research. My complete codebook, including examples of code comments, document comments, memos, and journal entries, can be found in the appendix.

Overview Of The Chapters

Chapter Two

Chapter Two establishes that conservative media responded to both communicators in the same way, by naming them as primarily political actors in a dichotomous struggle between a conservative ingroup and a leftist outgroup. I describe one of the major nominations for Fauci, that of the “deep state doctor,” and demonstrate that Fauci was linked to members of the government bureaucracy by a purported desire to establish an authoritarian leftist government that would oppress the right. I note that Thunberg was nominated in terms distinct from those of the adults who surrounded her. I describe one major nomination of Thunberg as a “psyops puppet,” which presented her as a victim of would-be tyrants similarly bent on authoritarian oppression of the right. I also demonstrate that conservative content creators rearticulated conservative identity to reinforce the appearance of internal equivalence based on their shared demands for things like gun rights that Fauci and Thunberg were said to threaten.

Chapter Three

In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how, in both cases, conservative content producers used predication to ascribe traits and characteristics to the conservative identity, orienting conservatives to the task of resisting the actual and purported aims of Fauci and Thunberg. I argue that conservative content creators characterized conservatives in ways that not only made hostility to Thunberg and Fauci seem justifiable but also morally imperative. I identify six traits attributed to conservatives, including courage, canniness, defiance, moral clarity, rationality, and blunt honesty, and explain how these were mobilized to build discourses of resistance.

Additionally, I demonstrate how those traits and characteristics were sometimes organized to create conservative personas tailored to the communicator they addressed. I note the similarities between the strategies of predication between the two cases, while highlighting the flexibility of the strategy to adapt to the moral particularities of each case. The first, in response to Fauci, I refer to as the “Principled Dissident,” whose traits drive him or her to a caustic refusal of Fauci’s messages. The second, which I call the “Responsible Parent,” has traits that compel him or her to resist the abuse inflicted on Thunberg by her tyrannical adult handlers. Finally, I note that in both instances, a discussion of whether Fauci or Thunberg were right or wrong about the science they espouse was not necessary for participation.

Chapter Four

In Chapter Four, I narrow my focus to those articles in which content creators made some attempt to challenge the merits of the science referenced by Thunberg or Fauci. I begin by noting that, in claiming to be rational while also refusing to give credence to expertise, conservatives made themselves vulnerable to delegitimizing charges of motivated reasoning. I then demonstrate that conservative media predicated conservative identity as reverent of science and expertise and I show how conservative media, in their own view, resolved the apparent contradiction between their self-proclaimed respect for expertise and their rejection of widely accepted expert claims. Using the PDT concept of argumentation, in which evidence is provided to justify claims about the characteristics ascribed to groups, I demonstrate that conservative content producers constructed a trait that I term an “epistemology of moral discernment.” This way of knowing, I argue, is presented as unique to the right, based on their trait of moral

clarity, and establishes the moral character of majoritarian scientists as a criterion for discerning truth, such that claims from immoral sources cannot be considered potential truths. I then show how conservative media predicated Fauci and other COVID-19 scientists as immoral, leaving the field clear for the work of contrarians and pseudoscientists to define truth. This process, I argue, advanced the same project that was described in the two previous chapters: defending the moral legitimacy of the right against charges of epistemic vice.

I conclude the chapter by arguing that the single most important variable explaining selective science-hostility discourse toward Thunberg or Fauci was whether their science communication disadvantaged the right in a contest with the left for cultural dominance in America. I describe various inconsistencies in challenges to science that support a hypothesis that political considerations were more important than concerns about truth in both cases. I then demonstrate that conservative media transitioned from morally lionizing Fauci to demonizing him in parallel with Fauci's growing disagreements with Trump. I conclude by proposing a hypothesis that in these two cases, conservative media would prefer to confront the risks warned of by scientists rather than lose ground in a populist struggle over who represents the "true American."

Chapter Five

In Chapter Five, I consider the implications of my hypothesis and suggest how we might imagine other possible social practices surrounding the partisan reception of science. I review the limitations of the research and propose a research agenda to investigate further the extent to which selective science hostility reflects genuinely held beliefs or indifference to the truth.

Scholarly Contribution

This research contributes to three areas of inquiry within the fields of political and science communication. The first is science communication, where researchers and practitioners have sought ways to increase the efficacy of communication in a highly partisan environment. My contribution is to reiterate what others have pointed out about the ineffectiveness of addressing a supposed “knowledge deficit gap,” and to argue that there is more reason to suspect politically motivated indifference to fact than ignorance of fact. I also suggest that, in the cases of COVID-19 and climate change, this attitude might be more rational than it initially seems, given that the risks of contracting COVID-19 and suffering serious illness or death were, indeed, fairly low, and the effects of climate change are, at least in the view of some, slow to unfold.

Considering the historically indisputable reality that people are willing to undertake far greater risks to achieve cultural dominance in a country, expecting a different outcome under these circumstances may be overly optimistic. The most straightforward resolution of this impasse—to decrease tensions between the left and the right in the United States—is unrealistic. Therefore, I propose that science communicators hoping to enhance their ability to achieve scientifically supported policy change should expend less effort trying to frighten the right into accepting science-supported policy and more effort on finding ways to reduce the political cost of consideration and acceptance. It is here that I suggest research energy should be directed, for I believe that the perceived political cost of accepting politically disadvantageous science is the single largest barrier to effective science communication across partisan boundaries.

The second area of inquiry that this research contributes to is political communication scholars interested in the relationship between populism and hostility to science. They have conjectured that some hostility to science might derive from a conservative populist antipathy for expertise. This research provides encouraging evidence that conservative identity is partially predicated on respect for expertise. Therefore, it is easy to imagine a world in which conservatives take pride in embracing the work of experts, if they do not perceive a political cost for doing so.

Thirdly, this research contributes to larger discussions about what it means to live in a “post-truth” world. My findings align with those researchers who have proposed that “post-truth” is a function of disinterest in empirical truth rather than a function of some form of deception. However, while many researchers contend that a post-truth society is systemically disinterested in truth, I suggest that people are provisionally disinterested in truth when the consequences of being wrong are not immediate and other considerations outweigh them. While the term “post-truth” often carries a normatively negative connotation of irrationality, I also propose that such stances may at times be rational when the stakes of being wrong appear low and the consequences of acknowledging an unwelcome truth seem high. This conjecture implies that indifference to truth is provisional and strategic and is therefore susceptible to incentivization for addressing it. I propose further study to explore the potential of incentivization in reducing indifference to the truth.

Chapter 2: How Science Communicators are Mapped onto Cultural Conflict in Conservative Media

This chapter investigates how links are established between conservative identities and politically disadvantageous science in conservative media during times when science is prominent on the public agenda. Numerous studies have shown that the rejection of science messaging regarding COVID-19 and climate change—the two science-related issues that have dominated the public agenda in recent years—was closely associated with partisan identity. However, few studies have explored the discursive mechanisms, or language inseses through which specific meanings are produced, that render science relevant to political identity. A core assumption of this chapter is that science does not possess a natural political valence; therefore, it is essential to understand how science becomes significant for political identity groups and how those groups perceive their roles in responding to that science. In this chapter, I employ the analytical tool of nomination to demonstrate that conservative content creators forged connections between conservative identity and attitudes toward both Thunberg and Fauci by renaming them as oppositional political figures and situating them within a pre-existing field of cultural contest between conservatives and the left.

In this chapter, I focus on two discursive techniques described in PDT as part of the multifaceted process of creating equivalence between Fauci, Thunberg, and the left. The first is nomination, which, as outlined in the previous chapter, involves naming agents engaged in a contest between an identity group and an antagonistic Other, such that the names facilitate categorizing the agents as either ingroup or Other. The second

technique is *articulating* named agents onto chains of equivalence, which portrays each group as equalized by one or more shared political demands. I show that conservative media nominated Fauci, Thunberg, and their supporters in terms that identify them as equivalent to the existing leftist Other based on political demands that marginalize conservative American culture. I also argue that science hostility discourse in both cases rearticulated conservative identity onto chains of equivalence to maintain a diametrical opposition to the (re)constructed Other. Finally, I contend that this discursive project served several strategic purposes, including justifying resistance to politically disadvantageous science by framing the conflict as one over politics rather than science, interpreting science communicators as opponents of conservative identity, and strengthening chains of equivalence among the constituent groups of the right.

The theoretical contributions of this chapter are threefold. The first is to demonstrate how conservative content creators make science relevant to political identity by employing nomination, articulation, and chains of equivalence, thereby conflating the political demands of science communicators and their associates with those ascribed to the left. The second is to shed light on how conservative content creators use the same discursive techniques of equivalence construction to reinforce the appearance of conservative homogeneity while also creating an understanding of how that monolithic identity is threatened by scientific messages. The third is to show how these techniques serve strategic purposes in power contests between identity groups. In the following section, I situate this research within the literature on science denial. I then discuss the aspects of PDT that are specific to this chapter and how the research was conducted.

Review of the Literature

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of the major characterizations of the connection between conservative identity and “science denial.” In this chapter, I identify three major schools of thought regarding how such links are established between conservative identity and certain matters of science. Then, I argue that accounts focusing on media offer a promising avenue of inquiry, but that steps must be taken to extend research beyond individual instances of science denial. I also argue that there is a lack of understanding about how conservatives develop perceptions of the relevance of certain science issues to their identity group and on what terms to respond to them.

Conflicts Between Science And Conservative Ideology

One explanation for the establishment of relationships between conservative identity and hostility to science centers on ideology, based on the premise that some conservatives recognize an incompatibility between certain scientific claims and the ideological commitments associated with their identity groups. Partisans, by this account, resolve that tension by refusing to accept these scientific claims. For instance, many scholars suggest that individuals committed to free market capitalism dislike scientific claims suggesting that free markets have caused problems they cannot solve (Dunlap, 2014; McCright, 2016; Young & Coutinho, 2013). Others contend that conservatives establish connections between ideology and science when the government, addressing problems identified by scientists, appears to infringe on business and the unconstrained use of private property (Lo, 2014). This interference leads partisans to draw on ideological principles to reject actions based on science

(Neubauer, 2011; Oreskes & Conway, 2011). An example is the assertion that, as scientific institutions are independent of the incentive structures that govern all entities within the market, their influence destabilizes the market (Bohr, 2016).

Other ideological conflicts that may inspire hostility to science include the belief that nature is primarily a resource for humans, leading conservatives to reject scientific findings that assign value to nature beyond its utility to humans (Bohr, 2016; Nisbet, 2009; Stoknes, 2014). Additional conservative ideologies that potentially conflict with science focus on economic growth as imperative (Stuart et al., 2022), anti-governmentalism that opposes the expansion of government to include institutions of science (Oreskes & Conway, 2022), and religious beliefs that are at odds with scientific accounts (Rutjens et al., 2018). According to these perspectives, “discrediting calls for strong national and international climate action has become a matter of ideological survival” (Collomb, 2014, p. 1) for many conservatives. This body of theory has many strengths. It is indisputable that ideology can inform opposition to theories and politics that challenge its commitments. Indeed, there are several excellent works that elucidate how ideology has informed the evolution of the conservative movement of today, influencing current attitudes toward fossil fuel consumption, among other things.

However, several complicating factors demonstrate that ideology alone cannot account for the modern phenomenon of partisan hostility to science. The first is that attempts to combat science hostility by framing science in terms appealing to conservative ideology, such as suggesting to evangelicals that acting on science aligns with biblical values of good stewardship of the earth, have not achieved the success that ideological explanations would suggest (McCright et al., 2016). Similarly, efforts to

create market incentives for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, once promoted by conservatives as a market-based solution, lost favor among conservatives when the Obama administration sought to implement them (Arnold, 2014). Furthermore, a 2021 study examining ideological consistency among Republicans and Democrats found that, while Republicans express consistency through vague terms like “freedom” and “small government,” on more concrete ideological issues such as abortion, immigration, and health care, Republican views are notably diverse (Lupton et al., 2021). This finding aligns with earlier research on the inconsistency of conservative ideological views (Francia et al., 2005; Noel, 2016). Given this lack of ideological uniformity, it is hard to believe that conflicts between science and ideology could fully account for conservative hostility to science.

Explanations centered on ideology also struggle to account for a phenomenon described in multiple studies: discourses expressing hostility to science messaging frequently make no reference to science but instead focus their hostility on the science communicator. In such discourses, the communicator is described as an enemy of “who we are” as a culture, which extends well beyond ideology (Jung et al., 2020; McCambridge, 2022; Park et al., 2021). Finally, conservative ideology is only associated with climate science denial in certain countries with high investment in fossil fuels, including the United States and Australia (Hornsey, 2008), suggesting that climate science denial, at least, is more closely related to an affinity for fossil fuel production than to a set of concrete ideological commitments. These observations suggest that more than ideology is at play in shaping conservative attitudes toward science communication.

Elite Framing Of Science As Hostile To Conservative Culture

Many researchers have highlighted the considerable efforts of elites in the fossil fuel industry and conservative politics to cast doubt on climate science that threatens their interests, aiming to influence conservative audiences to support governmental inaction (Armitage, 2005; Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Jacques et al., 2008; Oreskes & Conway, 2022). Many of these accounts focus on disinformation that directly challenges climate science communication, while others examine how elites have worked to make conservatives feel that certain scientific findings pose a threat to their identity. For instance, Hornsey (2020) argued that elites with financial interests assert that scientists are antagonistic toward conservative values. Hayhoe contended that elites intentionally frame climate science as a false religion to alienate evangelicals from its findings (Hayhoe & Schwartz, 2017). Others have detailed how conservative pundits, including Rush Limbaugh and Ken Hamblin, depicted environmentalism as a catalyst for cultural decay (Ruud, 2003).

More recently, during the COVID-19 crisis, many scholars have theorized that partisan elites likewise created connections between COVID-19 science and conservative identity. Communication from elected officials was polarized and reflective of identity politics from the outset of the pandemic (Box-Steffensmeier & Moses, 2021). Green et al. (2020) found that Republican officials were more likely to frame COVID-19 in terms of business and China, potentially creating tensions between scientific recommendations and conservative, pro-business attitudes, as well as a tendency toward nationalism. Druckman et al. (2021) also noted that conservative religious elites appeared to have influence over how evangelicals viewed COVID-19 science. Several

studies pointed out that Trump seemed responsible for creating links between conservative identity and hostility to science. Bisbee and Lee (2020) found that Trump's followers were likely to share his attitudes toward science. Druckman et al. (2021) highlighted several Trump discourses that may have established connections between identity and COVID-19. An example is when Trump suggested that the 'leftist media' and scientists weren't assigning enough blame to China for the emergence of the pandemic, so they could accuse conservatives who did blame China of xenophobia.

There can be little doubt that the efforts of elites have significantly influenced partisan views on science. Indeed, powerful individuals have influenced popular attitudes toward science for centuries, dating back at least to the efforts of religious leaders to discredit heliocentrism and later evolution. Some of the discourses produced by think tanks and economic elites, such as the notion that the science on climate change is not settled or that there is no consensus within the scientific community, have been successful in fostering skepticism about climate science among conservatives (Dunlap & McCright, 2015; Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009; Skocpol, 2013).

However, elites may offer points of view but cannot force others to share them. Furthermore, elites sometimes reflect opinions that have emerged from within the public, as when Trump retweeted a comment containing the hashtag #firefauci, sparking a firestorm of speculation about Fauci's future with the administration. This complicates efforts to identify the pathways of discursive influence; as Evans and Hardittai note regarding Trump, "[he] could be reflecting or causing public opinion" (2020, p. 1). They also found that the opinions of Republicans about COVID-19 differed little from those of independents, who presumably were not as strongly identified with Trump. The most

important variable in predicting trust in science was the extent to which respondents perceived scientists as sharing their values; however, the cues linking values to science did not appear to originate from Trump. Another study found that pro-vaccine cues from political leaders of their own party had no effect on Republicans' intentions to get vaccinated (Vlasceanu & Coman, 2022). This suggests that partisans tend to select the cues they wish to adopt rather than mechanically espousing the views of their leaders. If conservatives are not entirely taking their cues from their leaders, the question of how links between science and identity are established remains open.

Conservative Media Framing Of Science As Hostile To Conservative Culture

Associations between conservative media consumption and science denialism are well established (Carmichael et al., 2017). While many researchers have focused on the role of conservative media in spreading disinformation about science, others have identified compelling evidence that conservative media create connections between science denial and conservative identity. Since the 1990s, Fox News has frequently presented climate change policies as a matter of political correctness, a discourse that has thematic ties to conservative views regarding multiculturalism, higher education, and feminism (McKnight, 2010). Conservative media consistently serve as purveyors of conspiracy theories with identarian themes, and studies have found correlations between conspiracism and hostility toward science (De Coninck et al., 2021; Romer & Jamieson, 2021; Stecula & Pickup, 2021). Conservative pundits have suggested that COVID-19 was an anti-American tactic to weaken the economy or a political strategy to undermine President Trump (Motta et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2021). Conservative media have also portrayed climate science as a plot to pave the way for

communism (Stoknes, 2014; Uscinski & Olivella, 2017). Conspiracy theories may forge links between identity and science as they often revolve around populist themes of cultural conflict between the People and some Other, even when they also encompass theories about conspiracies within scientific institutions (Motta et al., 2020; Stecula & Pickup, 2021).

The literature on the relationships between conservative media consumption and the establishment of identity-centered discourses about politically disadvantageous science is convincing, but certain areas require further development. One concern involves how conservative media articulate the nature of science's threat to identity within selective science hostility discourse. For instance, it is reasonable to suspect that Trump's supporters worried that COVID-19 science could jeopardize Trump's reelection chances. What remains less clear is what Trump was perceived to represent that would be damaged without his support. Additionally, it is also unclear how less intuitive links between science and identity are formed, such as those between socialism and hydroxychloroquine or greenhouse gas reduction and cultural decay. Understanding these connections may help elucidate why identity content frequently appears in discourse hostile to science and what identitarian concerns drive selective hostility towards science.

Secondly, many studies have focused on how links between science and identity are established in a single context such as climate science or epidemiology. Comparative work is needed to identify commonalities and differences across contexts, as they may help predict discursive practices in scenarios when science disadvantages an identity group. To gain a deeper understanding of how selective science hostility

manifests across scientific contests and how identity becomes implicated in these contests, I proceed with the following research question:

RQ 1. When responding to science communication from Dr. Fauci and Greta Thunberg, how do conservative content creators establish discursive relationships between partisan identity and politically disadvantageous science? In what ways are those discursive relationships and the techniques of establishing them similar between the cases?

In the next section, I argue that Political Discourse Theory is a framework uniquely suited to exploring the discursive mechanisms by which science becomes relevant to conservative identity. I explain how I utilize the concepts of nomination, articulation, and chains of equivalence from political discourse theory to elucidate how conservative content creators map science communicators and their supporters into a pre-existing, dichotomous field of cultural contest.

Political Discourse Theory: Creating Equivalence

As outlined in Chapter 1, according to PDT, the most fundamental act of political discourse is the construction of a “people” (referred to throughout this work as the People) who are the legitimate citizens of a political body (Glynos et al., 2009; Laclau, 1994; McKean, 2016; Nymalm, 2020). Dichotomizing the social world into two cultural camps based on ideas of what each desires begins with two discursive tasks. One is the identification of who is being sorted. In PDT, this is referred to as nomination, or the process of constructing agents and groups through naming. The other is identifying what the named entities are assumed to want, which determines to which societal group—the true people or the usurping Other—the nominated group or actor belongs. This is

carried out through the articulation of named agents and groups onto chains of equivalence based on whose demands they are believed to share. This is not a sequential process but a simultaneous one; people and groups are often nominated in terms that also imply the nature of their shared desires, such as “makers” and “takers.” In the next section, I describe how conservative media responding to both Thunberg and Fauci articulated the actors identified in the content onto chains of equivalence, either with the People or the Other. I then demonstrate how those nominations and articulations were employed to build narratives about the kind of threat each communicator represented such that the differences between the cases were shown to variations within the same leftist project of domination. I also discuss how, in each case, conservative content creators leveraged nominations of the Other to reinforce the appearance of equivalency between the disparate groups of the right.

Organizing Science Advocates and Conservatives into Partisan Identity Groups

Greta Thunberg and Dr. Fauci each referenced scientific findings while urging political figures and common citizens to take specific actions. However, they did this in very different ways. Thunberg’s appeal was emotional and included a clear moral accusation against authority figures who did not act on scientific findings about the human causes of climate change. As an activist, her references to science were employed to support one point of view. Fauci used a noncombative, nonpartisan tone in his communication. He also worked hard to avoid the perception that he was using science to promote any particular point of view, saying early in the pandemic that, “I have found, and it’s proven time and time again: stick with the science, stay completely out of the politics. I have no ideology. My ideology is health, public health, and science”

(Sherman, 2020, para. 23). However, although the styles, perspectives and goals of each communicator differed such that their motives could have been seen as much different, conservative media described their motives as almost identical. Conservative discourses almost unanimously articulated both Fauci and Thunberg and their associates and supporters onto chains of equivalence with other entities already associated with the left, based on an alleged common desire to marginalize the right in all areas of public life.

Below, I describe two ways in which the use of nomination facilitated the articulation of both Fauci and Thunberg, along with their supporters and the institutions they represented, onto chains of equivalence with constituent groups of the left or the left as a whole. I demonstrate how these two techniques were employed to explain away the areas in which each appeared distinct from the homogenized left, while utilizing variations in nominations between them to reinforce bonds of equivalence between conservative constituencies. The first is through the articulation of each communicator onto chains of equivalence with a monolithic left equalized by a desire for domination. The second is by nominating each communicator as enemies of specific conservative constituencies, thereby allowing those constituencies to be articulated anew onto chains of equivalence with other constituencies of the right based on the antagonism of a common enemy.

Mapping Fauci and Thunberg onto Chains of Equivalence with the Left

In some ways, the names given to Thunberg and Fauci differed markedly. Some of those differences tracked with the demographic differences between the two.

Thunberg was sometimes named in terms that were specifically misogynistic, ableist,

and agist, such as “mentally ill,” “brat,” and unattractive, as conservative content creators explained why they did not take Thunberg seriously. Consistent with those overt nominations, misogyny, ablism, and agism were more subtly reflected in nominations of Thunberg as a person without agency or intelligence of her own, such as “puppet,” “human shield,” and a “victim” of the adults around her. Fauci, on the other hand, was named in terms that accorded him agency, presenting him as a corrupt agent of the left by his own choice, rather than an unwitting tool of others.

However, conservative media presented both Thunberg and Fauci not as unique individuals acting in good faith about what they believed to be true about specific matters related to science, but as agents of the Other, made equal with the Other by their common role in forwarding the oppressive leftist regime. As I demonstrate below, the unique names given to Thunberg and Fauci were explained as superficial camouflage that concealed their essential similarity as agents of the same leftist cause. Here, I describe two of the most common nominations that positioned Fauci and Thunberg to be articulated onto chains of equivalence with the left. First, I discuss how Fauci’s nomination as a “deep state doctor” was used to link him to a left bent on stripping the right of political power. Next, I discuss how Greta’s nomination as a “psyops puppet” presented her as an instrument of the same left committed to the same project of wresting political power from the right.

Deep State Doctor. A common nomination given to Fauci during the COVID-19 crisis was “deep state doctor” and similar terms for a federal government bureaucrat secretly collaborating with other elites inside and outside of government to strip conservatives of power by non-democratic means. In an *Independent Institute* article

titled “Fauci is a Deep State Fraud,” author Angelo Codevilla’s (2020) titular nomination immediately positioned Fauci among a group of actors that Trump’s inner circle had already connected to a left that sought to dominate the right (Abramson, 2017).

Codevilla then argued that Fauci’s refusal to endorse the use of hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial drug Trump was promoting as a potential cure, was not due to its unproven status, as Fauci claimed. Rather, he contended, Fauci was attempting to make Trump appear incompetent. Codevilla asserted that Fauci was doing this to “plant a dagger between Trump’s shoulders and help his party—the Democrats and the deep state—extort the American people’s compliance to their agenda” (para. 4), which included thwarting the political goals of the right. Similarly, Fauci was named a member of “sinister forces” (Diserio, 2020, para. 25) including “Bill Gates, his powerful investor friends, and the Democratic Party” (para. 24), all coordinating to enrich themselves while stripping Trump, and thereby the right, of justly acquired power.

Codevilla also nominated Fauci in terms that made him equivalent with another Trump-invoked category when he wrote that “the pandemic’s guru, unfortunately, behaves as an ordinary creature of the Washington swamp” (para. 1). Here, he implied that Fauci was among the self-serving operatives in what Trump frequently called “the swamp” (Overby, 2017), or the *mélange* of lobbyists, special interests, bureaucrats and politicians who served themselves instead of the American people, another version of the “deep state.” Another name given to Fauci was “bureaucrat” as in “a politicized, partisan bureaucrat” (Codevilla, 2020, para. 4), or “a “long-time bureaucrat and friend of the establishment high and mighty” (Kamioner, 2020, para. 1). This name, when

combined with an accusation that his agency was involved in a plot to strip Trump of power, situated Fauci in the structure of the “deep state.”

The above nomination of Fauci as a “deep state” actor, like most of the nominations applied to him, seldom appeared in isolation. Rather, conservative media often used pre-existing discursive links between the “deep state” and other actors associated with the left to integrate Fauci into a network already recognizable to the right. One such article by the *Institute for Political Economy*, entitled “Why Are Fauci, Redfield, and the Presstitutes Deceiving Us About Masks,” referenced pre-imagined links between the deep state, Big Tech, and mainstream media before placing Fauci into the narrative (Roberts, 2020). The article opened with the assertion that “Twitter, the Censor and Explainer Controller for the Deep State” (para. 1) censored a report stating that most masks did little to protect people from the virus. This description of Twitter suggested that the company was collaborating with the deep state to achieve a shared goal. The article’s title also nominated media as “presstitutes,” or media professionals who compromise their journalistic integrity for gain. An NBC reporter was categorized as such and articulated onto a chain of equivalence with Twitter as “likely a person who needs to hold on to his job by accusing Trump and his advisor of false and misleading content that violates Twitter policy” (para. 5). The reporter’s choice to quote an assistant secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services regarding the usefulness of masks was framed as an attempt “to contradict President Trump and his advisor” (para. 5), implicating the deep state, of which DHHS was a part. The article further implied that reporters and members of the “deep state” shared a goal of undermining Trump and his advisor Scott Atlas, who was also skeptical of masks. In this

manner, the article equated Twitter, DHHS, and NBC through their shared desire to see the Republican president removed from power. Fauci was then added to this chain of equivalence when he was nominated as a “Big Pharma shill” working with the others to contradict Trump and Atlas.

Although the construction of common desires or demands is identified in PDT as one of the most essential techniques for creating equivalence, conservative media did not always claim that the goals of all nominated actors were perfectly aligned. Rather, equivalence was sometimes established by asserting that a pro-science actor was motivated by reasons that differed from, but were compatible with, the deep state, and that they were assisting each other in achieving their goals. In the above example, Roberts made media and the “deep state” equivalent through a shared desire to try to “discredit Trump, thereby hurting his reelection chances, by presenting him as a person who gives advice dangerous to people’s health and lives,” and to keep the economy locked down “so that the economic hardship is blamed on Trump and prevents his reelection” (para. 9). Fauci, however, was said to desire “money for the pharmaceutical companies” (para. 8). Although those desires diverged, equivalence was created by presenting Fauci’s desires and those of the left as compatible so that Fauci and the left could coordinate to achieve their ends. Ultimately, the goals of the four named entities (the press, the deep state, Fauci, and Big Tech as represented by Twitter) equalized all four with the left due to the compatibility of their aims and the collusion in which they engaged.

The desires attributed to Fauci and other leftist actors that diverged from the leftist goal of dominating the right varied somewhat across the articles. Prolific anti-

vaxxer and conspiracy theorist Mike Adams (2020) wrote in a highly circulated article that Fauci wanted to be viewed as a hero:

Dr. Fauci has a communist mindset. He's a liar and a tyrant, and his ultimate goal here is to see the coronavirus inflict maximum pain, suffering and death across America so that he can engineer a "vaccine coup" and portray himself as the savior of the nation." (para. 14)

Here, Fauci was nominated a "communist," based on a desire he ostensibly shared with communists to tyrannize and victimize America, although Fauci's goal of being seen as the savior of the nation was presumably his own. Other writers accused Fauci of seeking celebrity, as did an article in *American Greatness*:

Sticking with the legitimate science while refusing to play the media's game of gotcha against Donald Trump doesn't exactly get one invited on 'The Daily Show' or played by Brad Pitt on 'Saturday Night Live' or considered a heartthrob by The Atlantic. (Kelly, 2020, para. 18)

In this excerpt, the media were equated with the left in their desire to undermine Trump, but Fauci was not directly accused of sharing their goal. Rather, he was made equivalent as a conspirator, which, in a dichotomized population, placed him in the opposing group with which he colluded.

Although several of the above examples could be construed as artifacts of a struggle for political power rather than cultural dominance, the cultural character of the struggle was made apparent when the ultimate ends of the left's political struggle were described. For example, *WND* called COVID-19 a "Trojan horse" being used by the "anti-freedom left to brilliantly engineer a coordinated campaign against the American

culture and society...to accelerate America's rush to national suicide by the tyranny of socialism” (McGill, 2020, para. 20). Here, the universal demand of the right was indicated by the object of the leftist attack: freedom, a signifier that is associated with the core values of the United States and thereby legitimizes its champions as the true representatives of the People. The left’s goal, after winning the struggle to strip the right of their freedom, was described as the death of American culture and society as “the last great hope for humanity” (para. 18). In that historic American culture and society, which the left was trying to abandon, “the way is plain, peaceful, generous, just – a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud and God must forever bless” (para. 27), the author wrote, quoting President Lincoln’s 1861 description of America as exceptional among nations and favored by the Christian god (Lincoln, 1862). That version of America was defended by the freedom-loving culture of the right, standing in opposition to the socialism espoused by the freedom-hating left, of which Fauci was a part.

The nature of the tyranny sought by the left in the Fauci case was sometimes rendered in medical terms, establishing science as not just colluding with an anti-American left but as aspiring to place science in the position of dictator in a leftist regime. Fauci was nominated as a “little medical tyrant” (*Dr. Fauci Says Americans Don't Like to Be Told What to Do, Then Says This?!*, 2020), and his colleagues as “vaccine tyrants” (Adams, 2020) and “murderous medical tyrants” (Fareed et al., 2020). They were described as working to bring about “medical authoritarianism” (Buyniski, 2020) or a “vaccine police state” (Adams, 2020), in which Americans would be forced to accept “blatant tyranny that is being masked as ‘public health safety’ and ‘science’” (*Dr.*

Fauci Says Americans Don't Like to Be Told What to Do, Then Says This?!, 2020, para. 11) and to “place faith in scientific bureaucrats, handing over our freedom to them overnight” (Klinghoffer, 2020, para. 8). This set of discourses, appearing throughout the Fauci sample, situated Fauci within a long-standing conservative discourse in which a deep state seeks to assist the left in seizing the mantle of the People and rendering America into a tyrannical cultural order inhospitable to the right.

Psy-ops Puppet. Greta Thunberg was not equated with the American left in the same way that Fauci was. Being from Sweden, Thunberg was not associated with the American party system. Yet the same set of techniques that was used to articulate Fauci onto a chain of equivalence with the left was used to fold Thunberg into the same homogenized left. Thunberg’s equalization with the American left instead derived from the American left’s embrace of her and the purposes to which the left intended to put her messages. This, too, involved naming Thunberg as something other than the concerned youth she appeared to be. While many nominations represented her as a tool of other forces, as noted above, she was also named a “little tyrant” (Sparks, 2020), an “attention-seeking poser” (Enache, 2019), an “eco-fascist” (Huff, 2019b), and other terms that were useful for equating her with the American left as would-be oppressors.

However, a larger share of the content regarding Thunberg named her in terms that framed her as a tool of the left. Such terms included “a 16-year-old autistic kid” (Delingpole, 2019a, para. 11) and “a mentally unwell girl” (Kirchoff, 2019a, para. 10), which stripped her of agency and rationality, making plausible the idea that she was being used to advance leftist desires. “The child has an array of developmental disorders and mental illnesses including Autism, ADHD, OCD, depression, anxiety, and

once had selective mutism and would not eat which stumped her growth,” wrote the *Independent Sentinel* (Dowling, 2019, para. 3), and Fox News commentator Michael Knowles was forced to apologize after calling Thunberg “mentally ill” and saying, “She has autism...She has obsessive-compulsive disorder. She has selective mutism. She had depression” (Morefield, 2019a, para. 11). A *PJ Media* writer referred to her as a “16-year-old emotionally troubled climate crusader” (Green, 2020, para. 1) while discussing ways Thunberg’s image was exploited by “Gaia-worshipping buttinsky” (para. 1) environmentalists. These designations implied that Thunberg could not be the author of her own messages and fame and, therefore, was a creation of other people.

Most nominations for Thunberg implied the role she played for the people who created or exploited her fame. One common name given to Thunberg was “puppet” (Delingpole, 2019b; Heyes, 2020; Huff, 2019a; Tap News Wire, 2020), often of globalists, a common discourse in the more internationally oriented body of content on Thunberg. *Natural News*, in one instance, wrote that as a “child psyop puppet, with Asperger’s no less, Thunberg is a perfect candidate for the globalists to exploit” (Huff, 2019a, para. 4). This nomination framed Thunberg as a weapon of psychological warfare of an Other attempting to strip America of its national identity. Another common nomination given Thunberg was that of “shield” (Adams, 2019; Hays, 2019; Morefield, 2019b) as when a *Louder With Crowder* writer directly addressed the left: “You’re using Greta Thunberg as a meat shield. You’re hoping her mental issues will deflect criticism of an argument you cannot seem to make without dire, emotional appeals” (Kirchoff, 2019a, para. 10). This set of nominations allowed for a discursive pivot away from

Thunberg and her message to the adults who ostensibly benefited in some way from her celebrity.

It was the people who ostensibly benefited from Thunberg's popularity that conservative media primarily equated with the left. Those individuals, too, were given names that positioned them to be articulated onto chains of equivalence with the left based on a shared desire to oppress the right. These end goals were similar to those appearing in the Fauci data, in that the left was said to desire authoritarian control. In one instance, a columnist for *Townhall* accused the "climate change cult" of "taking advantage of [Thunberg's] passionate, emotional speeches in order to seize power for the left" (Morefield, 2019b, para. 4). Sometimes, Thunberg and/or her supporters were equated with the left based on a single broad goal. When *Time* magazine named Thunberg "Person of the Year" in 2019, several conservative outlets noted that *Time* had historically conferred that title on totalitarians several times, including once naming Hitler "Man of the Year." *Climate Dispatch* suggested that Thunberg's backers desired a similar form of power: "This is not to compare her to Hitler. She is a pawn and puppet. However, the forces behind Thunberg merit such a comparison. Massive and dark financial funds, with totalitarian political objectives" (Glass, 2019, para. 3). These political objectives were specifically antithetical to the political priorities of the right. Thunberg was said to be the tool of "Marxist Globalists" (Hoft, 2019, para. 2) who were trying to bring about "changes that will, of course, eliminate freedom and liberty in order to 'save the planet'" (Tap News Wire, 2020, para. 8). The cultural identity threat was emphasized by a writer who warned that Thunberg was being used by people with the goal of "the enslavement of the human race under eco-fascism, where no one will be

allowed to eat meat, drive a car, own a cow or run a lawnmower” (Adams, 2019, para. 4), losses that would strike hardest at the conservative way of life.

Sometimes, as seen in the articles naming globalists as the hidden manipulators, Thunberg’s sponsors and supporters were equated with specific leftist constituent groups, which somewhat altered the nature of the domination the right could expect if they prevailed. *Townhall* articulated environmentalists and the left onto a chain of equivalence based on a demand for communism, suggesting that conservatives should risk criticism and argue back against Thunberg, “or the left could eventually succeed in using the wacky climate cult that Thunberg has become the face of to implement their Communist ‘utopia’” (Morefield, 2019b, para. 13). One outlet referred to Thunberg as “Greta the Red” (Dowling, 2019b, para. 25) and associated her with the “anarchist-communist network” (para. 25) Antifa, which itself was aligned with “totalitarians” (para. 24). The *Independent Sentinel* and others internationalized the meaning of communist oppression by adding references to globalism: “She is escorted around by George Soros employees and other communists as she predicts the end of the world which can only be solved by turning all control over to globalists” (Dowling, 2019a, para. 2). Thunberg’s messaging was characterized as a “ploy by globalists to control you, tax you and ultimately kill you in order to advance their agenda” (Brown, 2020, para. 19), an aim that struck at the heart of the conservative project of preserving national autonomy and keeping taxes low. However, though the particulars of the entities involved in each case differed slightly, Thunberg was named in terms that identified her as a tool of manipulators who were named in terms that suggested they desired a leftist political and cultural state inhospitable to conservatives.

As in the Fauci data, Thunberg's alleged desires (when she was granted her own agency) and those of her followers and sponsors did not always align perfectly. For instance, *Big League Politics* argued that Thunberg's parents had "turned Thunberg into a money-making machine, using the child to fleece environmentalists out of large donations" (Trejo, 2019, para. 9) while the left used her to pursue power. In another case, her parents were named "stage-parents" (Saavedra, 2019, para. 10) with a history of seeking fame, who benefitted by having a daughter promoting the causes of the far left. A number of outlets accused Thunberg's parents of using Thunberg to promote Antifa (Dowling, 2019; Hoft, 2019) while other entities used her to promote globalism. But regardless of the variations in the discursive techniques used to connect Thunberg through others to the left, the objectives of the left remained remarkably similar to those in the Fauci case: oppressing the right and threatening all the right held dear.

Maintaining And Reinforcing Conservative Equivalence Relative To Science

Above, I described how chains of equivalence were used to name both science communication figures in terms that identified them as political actors aligned with the left, united by a goal of dominating the right. In this section, I discuss how selective science-hostility discourse equalized the constituent groups of the right by linking the particular aspects of each case to other known threats targeting specific conservative groups that might not otherwise have understood themselves as having a clear stake in the fight over science. This process reinforced links between those specific groups and the rest of the right by interpreting each science communicator's messaging as a threat equally dangerous to all.

Why “We” Should Care About Science: Building Equivalence From Within Constituencies

Sometimes, conservative content creators who were members of constituent groups explained to the rest of their groups why they had a stake in science disputes by pointing out links between Thunberg or Fauci and the threats that the left already represented to their specific groups. For instance, evangelical writer and theologian Fay Voshell named Thunberg a “secular saint” of the “religion of climate change” (Voshell, 2019, para. 3). This theme, echoed in multiple articles, encouraged Christians to see and react to Thunberg and the climate science she advocated as a part of the leftist Other’s ongoing threat to Christianity. *Info Wars* contributor Leo Lyon Zagami wrote on his blog on Sept. 23, 2019, that “Today we will discuss the evidence that Antifa activist Greta Thunberg is possessed.” In the following paragraphs, Zagami argued that Thunberg displayed signs of demonic possession, especially upon encountering Trump at the UN, where Trump was scheduled to give a speech in support of religious freedom. The post concluded that “Satan knows his time is near and in his desperation he resorts to using a child to do his evil bidding” (para. 7). While perhaps startling to secular eyes, 54 percent of Republicans in a 2019 YouGov poll said they believed that demons were definitely real or probably real (Sanders, 2019), and a 2013 poll found that 72 percent of people who described themselves as “born again” believed demons could possess people (Jagel, 2013). Here, Zagami invited fellow Christians to view Thunberg as part of biblical prophecy, which foretells God’s final confrontation with evil, with Thunberg being portrayed as being on the side of evil. While doing so, Zagami also named Thunberg in terms that linked her to secular entities specifically anathema to the

right, including Antifa. In this way, Zagami used a language unique to evangelical Christian culture to offer a reason why evangelicals should concern themselves not only with Thunberg's celebrity but with the anti-fascist group Antifa. He also used the particularities of the Thunberg case with specific significance to his constituent group of the right to encourage his fellows to see themselves as rendered equal with the rest of the right by pointing out the specific threat she presented to evangelicals.

One way this was done in the Fauci case was to present Fauci as a specific threat to the antivax community while equalizing Fauci with other entities already linked to the would-be tyrants of the left. In an article found in the antivax outlet *Vaccine News*, the author named Fauci a partner and collaborator with the vaccine company Moderna, while linking Moderna with other conservative bugbears, including "Bill Gates, Jeffrey Epstein and George Soros" (Huff, 2020, para. 1). The article, ironically, was about a blog post by conservative author Jerry Hammond that responded to a *USA Today* article debunking an earlier conservative media claim. The first article had attempted to link Gates, Soros, and Epstein to Fauci by making false claims, including that Fauci and Gates had been college roommates, among other things, which *USA Today* pointed out. While those claims had been untrue, as the Hammond article referenced by *Vaccine News* acknowledged, the "villains" Gates and Fauci were linked by "financial ties" to Moderna (para. 2). Soros and Epstein were not mentioned again in the *Vaccine News* article, but in "proving" that Gates and Fauci were partners, the *Vaccine News* author implied that Hammond had debunked the *USA Today* story had in its entirety, leaving the links intact.

Meanwhile, *Vaccine News* quoted the name Hammond had given Fauci that tied him closely to Moderna, a company of particular importance to the antivax community. According to Hammond, and amplified by *Vaccine News*, Fauci was a “a co-reviewer of a vaccine platform” that Moderna was working on (para. 4), Fauci’s agency’s “scientists and their collaborators” (para. 9) were responsible for Moderna’s creation of a COVID-19 vaccine, which the Gates Foundation has also been a “strategic collaborator” (para. 10). *Vaccine News* claimed that Hammond’s article had proven that “the whole thing was planned well in advance” (para. 12) and quoted Hammond as writing that “the greatest purveyors of misinformation are the government and mainstream media” (para. 14). The overall effect of the *Vaccine News* article was to present ways to understand the specificities of the Fauci case as proof that Fauci represented an equal threat to the antivax community and the rest of the right. In both cases, media representatives for specific constituent groups established equivalences between their own groups and the right to demonstrate to their constituents why they should join the rest of the right in closing ranks against the message of Thunberg or Fauci, even when their stakes in the contest were not immediately clear.

Reinforcing Equivalencies Among General Audiences

Most of the outlets containing responses to Fauci or Thunberg were general interest outlets. These outlets consistently bundle the issues of multiple subgroups under the banner of general conservatism, reinforcing equivalencies and eliding differences between constituencies by orienting them against a common foe. Like the special interest publications, they, too, responded to Thunberg and Fauci by presenting

their particularities as different facets of the same overall threat to the right, establishing non-obvious connections between disparate conservative groups.

In one such article from the Fauci case, prolific conservative publisher Mike Adams, responsible for as many as 500 conservative websites (Rational Wiki, n.d.), did so by claiming that Fauci was “a liar and a tyrant” with a “communist mindset” who was trying to continue Obama’s efforts to “destroy America and enrich its enemies” (2020, para. 6). According to Adams, Fauci would “push vaccine mandates and steamroll ‘anti-vaxxers’ who question vaccine safety” (para. 15) while continuing Obama’s program of “whipping up racial tensions, turning America against law enforcement, socializing the medical system” (para. 2), weakening the military, and undermining America’s economy. This equalized constituencies, including capitalists, whites, law enforcement members and supporters, military supporters, those primarily concerned with the economy, and anti-vaccine communities by presenting Fauci as an enemy common to all of them.

Another author ridiculed Fauci for recommending goggles to protect the mucosa of the eye (Eastman, 2020) but expanded the scope of the story to accuse Fauci of trying to strip Americans of their freedoms, attempting to get Trump out of office, and going on the Black entertainment network BET to stoke racial tension. This common threat equalized self-described patriots, Trump supporters, and whites with conservatives “reopen advocates” arguing for an end to shutdowns. Others suggested that Fauci and the left were allowing BLM riots while suppressing church services (Heine, 2020; Papazian, 2020; The Right Scoop, 2020), equating Christians and whites with those who wanted the economy to reopen.

The links that could be reimagined and reinforced by renaming these science communicators and linking them with known foes of conservative groups were sometimes startling in scope. One writer for *Secure Arkansas* articulated truckers, whites, law enforcement constituencies, gun right advocates, anti-vaxxers, anti-globalists, and anti-socialists onto a chain of equivalence by presenting them all as groups with reason to be concerned by an “internationalist” plan to use COVID-19 to usher in a “New World Order.” Truckers, the piece argued, faced significant risk by being forced to drive into areas made lawless by “radical socialist cities that have collapsed into chaos and ‘warlord’ autonomous zones” (Hansen, 2020, para. 9). This lawlessness was part of a larger globalist plan to destabilize the country enough to justify turning authority over to the UN; the writer warned, “Remember, these internationalists do NOT want borders or sovereign nations” (para. 13). Part of their strategy included “the globalist plan to disarm the population” (para. 14) because “global control includes total gun control” (para. 14). COVID-19 was explained as especially useful for facilitating the coming of the New World Order beyond mere economic and social destabilization because of the additional benefit its authors would derive from a selling a new round of vaccines, the piece argued. Articulating the globalist demands of vaccine scientists, socialists, BLM (which was protesting in multiple cities at that time) onto one chain of equivalence simultaneously articulated corresponding groups of the right onto another chain of equivalence based on a shared fate should the left prevail.

This pattern was highly pronounced in the Fauci case, as conservative content creators hurried to interpret and address an emerging crisis in which discourses of equivalence were not yet well established. However, despite Thunberg’s differences,

general interest outlets took the same tack in naming Thunberg and her supporters in terms that linked them to pre-existing foes of multiple conservative constituencies and the rest of the conservative movement in their response to Thunberg. One example was found in a *National File* article on an incident where Australian conservative personality Avi Yemini accused Twitter of suspending him for criticizing Thunberg. The *National File* pointed out that Twitter had also recently blocked a gun rights activist (Hadfield, 2019, para. 11), and generalized from those instances that “No conservative, libertarian, or populist is safe from Twitter’s line of fire” (para. 12). Here, Twitter served as a synecdoche for “Big Tech,” whose apparently leftist hostility equalized conservatives, libertarians, populists, and Second Amendment supporters in a way that suggests the connection between all four was obvious. Furthermore, although Yemini is not a household name on the right, those aware that Yemini was an outspoken anti-Islam activist would also be encouraged to see the connection between all conservatives, libertarians, populists, gun rights supporters, anti-Islamists, and Thunberg critics as proceeding from an indiscriminate leftist hostility.

Another author equalized Thunberg critics with whites, pro-life conservatives, and gun rights supporters by suggesting all were victims of the same leftist strategy of shaming:

Example, if you name a militant, cop-hating group something totally justified, like “Black Lives Matter” how can anybody argue with that? Of course black people’s lives matter. But, if you condemn the groups abhorrent actions, somehow you’re also condemning the fact that “black lives matter.” See how this works? Same goes with Pro-choice. You name a movement “pro-choice” so it sounds as if all

you're doing is making amazing life choices for yourself and your family. (Crane, 2019, para. 4)

The writer assumed that the same leftist Other was responsible for giving the movement to end racial disparities in police violence the label “Black Lives Matter” and giving abortion rights supporters the label “pro-choice.” The writer also assumes that a conservative audience would not need an explanation of the connection between those who condemned BLM and those who oppose abortion. In the next paragraph, she drew in gun rights supporters by arguing that “They did the same with David Hogg. They made a teenager the face of the anti-gun movement. Get it?” (para. 5). “They” were identified as the left in the same paragraph: “Now, the left will do the same to you if you so much as say one bad word about a 16-year-old climate kook” (para. 5). By this telling, the same left that was hostile to people who oppose BLM and abortion was also hostile to gun rights supporters and critics of a climate science advocate, which elided whatever differences might exist between those four groups in favor of a common front. Below, I show how conservative content creators presented the particularities of the cases of both Thunberg and Fauci as they emerged in the daily news cycle, despite their differences, as threatening to the same two groups: whites and Christians.

How Daily News Cycles Were Used to Name Thunberg and Fauci as Threats to White Males and Christians

Mainstream news media in 2019 made much of an incident in Washington, D.C. in which young men from Covington Catholic High School, on their way back from an anti-abortion demonstration, encountered a group of Black Hebrew Israelites, a small sect known for highly bigoted language. Hostility escalated until an older Native

American man interjected himself between the two groups. Several of the high school boys appeared to mock the man, a confrontation that appeared on network news. However, greater context and deeper investigation into the source of the original images discredited that version of events (Flanagan, 2019), leading mainstream news to retract the story. Some conservative writers took the opportunity to present the incident as proof that the left's use of Thunberg to silence the right about climate science was part of the same leftist project that condemned other children because they were white males. Thunberg was named a "mouthpiece" for the left "because she can be used as both their sword and human shield" (Hays, 2019, para. 24). However, according to *Natural News*, the Covington boys "didn't actually do anything wrong other than to exist while white and male, which means, at least according to liberals, that they must be silenced using any means possible" (Huff, 2019, para. 3). By this account, liberals used Thunberg to silence critics of environmentalism while silencing the white boys for no other reason than that they were white and male.

In the Fauci data, the issue of whiteness versus science came up early in 2020, when Trump faced criticism for closing the borders to Europe and China. "Democrats were more concerned about impeaching [Trump] and calling the ban 'racist'...Liberal media was upset about the fact that there were white men on the task force Trump formed in January" (Arama, 2020, para. 7), wrote a contributor to *Red State*. At that time, scientists were divided on the merits of travel bans, with many arguing that the virus had already spread well beyond China and, therefore, bans would be of limited use. This led liberal commentators to suspect that Trump was using COVID-19 as an excuse to further a xenophobic agenda while conservative commentators interpreted it

as evidence that the left was using COVID-19 to name the right as “racists” as part of their overall program of hostility to white males, thereby linking white males to the larger conservative group facing science-enabled hostility from liberals.

Thunberg and Fauci were also identified as anti-Christian in both sets of data. In the Fauci data, this was sometimes associated with pandemic shutdowns that included church services while appearing to allow activities that liberals supported, especially pro-BLM demonstrations. One outlet argued that conservatives were “seeing, especially in Democrat states and cities, that protests are given an exemption while all other gatherings, including church services, are being shut down” (The Right Scoop, 2020, para. 3). This was presented as proof that Fauci was a Democrat-aligned hypocrite who held a double standard that favored black protestors over churchgoers. In another article, an *American Greatness* writer named Fauci “a leading proponent of state lockdowns, the closing of ‘non-essential’ businesses and draconian restrictions on church gatherings” (Heine, 2020, para. 23). Throughout the article, the writer cited Ohio representative Jim Jordan’s interview of Fauci during a congressional hearing to amplify Jordan’s assertions that Fauci was an opponent of Christianity. Fauci’s family was even recruited to the effort to name Fauci an antagonist of the church when an article cited a Fauci relative as saying that he didn’t understand why leaders “let them riot and protest, 5,000 people with no masks on, but we can’t go to church with 10 people” (Samson, 2020, para. 10).

Others interpreted Fauci as favoring the rights of gays over those of Christians after Fauci had called the decision to seek intimacy through dating apps such as Grindr (primarily for gay men) and Tinder “your choice regarding a risk” (Hamby, 2020, para.

40), which the *Independent Institute* interpreted as “Holy Communion versus sex with strangers” (Codevilla, 2020, para. 15). Through these examples, the implication was that Fauci’s messaging was intended to suppress Christianity while supporting activities inconsistent with conservative values, including those of racial justice protesters and non-traditional sexual cultures.

The Thunberg articles similarly depicted Thunberg-related events in the daily news cycle as a threat to Christianity, often linking Thunberg to eschatological prophecies that warn the faithful about the emergence of “false teachers” and “false Christs” (see, e.g., Got Questions, 2016). For over 20 years, climate deniers have accused climate scientists of climate idolatry (Powell, 2011). When Thunberg was warmly received in New York after crossing the Atlantic in a wind-powered yacht to address the United Nations, one such article seized on the opportunity to name Thunberg a false Christ.

Last Wednesday, in a blaze of unremittingly fawning publicity and uncritical adulation of which even Moses descending from Mount Sinai with the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments would have been envious, the good ship Mazilia – or, as I prefer to call it in view of its almost quasi-religious mission, ‘Greta’s Ark’ – set sail from Plymouth bound for New York, carrying no less a personage, if you believe the Green hype, than putative Saviour of the World, diminutive, pigtailed ‘climate activist’ Greta Thunberg, aged 16. (St. George, 2019, para. 1)

A sense of humor can be detected in the above excerpt, originally written for a British publication but later reprinted on the American climate denial blog *Climate Depot*.

But references to “unremittingly fawning publicity” and “uncritical adulation” indicate the writer’s critique of the culture supporting Thunberg, and the juxtaposition of media adulation with religious language suggesting that Thunberg’s supporters conferred upon her the title of “Saviour” would be legible in conservative evangelical culture as a reference to end-time prophecies warning of false prophets. Furthermore, references to “St. Greta” (Perry, 2019), assertions that Thunberg had been called a successor to Jesus (Huff, 2019b; Urbanski, 2019), or nomination of Thunberg as a “climate prophet” (Fitzpatrick, 2019; McDonald, 2019) all signaled to Christian conservatives that Thunberg was an example of the people that God had specifically warned against, with climate science as one of the false religions that had been foretold as presaging the emergence of the anti-Christ. In both cases, conservative content creators utilized the events of the daily news cycle to argue that the messaging of both Thunberg and Fauci, despite their differences, posed the same threat of marginalization to the same two conservative constituent groups.

How Equivalence Legitimized Extremists

Just as nominations were used in both cases to demonstrate why Thunberg or Fauci should be understood as enemies of the same conservative interest groups, conservative content creators in both cases also used nominations of science communicators and of radical conservatives to elide divisions between conservative extremists and moderates. Above, I described a Sept. 19, 2019, incident in which YouTuber Avi Yemini called Thunberg an “extremist” in a tweet. Shortly thereafter, Twitter briefly suspended Yemini’s account for spamming; however, Yemini claimed that the ban was due to his jab at Thunberg. A subsequent defense of Yemini by the

National File demonstrated how chains of equivalence can normalize far-right radicals and norm-rupturing behavior. It is instructive to consider the context in which the incident took place. In the days following Thunberg's speech at the U.N. on September 23, 2019, the hostile tone of responses to Thunberg from the right also drew significant attention and condemnation (Nelson, 2019), especially when Trump targeted Thunberg in a tweet that many deemed sarcastic (Cillizza, 2019).

Conservatives' incivility on social media was already a source of many challenges to the moral legitimacy of the right, even among some Republicans. A Pew Research Center poll found that Trump's use of social media was the top concern among his supporters about his conduct as president (2017). His hostility to Thunberg was received even more poorly; a YouGov poll revealed that Republicans' approval of his tweet to Thunberg was significantly lower than the average score they gave him for other tweets (Sanders, 2019). Those conservatives who were the loudest in rupturing social norms of civility toward children were particularly problematic for the right, because, as I will elaborate on in Chapters 3 and 4, much of the ongoing contest between the left and the right revolved around which party held the moral high ground. Extreme conservative hostility toward a child presented a challenge in that regard. By defending Yemini, the *National File* framed the moral backlash against his hostility to Thunberg as a leftist attempt to censor free speech while equating the radical Yemini with Trump and all other conservatives facing the same leftist threat.

Furthermore, Yemini was (and is) a far-right figure; he has described himself as the "world's proudest Jewish Nazi" (Geelan, 2023) and has faced charges of both antisemitism and anti-Muslim intolerance for the views he has expressed on social

media. The year before the COVID-19 outbreak, Trump and conservatives faced criticism for a “Muslim ban” that restricted travel to the US from certain countries in the Middle East due to fears of extremist terrorism. Democrats accused the right of prejudice against Muslims and Arabs, and Yemini was one of the most vocal critics of Islam, drawing accusations of hate speech. The *National File* seized on the Thunberg moment to present Yemini as not meaningfully different from other conservative groups and figures who could face censorship for disagreeing with the left. “This is not the first time Big Tech has swung into action to ‘protect’ children they agree with” (2019, para. 10), the author argued, and provided examples in which other conservative groups had been similarly silenced. With this, the author presented Yemini as being of the same stock as all other conservatives and, by listing major right and right-leaning groups as likely to receive the same treatment on behalf of “human shield” Greta Thunberg, presumed that the entire right could have just as easily expressed such views.

A similar article in *Townhall* responding to a Fauci message recommending people avoid travel over the holidays also elided fissures between the far right and moderate conservatives. In a Dec. 20, 2020, article published on *Town Hall*, former Libertarian vice-presidential nominee Wayne Allyn Root reacted to Dr. Fauci’s recommendation to avoid large gatherings on Christmas by interpreting it as an assault on conservatives, writing that “Fauci and his crowd of moronic Democratic governors are control freaks. But no one is listening, certainly not conservatives, not Trump deplorables, not patriots and not Christians. We love Christmas. We love our families. And no one is taking that away from us. Not in America” (para. 6). In this way, Fauci

was named in terms that presented him as a control freak hoping to dominate all conservatives.

As previously discussed, a common identity among conservatives has existed long enough for those who identify as conservative to be aware of the demands they are presumed to share. Root hailed individuals who already identified as conservatives by referencing demands for religious and other freedoms common among conservatives. At the same time, however, a third group called “Trump deplorables” was articulated onto this chain of people who share those values. This move articulated those drawing moral condemnation for refusing to comply with social distancing measures onto a chain of equivalence with core conservative groups. The term “deplorable” was based on presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s campaign comment that a portion of Trump’s supporters were best described as a “basket of deplorables” (Montanaro, 2016). She referred to the most radical of Trump’s fan base. Still, Root extended the mantle of deplorability across the entire conservative spectrum, presuming not only that conservative identity included patriotism and Christianity but also adherence to the values associated with Trump’s most controversial supporters. Through the unifying word “we,” Root imagined moderate conservatives and the extreme right as a single group acting and thinking in concert.

Discouraging Freeriding

Social Costs. Resistance to the messaging of Thunberg and Fauci came at a social cost for many conservatives. Conservative content creators used nomination to impress upon other conservatives the necessity of conservative unity in bearing those social costs, even to groups that were only tangentially affected by the communicator’s

messages. This was particularly prominent in the Thunberg case, in which publicly criticizing Thunberg or disputing her arguments could attract moral condemnation. Conservative media figures acknowledged the risks, using the “human shield” nomination to warn conservatives that “you’d better agree with everything she says and adapt your lifestyle to her whims, or else you’re an “intolerant hater.”” (Crane, 2019, para. 7). Social costs could damage to one’s intimate social networks as well. “Fear over global warming is ripping apart friendships and stealing the spirit of young people,” (White, 2020, para. 2) said “anti-Greta” personality Naomi Seibt. Even British television personality Jeremy Clark confessed that his opposition to Thunberg strained his relationship with his daughter (Kirchoff, 2019b). A few writers mentioned social costs that could come from resisting Fauci’s messaging as well, as when a writer asserted that “if you don’t wear [a mask] between bites while eating at an outdoor restaurant, you are trying to kill grandma” (Lennox, 2020, para. 4).

But lest a conservative without strong feelings regarding Thunberg or Fauci be tempted to stand out of the fray, conservative writers reminded them that such condemnation awaited all conservatives should the left prevail. Condemnation of Thunberg critics, for instance, was given as “the same thing they do with the rest of us in decrying us as evil, racist, sexist, ‘istophobic-phobo-phobes”” (Walker, 2020, para. 3), one writer cautioned, hailing all conservatives who had resented such titles before.

Material Costs. There could also be material costs associated with hostility to Thunberg or Fauci. Conservative writers referenced these mostly in the COVID-19 case, where flouting Fauci’s recommendations sometimes involved breaking the law. In such cases, conservative content producers nominated resisters as victims. “Some

intrepid business owners whose communities are not coronavirus hot spots are also defying lockdown orders—even at the risk of license suspension or being jailed” (Papazian, 2020, para. 43), one writer observed, while another noted that “a health spa offering intravenous vitamin C was raided by the FBI and accused of promoting quackery” (Pappert, 2020, para. 6). Elsewhere, “gym owners were arrested for trying to operate their gym” (Heine, 2020, para. 28) despite lockdowns. As such, the conservative content creators suggested that unity was essential in resistance. In the above instances, conservative media warned that business owners had a lot to lose for defying Fauci, and therefore a lot of reason to join others in adopting a hostile attitude toward him. But one did not have to be a business owner to suffer material costs for ignoring Fauci. “A man in Los Angeles was arrested this week for paddleboarding alone, according to the Los Angeles Times. A pastor in Florida was arrested Monday for holding church services after he went the extra mile to keep his congregation safe (Jones, 2020, paras. 33–34)” one outlet reported, inferring that even the most ordinary of citizens could not afford to sit the conflict out.

Conservative media also noted that there could be material costs associated with criticizing Thunberg. One such cost was being banned from social media, as in the Yemini case described above, which conservative media used to argue that anyone who used social media could be deplatformed or even doxxed for criticizing Thunberg. Other writers pointed to potential outcomes for various conservative constituencies if they failed to stop Thunberg in her tracks. One author, for instance, warned gun owners of the consequences they could expect if the right allowed itself to be silenced about Thunberg. The “modern political Left,” the writer argued, would carry out its habitual

practice of silencing their foes, “while demanding conservatives surrender their guns (to make them easier to round up and exterminate, of course)” (Huff, 2019c, para. 6). In these examples, conservative media cautioned all conservative groups that if they did not have clear reasons to resist and instead tried to offload the potential costs onto the groups that were more affected, they would ultimately bear the cost of losing political ground for all of conservatism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an analysis of how these two widely disparate communicators and their associates were discursively equated with enemies of conservatism using techniques of nomination and articulation of actors onto chains of equivalence with the homogenized left, which was presented as united by a desire to dominate conservative identity. I have also argued that these discursive processes possess strategic political power to rally a unified right, thereby limiting any advantages that science could afford the left. I have left one implication unstated, but to leave it unstated would be to endow this chapter with a weakness that besets much research into partisan hostility to science. That implication, seldom explicitly stated, is that hostility to science is, at least to some extent, performative, that conservatives disavow science when it disadvantages them politically rather than out of sincerely held concerns about science. I will enlarge upon that hypothesis in the following two chapters. Still, I introduce the matter here because of an obvious question that arises from the conclusions presented in this chapter. That is, did conservative media present what they believed to be an accurate account of facts when they labeled these science messengers as political agents of a left bent on marginalizing the right? Very possibly,

but it is also true that these discourses served to protect the moral legitimacy of the right in a perceived contest between the right and the left for cultural dominance, and that could be what motivated those stated beliefs.

Central to political legitimacy in a struggle over who should embody the true American is the appearance of morality and patriotism. Pushing back uncivily against Thunberg's moral plea for climate action before climate change robbed her generation of a future threatened the moral image of the right. Refusing to comply with measures to protect other Americans from COVID-19, breaking laws regarding social distancing, and disregarding appeals for Americans to vaccinate and wear masks all jeopardized the moral and patriotic image of the right. In the following two chapters, I apply the PDT concept of predication, or the construction of identity through answering the question "What are we like?" to demonstrate how selective science-hostility discourses constructed a conservative identity such that resistance to science, including norm and law-rupturing behaviors, could be perceived not as morally and patriotically deviant, but as morally and patriotically imperative. Through that analysis, more clues will emerge that will enable us to draw conclusions about what motivated conservative media to construct discourses hostile to Thunberg and Fauci, and how they went about doing so.

Chapter 3: How Conservative Media Used Predication of Identity to Justify Hostility to Science

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that conservative text producers made Fauci and Thunberg relevant to conservative identities by portraying them as actors on the opposing side of a cultural-political struggle. This, in the most fundamental terms, identified Thunberg and Fauci as political, not scientific, actors. In this chapter, I examine how conservative media discourse portrayed the relationships between aspects of conservative identity and the hostility expressed toward Fauci and Thunberg's messaging on science. I use the PDT concept of predication, which is the explication of elements of political identity, to argue that the aspects of conservative identity described in science-hostile discourse served to connect negative attitudes toward science with the qualities that conservatives value about themselves. Although the ways that Thunberg and Fauci used science—Thunberg as an activist, Fauci as a non-partisan expert—I show that in both cases, conservatives were predicated as sharing characteristics that morally justified, even mandated, conservative hostility to each of their messages.

The relationship between aspects of identity and the attitudes that members of identity groups hold toward science has long been considered important. This is because when an attitude is primarily associated with a single identity group, it follows that the attitude in question has some relationship with the aspects of identity that make that group unique. However, most identity-centered science denial research focuses on how outside observers perceive aspects of conservative identity. Little research has

investigated how people within identity groups understand the relationships between their attitudes toward science and the specific aspects they believe define their group. Yet, without insight into how members of identity groups comprehend those connections, no account of the relationships between aspects of identity and hostility to science will be complete, and opportunities to establish meaningful dialogue across identitarian differences may be missed.

This chapter examines conservative media texts responding to Thunberg and Fauci to explore how conservative content producers articulated conservative identity and connected that identity to their stances on science. It has three aims. The first is to develop an account of which aspects of conservative identity text producers deemed relevant in discussions about Thunberg and Fauci's messaging. The second is to understand how conservative media explained the connections between those aspects and the responses of conservatives to Thunberg and Fauci. The third is to consider the implications of those discourses because, as PDT theorists have noted, the predication of identity is emotionally and cognitively coercive, intended to facilitate political outcomes (Hart, 2010).

In the following section, I review existing literature on the relationships between aspects of conservative identity and hostility to science. I argue that accounts of identity developed objectively from outside the identity group both dominate and weaken the field. Following Bilgrami (2006), I advocate for the value of considering subjective accounts of identity produced within the identity groups under study; this approach sheds light on how identity and attitudes toward science are discursively linked. I then briefly review the concept of predication and explain its utility in revealing how identity is

constructed and leveraged in science-hostile discourse, as well as the political strategies that such discourse serves. I show how this was carried out in response to each science communicator in ways that were unique to each, yet ultimately produced the same result. I illustrate how this was carried out by describing six prominent identity traits that conservative media avowed and promoted in the cases of Thunberg and Fauci. I contend that the ways conservative media established connections between those identity aspects and hostility to Fauci and Thunberg defended conservative moral and intellectual legitimacy by portraying that hostility as arising from positive group traits and being consistent with group values. I conclude by addressing limitations and providing recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Objective Accounts of Identity and Science Denial

Many studies of the relationship between conservative identity and science denialism start with the assumption that conservatives are hostile to science due to a defining characteristic of conservative identity and attempt to identify that characteristic. A commonly cited attribute is anti-egalitarianism, which includes prejudices against women, adolescents, racial minorities, and non-neurotypical individuals (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Chapelan, 2021; Gelin, 2019; Jung et al., 2020; Pinhiero, 2020; Vowles & Hultman, 2021; Wilkie, 2017). Observing anti-egalitarian traits in speech or through survey work among anti-science conservatives has led many scholars to infer that when science highlights minority voices or concerns, conservative identities tend to react negatively to that science (Agius et al., 2020; Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Gelin, 2019; Jung et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021; Pulé & Hultman, 2019; Vochocová, 2023). Agius

(2020), for instance, noted misogynistic language and attitudes in speech critical of Thunberg and concluded that many conservative men categorically reject critiques from young women like Thunberg. Other scholars have found that some conservative men perceive environmentalism as inherently feminine and thus something to be eschewed (Gelin, 2019). Several studies have examined anti-climate science discourse and uncovered evidence that some conservative men resent critiques of traditional patterns of production and consumption as moral condemnations of a world order established by men like them (Anshelm & Hultman, 2014; Pulé & Hultman, 2019).

Another characteristic that scholars have observed among science deniers is authoritarianism, or a preference for a society that submits to a strong ruler and punishment for those who resist (Azevedo & Jost, 2021; Häkkinen & Akrami, 2014; Hill et al., 2022). Azevedo and Jost (2021) found, for instance, that authoritarian attitudes were highly associated with negative attitudes toward science. Häkkinen & Akrami (2014) found that a preference for hierarchies of social domination was associated with hostility to climate science. Hill et al. (2022) found that authoritarian preferences were positively correlated with hostility to COVID-19 science. These attitudes were proposed as drivers of aversion to taking direction on addressing science-related crises or hearing from people in lower positions of traditional social hierarchies.

A third conservative characteristic often linked to science denial is conspiracism, which includes tendencies to view historical events as the result of collusion among powerful individuals (Azevedo & Jost, 2021; Bar-On & Molas, 2021; Fuchs, 2021; Hornsey et al., 2020; Prasad, 2022; Romer & Jamieson, 2021; Stecula & Pickup, 2021; Uscinski & Olivella, 2017). Fuchs' in-depth research on conspiracy discourse during the

pandemic outbreak found that conspiracism dovetailed with authoritarianism's friend/enemy schemes, as it identified a single villain responsible for the crisis and categorized that villain as an enemy of the people. This emotionally satisfying practice reduced the sense of uncertainty many felt and created a sense of agency: that someone was at fault and that something could be done about it. The above characteristics of conservatism, as outlined in Chapter 1, are typically presented as driving disbelief through willful self-deception, such as motivated reasoning, selective attention, and exposure that precludes counter-attitudinal information, or solution aversion to measures proposed to address a crisis.

There are three reasons why these studies fall short of delivering a comprehensive account of the relationships between conservative political identity and hostility to science. The first is that they omit the perspectives of the people who are hostile to science, which can be ethically and theoretically problematic. According to Bilgrami (2006), theorizing identity without accounting for the perspectives of the subjects in question “puts the theorist in the position of laying claim to ‘a greater understanding of what a subject’s self *really* and *objectively* is” (2006, p. 13) than the subject has. It is essential, especially when drawing unflattering conclusions about another's identity characteristics, to allow individuals to speak for themselves, or at least to observe how they present themselves to others. Indeed, research centering on conservative characteristics as drivers of science denial often implicates characteristics with a negative normative valence. Although misogynist language was prevalent in responses to Thunberg, it is difficult to imagine conservatives agreeing among themselves that misogyny is a characteristic they all share and that it explains why they

won't listen to Thunberg. Nor would one expect to find many conservatives openly professing a desire for autocracy or embracing the pejorative label of conspiracist. We may assume that conservatives have their own accounts for the links between what it means to be conservative and their attitudes toward Fauci and Thunberg, and we should attend to this if for no other reason than to allow the studied population to speak for itself and take their accounts into consideration.

Theoretically, failing to account for conservative understandings of the links between conservative characteristics and hostility to science messaging closes off certain avenues of investigation. One possibility is that characteristics such as anti-egalitarianism are features of conservatism—as noted in the Introduction, PDT does not assume that there is a one-to-one relationship between what people say about themselves and what researchers may discover—but they may do more to explain the forms that selective science hostility takes and less the reasons for the hostility itself. That is, people who are anti-egalitarian are often unaware of their own prejudices, but those prejudices may be visible to others who observe evidence of them in their speech. One would expect this to be the case; if conservatives do tend to be anti-egalitarian, their expressions of resistance to communication would naturally manifest in their discourse as dislike for a young, female activist and so on. Crucially, however, if anti-egalitarianism or other traits merely reflect the culture of those engaged in discourse, rather than the reasons underlying the shared attitudes they are discussing, then failing to look beyond those surface traits may result in overlooking deeper anxieties, values, and motives that drive hostility to science. This oversight, in turn, closes off another

important avenue of inquiry regarding what kind of communication could address those less visible drivers of hostility to science messaging.

Secondly, many studies on identity and science denial focus on individual scientific cases, such as COVID-19 or climate change. Consequently, traits that might explain science denial in one instance may not apply to another. For example, misogyny might play a role in resistance to Thunberg's messaging, but it does not account for resistance to Fauci. Looking for similarities across these cases can be revealing. Investigating the subjective aspects of conservative identity in science-hostile discourse across various cases may reveal more consistent relationships between identity and scientific attitudes. Thirdly, from a pragmatic perspective, analyses identifying immutable and irrational traits as drivers of hostility to science often imply that nothing can be done to enhance receptivity across political divides. This is concerning, considering that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that such groups are too substantial to overlook without consequence. Examining how conservatives perceive the links between their understanding of conservatism and their hostility towards Thunberg and Fauci, especially where those links are similar, may uncover issues that can be addressed or potential areas of common ground to foster productive dialogue. However, as I will elaborate below, doing so will necessitate a shift from developing objective accounts of conservative identity to uncovering subjective accounts of identity within science-hostile discourse.

Objective Vs. Subjective Accounts of Identity

In Chapter 1, I discussed Bilgrami's (2006) definition of political or partisan identity as an assemblage of traits and characteristics that a person perceives

themselves to hold, believes are innate, believes inform their political beliefs, and embraces as positive characteristics. It should be evident that, by this definition, political identity can only be explicated from within, that is, subjectively. For Bilgrami, discussions of identity politics are usually based on either subjective or objective accounts of shared identity, which is a constellation of the traits and characteristics that distinguish a societal group and are reflected in the individual members of that group. In objective accounts of identity, subjects may not be aware of the features of their identities but may betray them through behavior in ways that make them apparent to others, as I have argued that much scholarship around science denial does. For Bilgrami, there is some validity to that approach, as “if the only good explanation of his behavior is that he has those features, and if those features are salient compared to others, then some claim can be made regarding how they constitute his identity” (2006a). For instance, from an objective perspective, a subject may be a racist without being aware of it or even while condemning racism, but that racism may become apparent to others through the subject’s unconscious behaviors and thus, from an objective perspective, can be said to be a facet of the subject’s identity. However, as noted above, there are ethical and theoretical issues with operating solely from the objective perspective of political identity.

For Bilgrami, a more ethical and fruitful approach to studying political identity is to examine it as gleaned from observations of subjective identity. The very idea of objective identity, as somehow divorced from a person’s self-understanding, obscures the rationality of the individual and their personal reasons for doing, saying, valuing, or believing certain things. Identity provides reasons for decisions and actions, and to the

extent that we rely on objective accounts of identity to explain an individual's decisions and actions, we risk missing or misunderstanding the internal commitments involved. In any case, where subjective accounts of identity-holders and objective accounts of identity derived from observation do not align, scholarship cannot be complete without accounting for the subjective perspective.

Certainly, scholars who have studied what conservatives hostile to science say about themselves have not found that conservatives cite anti-egalitarianism, conspiracism, or authoritarianism. Rather, these scholars have discovered that conservatives discuss strongly self-endorsed aspects of their political identity that they believe are threatened by a science-aligned left. For instance, Veldman (2019) found that Christian evangelicals felt their common faith was under threat from the left and formed strategic alliances with the right, adopting a conservative identity and engaging in conservative political projects, including climate science denial. Westermeyer (2021) found that former Tea Party activists joined COVID-19 "reopen activists" in advocating for an end to stay-at-home policies because they believed that COVID-19 restrictions aimed to suppress the Tea Partiers' brand of patriotism rooted in traditional American culture. Anshelm and Hultman (2014) found that academic male climate skeptics described themselves as "marginalized, banned, and oppressed" (2014, p. 84) because this group strongly identified with a traditional notion of masculinity they felt was threatened by environmentalists questioning the masculine industrialist past. In a discourse analysis of far-right media in Sweden, Vowles and Hultman (2021) revealed that discourses hostile to Thunberg also encompassed anti-feminist themes reflecting anxieties regarding the status of men who identified with industrialism.

These accounts, by utilizing conservative self-descriptions, highlight the specific anxieties that fuel hostility toward science. For instance, they enrich anti-feminist narratives by revealing the perceived threat to the conservative preference for patriarchy. Collectively, these accounts portray hostility to science as a tactic in an ongoing populist struggle for cultural dominance in society, rather than merely a set of beliefs driven by disdain for minority perspectives, an affinity for conspiracy theories, or authoritarian motivations. This study builds on existing research that examines how conservatives perceive themselves in relation to science by providing an account of major predications of identity in conservative science-hostile content and analyzing how these predications interact with science hostility to produce particular discursive outcomes. To that end, I pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What traits and characteristics of conservative political identity did conservative media text producers reference when responding to Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci? In what ways were they different? In what ways were they similar?

This question will enhance existing scholarship by presenting a range of traits, rather than focusing on just one, as many studies do. It will also offer an account of the meanings that conservative media attribute to those traits in discussions that are hostile to science. And it will identify the ways in which these practices are similar between these two disparate cases.

RQ2: How did conservative media text producers account for the links between those traits and the attitudes they demonstrated toward Fauci and Thunberg? In what ways were those accounts similar? In what ways did they differ?

Predication: What “We” and “They” Are Like

In PDT, predication is the process of attributing distinguishing traits and characteristics to the members of a political identity group, such that it “endows a subject with qualities, attributes or properties; it affirms its identity” (Åhäll & Borg, 2013, p. 203). While nomination of actors tells an identity group who “we” and “they” *are*, predication clarifies what “we” and “they” *are like*. Additionally, predication aims to produce action and attitudes by “reproducing cognitive associations between the outgroup and negative or threat-connoting cues” (Hart, 2010, p. 65). The outgroup is the diametrical opposite of the ingroup and, therefore, is hostile to all its defining characteristics. Predication in political discourse about current events helps establish connections between the specifics of the context and the threat posed by the Other, validating or legitimizing certain actions, ideas, and emotions in response (Åhäll & Borg, 2013; Hart, 2010).

Predication can be recognized in texts in several ways. The most basic is the use of adjectives and descriptive language that convey the exclusive qualities that give groups their identities. For instance, Peck (2019) described how Fox News personalities constructed a conservative identity as populist and working-class by using adjectives such as “regular,” “blue collar,” and “hard-working” to describe themselves and conservatives as a whole, in contrast to an aspirational, snobbish left. Another indicator of predication in action is the use of *empty signifiers*—words with no fixed meaning that can arbitrate legitimacy depending on which group’s definitions become dominant—such as “patriot,” “tyranny,” and “American.” Empty signifiers that represent the ingroup reveal the qualities and values they believe define and legitimize them, while those that

represent the outgroup reveal what the ingroup is not and what makes the outgroup threatening.

A third indicator of predication is *embodied performance*, in which ingroup members enact what it means to belong to the group, as when wealthy Fox News personalities performed working classness by claiming to eat at Red Lobster and listen to country music (Peck, 2019). Ingroup actors can also express emotions that represent their identity group, such as anger toward immigrants or love for veterans. Finally, a key indicator of ingroup predication is the *predication of the outgroup* as the ingroup's opposite. These four indicators were used to identify predication in the 400 conservative media texts analyzed.

How Conservative Media Predicated Conservative Identity in Discussions of Thunberg and Fauci

Descriptors for conservatives in articles responding to both Fauci and Thunberg reinforced familiar aspects of conservative identity. They were characterized as people of “faith and morality” (Crane, 2019, para. 9) and “free-market” (Richardson, 2019, para. 5) capitalists who valued work (Chadwell, 2019) and who “love family” (Root, 2020, para. 11). In contrast, progressives were labeled as “communist Democrats” (“Weasel Fauci: Do as Your Told, Wear Masks after Vaccination!,” 2020, para. 1) who lived in “radical socialist cities” (Hansen, 2020, para. 9), were described as “lunatic” (Adams, 2019, para. 5) “hypocrites ” (“Hypocrites of 2020’,” 2020), and “elitist” (O’Neill, 2019, para. 6). These ostensibly liberal qualities contrasted sharply with their conservative opposites, depicted as capitalist, rational, honest, and populist. There was a wide array of predications of conservative traits, and they did more than merely describe

conservatives. Rather, I argue that they laid the groundwork for defending the moral legitimacy of conservatives who expressed hostility to Thunberg or Fauci's messaging.

Below, I describe six prominent predications of conservative identity as they appeared in conservative media texts responding to Thunberg and Fauci. I explain what each predication meant in context, I show that most of those characteristics were ascribed to conservatives in both cases, with slight variations in those traits that corresponded to the particularities of each case. In the next section, I demonstrate how those predications served as "building blocks" that combined to construct narratives establishing links between conservative identity and attitudes toward Fauci and Thunberg's science messaging that presented resistance to them as serving the same cause against the same foe.

Courage

Courage, defined as a willingness to take risks for the sake of freedom, was a trait frequently attributed to conservatives in the Fauci case, and to some extent in the Thunberg case. In the Fauci case, Americans, an empty signifier often portrayed in conservative media as those defying Fauci, were not "nor have we ever been, a people led by fear" (Root, 2020, p. 3). Rather, conservatives excelled in "quantifying risk" (Limbaugh, 2020, para. 15) concerning "illness or a tiny risk of death" (Root, 2020, p. 3). They "assessed the low level of risk posed to most people by the coronavirus and chose to live their lives" (Conservative Revival, 2020a, para. 7). Conservative courage was frequently contrasted with leftist "panic." Conservatives ignored "Fauci's campaign of fear and panic" (Conservative Revival, 2020a, para. 5) and the media's promotion of "panic porn" (Lennox, 2020, para. 12). This courage was framed as stemming from

patriotic values of freedom, such that “every lover of liberty and national sovereignty” (Smith, 2020, in Heyes, 2020, para. 14) opposed Fauci’s agenda, which was viewed as a “threat to liberty and freedom” (J. D. Heyes, 2020b, para. 17) for the American people.

In the Thunberg case, conservatives painted their identity group as courageous by arguing that they refused to yield to the fear promoted by Thunberg and her associates. Conservatives would seek to address issues related to the environment, not with “panic, but in well-conceived plans” (Ewert, 2019, para. 4). Thunberg’s message was one of “fear and despair” as opposed to conservative “hope and trust in technological innovation” (Wirtz, 2019, para. 7). In one article, an evangelical writer compared Thunberg to Joan of Arc, whom she conflated with the courage of the faith-reliant right. Thunberg’s “fear is palpable,” but “fear is only useful for fleeing or fighting” (Chadwell, 2019, para. 10) the author wrote, modeling what she presented as a conservative perspective. Joan of Arc, on the other hand, was motivated by “love of her savior, love of her country” and, therefore, “showed very little fear in her short life, and what fear she felt, she controlled” (para. 11). In both cases, the left was described as fearful, as opposed to the courageous right.

Canniness

A second trait that appeared in both data sets and that was particularly important in conspiracist discourse was a keen ability to assess the hidden motives of others, a trait I call “canniness.” Conservatives were sometimes portrayed as wise to the ways of the world and the frailties of human nature, which authorized them to assert certainty about the motives of the outgroup. Fauci was depicted as downplaying HCQ because “human nature recognizes that there’s no glory in pushing HCQ” and because “[t]here

will be no ‘Fauci vaccine’ if HCQ is the answer to the problem” (Fischer, 2020, para. 17). Scientists were “humans with virtues and faults,” including a “thirst for glory” (Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2020, “Fauci Follows” para. 10) that explained Fauci’s eagerness to create a vaccine for COVID-19. Fauci’s distancing from Trump on HVQ was attributed to “too long a tenure in the limelight” which had made him a “political animal” (Dr. John, 2020, para. 13). Thunberg, too, was said to be motivated by “attention-seeking” (Smith, 2020, para. 3) because she was clearly “basking in her rapidly waning 15 minutes of fame” (Huff, 2019d, para. 10). These writers all claimed to possess the ability to discern the “true” reasons for why Thunberg and Fauci were presenting themselves in the public sphere. Many such “true reasons” were inferred in this way, including a desire for political power (Schlichter, 2019), money (Hoft, 2020b), and globalism (Bruce, 2019). Despite the markedly different roles these actors held — one as an activist and the other as a highly regarded scientist — they were both rewritten in the same way to have goals that, at first glance, appeared different, yet were both part of the same project of oppressing the right.

Conservatives were portrayed as unique in their ability to notice subtle clues, including relationships between actors, to discern motives. This appeared in both cases, although it took different forms in response to each communicator. In the Fauci case, conservatives noticed an old, friendly email to Hillary Clinton that made it “so obvious” (Jones, 2020b), at least to them, that Fauci was undermining Trump. Because of this astuteness, “Anyone with even a modicum of intelligence” (Widburg, 2020, para. 13) would disregard Fauci if reviewing his self-contradictions, and “everyone who’s been paying attention” (Huff, 2020a, para. 10) enough to notice that Fauci was “quietly” (para.

8) involved with Bill Gates' global vaccine plan could see Fauci for "the rat he is" (para. 10).

In the Thunberg case, a Tweet attributed to Thunberg was so obviously written by an adult that the author remarked "rolls eyes" (Laila, 2020, para. 8) when quoting it. In another article, an author told his audience to "notice the one-eye sign" made by Thunberg and her mother in news photos (Tap News Wire, 2020, para. 8). The author presumed that no further information would be needed; canny conservatives knew that it was a symbol shared by members of the Illuminati (Wilson, 2020). In the same article, the author claimed that conservatives could see in images of Thunberg found in mass media something everyone else overlooked: facial expressions reflecting "extreme mental anguish" (para. 19) which suggested that Thunberg was a victim of psychological torture. Finally, the author included a link to a video, confidently stating that conservatives who watched it would be able to spot plenty of evidence that Thunberg did not write her own speeches. In these examples and others like them, conservative content producers presented themselves and other conservatives as canny enough to grasp the same leftist authoritarianism that was "really going on" based on subtle hints and common sense. When *Climate Dispatch* asked, "How damn stupid does someone have to be" (Stockman, 2020, para. 8) to not see that Fauci was engineering the plummeting employment rates during lockdowns, the answer was that whoever was that stupid, it was not conservatives.

Defiance

Conservative content producers in both the Thunberg and Fauci cases attributed defiance to their conservative identity, although the manifestation of that defiance

differed in ways specific to each case. In the Fauci case, defiance manifested as rebellion against institutions, as when, in an open letter to Fauci, Root declared that if “you tell Americans not to do something, the odds are we're going to do it, even if we weren't planning to do it in the first place” (2020, para. 7). Most conservative content producers, like Root, conflated Fauci with the government during the pandemic, which “The American public is refusing to obey” (Huff, 2020b, para. 13), also conflating conservatives with the “American public” as conservatives were the only ones rebelling. Fauci was accused of blaming outbreaks on “those rebellious Americans who want to live again” (Thompson, 2020, para. 12) because he “believes that we should ‘do what you’re told’ and surrender our freedom” (TeaParty.org, 2020, para. 17) to which conservatives replied “No, thank you” (2020, para. 18). Freedom could only be retained if the people “stop using” the government which “includes the judicial system,” and “start applying Constitutional law” (Shilhavy, 2020, para. 7), which the current, illegitimate government was not doing.

Conservatives also rebelled against health and media institutions with a performative rupture of norms regarding the use of prejudicial language when referencing the Chinese. On March 2, 2020, the World Health Organization called for people to avoid referring to COVID-19 in China-specific terms, cautioning that such terminology tended to increase hostility toward Asian people (Gstalter, 2020). From that point on, references to the “Wuhan coronavirus” (Arama, 2020b, para. 1), “Wuhan novel coronavirus” (Howley, 2020, para. 18), Kung Flu (Blount, 2020, para. 2), “Chinese virus” (Velisek, 2020, para. 5), and the ostentatiously long “Wuhan coronavirus (COVID-19)” (Huff, 2020a, para. 1) became ubiquitous in conservative media, although mainstream

media complied. Conservatives also performed norm-rupturing anti-Chinese sentiment, often accusing them of dishonesty and declaring, “it’s tough to trust anything China is saying” (Arama, 2020b, para. 2). Limbaugh made his intentionality clear when he declared that “I know I’m gonna catch hell” from “the media” for saying that the “Chinese lie” (2020, p. 2), and performatively embraced the blowback that was sure to follow.

Defiance in the Thunberg case often meant the willingness to rupture social norms against violent or degrading language. This included harsh language directed at a child, as well as some use of sexualized and profane language. When Germans bumper stickers read “Fuck you, Greta,” one outlet applauded, saying, “Turns out adults don’t like being told by a child how to live their lives (Watson, 2019, p. 1). When an Italian soccer coach described Thunberg as “the right age to take a pounding,” another outlet defended him, saying that leftist elites and media were just as guilty for “pimping” Thunberg for “kiddie porn for political pedofiles (al-Blogunov, 2019, para. 5), thereby permitting conservatives pleasure in the “crass joke” (2019, para. 5). Conservative media also performed defiance against norms of civility toward children, calling Thunberg a “hyperemotional, tantrum-prone, attention-seeking teen brat” (Smith, 2020, para. 3), “retarded” (Anglin, 2019, para. 1), and a “stupid idiot” (Kirchoff, 2019b, para. 5). In the backstage spaces created by conservative media, the use of language that directly transgressed against liberal notions of decency was a performance of partisan identity. (How in each case, the

Moral Clarity

Moral clarity, defined as the ability to discern between right and wrong while choosing the moral alternative, was a predication of conservative identity that was

prominently featured in the Thunberg data, and to a lesser extent in the Fauci data. For conservative text producers responding to Thunberg’s messaging, moral clarity often represented the ability to identify immorality, particularly within the familial sphere, as conservative values compelled them to strive to be “morally right” by “standing up for all children” (Crane, 2019, para. 1), including Thunberg. This understanding of moral clarity regarding the sanctity of the child was also articulated on behalf of Nicholas Sandmann, a teen accused by the media of laughing at a Native American elder during a protest, prompting “leftists” to denounce the boys, “even calling for their *deaths*” (Crane, 2019, para. 1). This proved that the left and their associated media had “absolutely no regard for human life – in this case, *children’s lives*” (Crane, 2019, para. 4). Such indignation, especially when heightened by the use of italics, illustrated the right’s reverence for children and moral shock over the leftist breach of that value. Claims of moral clarity were amplified to the extent that conservatives expressed moral outrage at the exploitation or abuse of a child. Children learning about climate change were “being psychologically destroyed” (Tap News Wire, 2020, para. 20) by adults “who have been willing to terrorize innocent children” (Hendrickson, 2019, para. 18) and “have injected dread into the youth” (O’Neill, 2019, para. 5), which the conservative moral framework identified as “unforgivable” (Schlichter, 2019, para. 8). In the Fauci case, moral clarity was evidenced less frequently, but appeared in the form of recognizing that church was more important than riots or gay sex, or recognizing that Fauci was an immoral agent, which I will discuss further in the next chapter. In both cases, moral clarity was part of a conservative response that militated against the credibility of the speakers.

Frankness

A predication frequently found in discussions about Thunberg was frankness, or blunt honesty, describing conservatives as unapologetically forthright and “not afraid to tell the truth” (Homewood, 2019, para. 1). This predication bore some resemblance to the previously described trait of defiance. However, performances of defiance centered on the act of norm rupture, while performances of frankness emphasized the content of the text. A common expression of frankness was to accuse the left of intolerance, suggesting that “anyone who criticizes” specific ideas or people is “demonized” (Huff, 2019d, para. 12), then, in the same article, openly criticizing that idea or person. An article linking Thunberg to transgenderism announced that accepting transgender therapy was “politically correct” (Huff, 2019b, para. 6) before denouncing it as “pharmaceutical ‘hate’ against children” (para. 10). Liberals were accused of “silencing their opposition” (Graham, 2020, para. 6) by shaming “climate deniers” (para. 1) in an article that also called the Paris Accords an “eco-socialist parade” (para. 1).

Such articles highlighted certain speech as transgressive before conspicuously performing that speech, establishing bold, unapologetic discourse as part of conservative identity. These authors also often declared a willingness to accept backlash for their outspokenness. A common declaration was that there was a “liberal commandment” (Arama, 2020a, para. 2) that Thunberg “cannot be criticized” (para. 1) and that anyone who does “make jokes or dare to criticize” is “castigated and sacrificed on the altar of media shaming” (Wirtz, 2019, para. 13) and branded an “intolerant hater” (Crane, 2019, para. 7) or “cruel child hater” (Chumley, 2020, para. 9). Those who did criticize Thunberg or made similarly exceptionable speech were praised as

“outspoken and hilarious” (Kirchoff, 2019b, para. 1) or publicly supported on social media (Hadfield, 2019), establishing bluntness as something the right valued in themselves and others.

Rationality

Predications of conservative identity as rational appeared widely in both data sets, but the interpretation of rationality varied slightly between them. In the Fauci data, conservatives portrayed rationality as the ability to think for themselves without falling victim to emotionalism or panic. Conservative content producers expressed a desire for “hard facts” (Fisher, 2020, para. 3) because “we’re smart enough to take into consideration” (Heyes, 2020b, para. 19) all the data, to “read the available information from all sources and make the best decision” (Lennox, 2020, para. 14). Conservatives also tended to depict themselves as cool-headed, as “calm and peaceful” at public rallies (Clark, 2020, para. 1), “good citizen[s]” (Jones, 2020a, para. 29) who were “willing to sacrifice, when necessary” (para. 34) to comply with “moderate and reasonable” (Cohen, 2020, para. 3) pandemic measures. This conservative sagacity was reinforced by contrast with the left, which fell prey to Fauci’s “campaign of fear and panic” (Conservative Revival, 2020b, para. 5) that was “based not on science but primal fear” (Fumento, 2020, para. 1). Conservative authors frequently pinned the blame for “panic-mongering” (P., 2020, para. 3) on “hard left-dominated” (Bostom, 2020, in Hoft, 2020a, para. 14) media or the “Panicker-in-Chief” (Kilgore, 2020, in Widburg, 2020, para. 3) Fauci, but since conservatives were “far less terrified of the virus than Democrats” (World Tribune, 2020, para. 10), they remained unaffected. In both cases,

conservative text producers represented conservatives as “thinking, rational people” (J. D. Heyes, 2020a, para. 3) able to separate their reason from emotion.

Emotionalism was also used to depict the left as irrational in the Thunberg data. Thunberg herself was routinely dismissed for irrationality. She was painted as “an emotional child” (Wirtz, 2019, para. 3), a “hysterical” (Tap News Wire, 2020, “Bill Gates,” para. 13) teen who had been “steeped in fantasy and delusion” (Trejo, 2019, para. 7), whose rhetoric was “irrational, unrealistic, bratty, and demanding” (Johnson, 2020, para. 3) and reduced to “emotion and indignation, histrionics and fantasy” (Harsanyi, 2019, para. 3). Some authors claimed that her susceptibility to such irrational emotionalism was due to her disabilities, as “Greta suffers from autism/Asperger's and no doubt has to cope with the social rough spots associated with being on the spectrum” (Chadwell, 2019, para. 9) and that “a child with depression” (Clark, 2020, para. 3) was prey to parents who told her that the world would soon end.

Conservatives were not only more rational than Thunberg but were more rational than the entire body of people who took Thunberg seriously, according to conservative content creators. Thunberg was calling indifference to climate change insane, one outlet claimed, but “what’s insane is the specter of world leaders and media outlets venerating a vulnerable 16-year-old girl” (Richardson, 2019, para. 4). Mike Adams agreed with his waseevidentce that, “Yes, the panic makes no sense, but the whole point of their agenda is to completely bypass logic and reason, appealing purely to emotions” (2019 para. 2), in an article that ran in several of his many outlets. Environmental activists wanted governmental input without any facts “to support their emotional rhetoric”

(Stirling, 2019, para. 10), but conservatives were too rational to allow the “emotions of fanatical teens” (Schlichter, 2019, para. 7) to guide policy.

In the Thunberg data set, conservative rationality was often presented as the ability to recognize that climate science was patently absurd. This rationality was frequently contrasted with the irrationality of Thunberg and others who shared her concerns. For instance, Thunberg was “hysterical” about what “we all know is simple weather” (Brown, 2020, para. 16), and her “anxiety and desperation” were the fault of people other than conservatives who were “adults who act in accord with the facts” (Agresti, 2019, para. 49). Conservatives called climate change a “total hoax” (Tap News Wire, 2020, para. 30), “climate tripe” (Crane, 2019, para. 2), “globaloney” (Schlichter, 2019, para. 1), and a “weird...form of mass hysteria” (Delingpole, 2019, para. 11), usually without making any attempt to refute that science. This implied that the science was too patently ridiculous to merit an argument, but only conservatives could see it.

These six examples of conservative media predications of identity, including some samples of their variants, typify the discursive “units” of texts that interpret conservative identity relative to the particularities of contests involving politically relevant science. These findings lay the groundwork for the following discussion, in which I draw on larger patterns found within conservative media texts to demonstrate how these identity dimensions function in selective science hostility discourse.

How Conservative Media Accounted for Links Between Identity Traits and Hostility to Science

The key function of predications of identity, such as those exemplified above, I argue, was to establish discourses of moral legitimacy for taking actions that could be considered dishonorable. Here, I discuss how conservative text producers employed the six predications described above to construct plausible narratives tailored to each case, yet shared a common goal of defending the morality of refusing to cooperate with or support policies endorsed by science advocates. I also argue that an important aspect of predication-based defenses of moral legitimacy was that they allowed conservatives to avoid engaging with science in most texts.

In this section, I describe a technique that appeared in the data in which multiple predications were combined to build perspectives that conservatives could discursively “occupy” and perform. These perspectives provided a sense-making framework that not only justified the morality of conservatives' actions but also made those actions seem morally imperative. The first perspective I discuss is that of the “principled dissident,” which appeared in the Fauci data. I begin by providing an overview of the unique moral legitimacy problems associated with resistance to Fauci’s messaging. I then show how predications of canniness, defiance, and courage were combined with patriotism, another longstanding predication of conservative identity, to present a way of understanding conservative resistance to Fauci’s messaging as a defense of fundamental American identity from the left. After that, I discuss the moral imperative at the core of Thunberg’s messaging before describing how predications of moral clarity, rationality, and frankness were combined into a perspective of the “responsible parent,”

which made it possible to interpret conservative hostility to Thunberg's messaging as logical and morally imperative. Finally, I discuss the strategy of using predication-based science-hostile discourses to enable conservative text producers to present themselves as moral and logical without having to assess the merits of the disputed science.

The Perspective of the Principled Dissident

The previous chapter established that conservative media figures interpreted climate and COVID-19 science advocates as hostile participants in a political contest between a conservative People and a leftist Other. PDT holds that such contests are based on which of the two halves of society is justified in claiming the mantle of the nation's more virtuous and, therefore, legitimate People. As such, hostility and resistance to Fauci's science messaging and recommendations during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, to the extent that it appeared politically rather than scientifically motivated, risked the claim to virtue upon which the conservative project to represent the moral core of America relied. Therefore, addressing the problem of moral legitimacy was paramount, not only to defend the right from critique but also to shore up the convictions of the people thus confronted.

By arguing that Fauci was operating in bad faith and that it was the duty of conservatives to resist, conservatives developed a discourse that could explain their hostility to science as something other than politically motivated reasoning. When Fauci's recommendations conflicted with Trump's preferences and when Fauci disputed Trump's beliefs or statements about the disease and its potential treatments, conservatives often accused Fauci of doing so to undermine Trump and, by extension, the right. By grouping predications of conservatives as canny, rational, courageous, and

defiant while linking Fauci to a left bent on tyranny, conservative media constructed the perspective of a patriotic' principled dissident.” From this discursive position, conservatives could explain their noncompliance as the fulfillment of a patriotic, and therefore moral, duty to protect their country from hostile internal forces by refusing to comply with them.

Why Only We Can See that America is Threatened by Science. Conservatives presented Fauci as helping the left seize power non-democratically, using the predication of canniness to explain how they alone could perceive his true goals. This was employed to demonstrate how conservatives knew that Fauci’s refusal to endorse the use of HCQ was politically motivated, and, therefore, that HCQ was likely a good treatment. For instance, a Townhall writer argued that HCQ was a promising therapy but that “Democrats have lined up alongside their pals in the media to demonize the drug and any medical professional who dares to suggest it might...prove beneficial. They've seen this drug as a political weapon to injure Donald Trump and anyone who supports him” (in McDonald, 2020, para. 6). Similarly, one writer alleged that Fauci’s refusal to endorse HCQ was not due to hesitation over an unproven drug. “More likely, it’s Dr. Fauci’s connection to Bill Gates that is pushing the NIH to make this highly-suspect recommendation against hydroxychloroquine” (Diserio, 2020, para. 12), the writer asserted.

The author, with the words “more likely,” presented her own reasoning as sufficient to identify Fauci’s true motives, which were to help Gates make millions on a vaccine while inflicting the “maximum political damage” against Trump’s odds in November by supporting the “dangerous Trump’ narrative” (Diserio, 2020a, para. 3).

The author expected the audience to likewise accept this reasoning; if corrupt motives were plausible, because of their collective understanding of what the Other was “like,” the corrupt motives were the more credible explanation for Fauci’s decisions than professional concern. However, the author fully expected, and expected that her audience would also expect, this observation to escape all but the right.

The ability to discern true motives was usually predicated on a content creator’s performance of that ability, along with the assumption that this performance would be legible to the audience. However, the social nature of the right’s collective ability to discern true motives was occasionally explicitly identified, as seen in an article responding to a Fauci appeal to comply with travel guidelines over the holidays. *Teaparty.org* identified this appeal as deriving not from a concern about the spread of the virus. Rather, Fauci had “exposed what the leftist medical and scientific community” truly wanted, and that was “unflinching obedience to their authority” (TeaParty.org, 2020, para. 1). However, the outlet asserted, “Americans can think for themselves and can see the blatant tyranny that is being masked as ‘public health safety’ and ‘science’” (para. 11). By “Americans,” the author referred only to a subset of Americans, i.e., that subset that could see this tyranny for what it was, which did not include the left.

Another author pointed to the right’s collective perspicacity in response to a Fauci “suggestion” to add eye protection to their self-protective measures in public, writing that “social media responses suggest that the ‘suggestion’ is more proof that Fauci’s goal to continue generating pandemic panic” (Eastman, 2020, para. 6). The article included social media excerpts from conservatives claiming to be able to tell that the panic was only to last long enough to defeat Trump in November, and that this was apparent to

conservatives because Fauci himself was not wearing eye protection. In the writer's presentation of reality, conservatives could piece together small clues and combine them with their larger understanding of the true nature of the Other so that they could bring into focus and see what the left could not.

As noted previously, not all the motives conservatives ascribed to Fauci were political; other motives included fame, glory, and money. However, stories identifying Fauci as a "deep state doctor" claimed to show that Fauci was either part of the deep state or colluding with a deep state entity aimed at marginalizing the true American people, including the media, scientists, globalists, bureaucrats, agencies, elected Democrats, or any combination thereof. Because the "deep state toolbag" (Huff, 2020a, para. 2) Fauci "stands to make millions" (para. 11) from a vaccine, "we know" (para. 2) that Fauci works for the tyrannical Bill Gates and "everyone who's paying attention" (para. 11) could see that he was colluding with Gates and the pharmaceutical industry to enrich himself. Because Fauci appeared on a magazine cover, another writer suggested that "one could believe Fauci is enjoying his notoriety, with attention lavished on him largely because he is a foil to President Trump" (Lennox, 2020, para. 4), "one" being the conservative who could perceive that Fauci was positioning himself as a foil to Trump to appease the leftist, anti-Trump media and prolong his moment in the spotlight. Regardless of Fauci's motives or which leftist entity he was said to abet, conservative text producers portrayed the right as the only Americans astute enough to avoid being hoodwinked. The assertion of this unique characteristic, the ability to discern the truth about the motives of public figures based on an understanding of human nature, was a

necessary but not sufficient element to explain why the right, and only the right, were aware that Fauci represented a danger to Americans.

Why Only We Can Determine that COVID-19 was Overrated. Just because a government or anyone else uses a pandemic to seize or consolidate power or pursue private ends does not mean the pandemic itself is harmless. Therefore, the refusal to support pandemic control measures was still suspect as morally and patriotically unsound unless the right could believe that the risks of cooperating were higher than the public knew, *and* the risks of contracting the virus were lower than the public knew. Conservative text producers used the predication of rationality to explain that conservatives could remain calm in the face of mass panic, calculate the true risk that all Americans faced, and determine that the pandemic was not dangerous enough to justify compliance with reductions to personal freedom.

Many outlets, some using scientific-sounding language, argued that COVID-19's infection rate was no worse than that of the flu. In an article titled "Fauci is a Deep State Fraud," noted conservative intellectual Anthony Codevilla, although not a medical expert, claimed to use a layman's skill to determine that COVID-19 was "milder than most flu strains" for all but the ill and elderly (2020, para. 8). "I knew for sure that Anthony Fauci is a fraud after listening to him for about 10 seconds, as anyone who listens carefully would have known as well," the writer claimed (para. 9). At a press conference, a reporter asked Fauci if the Chinese were telling the whole truth about the virus, and Fauci carefully replied that the Chinese had turned over the virus's gene sequence. Codevilla interpreted this to mean that Fauci was aware that the Chinese had lied about other things and, in this way, had planted "a dagger between Trump's

shoulder blades and help his party—the Democrats and the deep state—extort the American people’s compliance to their agendas” (para. 4). Fauci also used fear to terrify Americans, Codevilla claimed, but the West had learned by experience that COVID-19 was “milder than most flu strains for just about everyone” (para. 9), except the elderly and compromised. In Codevilla’s telling, rational observers of Fauci and the pattern of the virus could resist fear and calculate the true mildness of the illness by watching and listening carefully. Since the left did not see Fauci as a fraud, the only rational watchers and listeners were on the right.

Other text producers presented Fauci’s record as evidence that rational people would distrust him. A common discourse of this type was that Fauci had been wrong or had reversed himself too many times to be credible. In one such “flip-flop” story, a writer for *The Hayride* claimed that “we reported on March 30 that the models predicted 1-2 million cases in the U.S. and 100,000 to 200,000 American deaths. Since then, projections have been amended to the tune of just over 60,000 deaths” (Howerton, 2020, para. 5). Because Fauci had promoted “grossly inaccurate” models, the author endorsed GOP elite Ron Paul’s accusation that ““their plan”” was to gain ““total control’ over everyone’s lives” (para. 4) and his insistence that ““the people have to fire [Fauci]’ by exposing him as ‘a fraud’” (para. 2). That is, it was up to the conservative “people” to reveal the truth that only they were rational enough to assess to foil the scheme that only they could recognize. In another case, an *American Greatness* article titled “Fauci’s Flip Flops” (Papazian, 2020) listed Fauci’s seemingly self-contradictory statements on masking, social distancing, HCQ, surface contamination, the likelihood of a “second wave,” antibodies, and vaccines. The writer then praised “Americans” who had

observed these inconsistencies and were questioning Fauci's authority, even to the extent of violating local health policies. These Americans were comprised of conservatives who were justified in their resistance by their unique perspicacity. In the above examples, "proof" was given that Fauci was unreliable, and conservatives were depicted as rational because they were the only ones who could see it.

Why (Real) Patriots Are Compelled to Resist. Once it was established that conservatives were canny enough to see that the left was trying to use the pandemic to dominate the nation's true citizens and rational enough to resist mindless panic over an overstated risk, it followed that not only was resistance justified but also mandated for those who took it upon themselves to defend their country. In articles written from the perspective of the principled dissident, conservative media portrayed conservatives as patriotic and, therefore, duty-bound to resist. They also predicated conservatives as courageous for doing so, making resistance appear to be an act of patriotic virtue. *American Greatness*, for instance, lauded conservatives for "taking to the streets" to end government overreach related to COVID-19 and called business owners "intrepid" for "defying lockdown orders—even at the risk of license suspension or jail" (Papazian, 2020, para. 28). The courage of the protesters and the defiance of the business owners were portrayed as manifestations of patriotism.

Many articles in the Fauci data portray resistance as the contemporary manifestation of a long-standing tradition of patriotic rebelliousness that began with the nation's founders. These discourses sometimes leaned heavily on the mythology of the Revolutionary War. One writer likened Fauci to "the king of England" who wanted to "add a few cents to of tax to our tea" and got a war for his trouble, and threatened Fauci

with the same (Root, 2020, para. 8). Root thus equated gathering for the holidays with the defiance and daring of those who destroyed British tea at the risk of retaliatory violence. Conservative content creators often employed language associated with America's founding documents to cast Fauci in the role of the colonizer determined to subjugate its subjects.

One such term was “tyranny,” a term that, along with its variants, is often associated with the Revolutionary War. Fauci was a “liar and a tyrant” (Adams, 2020, para. 15) and a “little medical tyrant” (TeaParty.org, 2020, para. 1) attempting to rule Americans' lives in a non-democratic manner. The patriotic nature of conservatives endowed them with the ability—and the responsibility—to recognize Fauci as the agent of modern-day would-be oppressors. Consequently, Americans resisted Fauci's orders because “we are a free people and that is tyranny” (TeaParty.org, 2020, para. 13). “Fauci and other tyrants” (Slavo, 2020, p. 1) were pushing fear, and as “long as the sheep obey and don the ritualistic shame muzzle upon command, this will continue,” one writer claimed, implying that the contemporary manifestation of the original patriots' fortitude was to flout masking rules. Moreover, the authoritarian language of vaccines as a “final solution” should raise alarm bells for every patriot opposed to tyranny on the horizon (Miguel, 2020, para. 20). Casting resistance to public health efforts as part of the American tradition of patriotic dissidence in this way increased the honorability of resistance while burnishing the patriotic credentials of the right.

Characterizing conservatives as possessing the canniness to recognize the political weaponization of science, the rationality to comprehend that resistance to this science might not be as costly as scientists suggested, and the courage to fulfill the

patriotic duty of protecting the nation from tyranny, offered a viewpoint from which “principled dissidence” in response to Fauci’s messaging and recommendations could convincingly appear not only justifiable but commendable.

The Perspective of the Responsible Parent

Conservative content creators adopted a similar strategy to rejecting Thunberg’s messaging, utilizing a different set of premises. Conservative media argued that only conservatives were rational enough to recognize Thunberg’s climate concerns as unworthy of consideration. They also claimed that conservatives alone had the moral clarity to see that ecology-minded leftists were exploiting Thunberg’s youth and mental irregularities to manipulate her into believing those absurdities to the extent that she was terrified enough to disseminate their tyrannically motivated propaganda. Part of what provided conservatives with the moral clarity to feel horror at Thunberg’s “abuse,” according to conservative text producers, was their appreciation of family values concerning the role and treatment of children, which aligned with conservative self-perceptions as custodians of culturally fundamentalist family structures. Ultimately, conservative honesty and frankness, combined with the duty of care that moral individuals should feel in the face of such grotesque abuse, dictated that conservatives, responding from the perspective of responsible parents, would naturally and honorably speak out against Thunberg’s presence in the public sphere.

Thunberg’s message was primarily moral. She did not number among the scientists whose work she advocated, as Fauci did, and thus, she lacked his full measure of scientific credibility. She did not take upon herself the task of interpreting scientific findings for a public who did not understand what was happening to the

climate. Rather, she amplified and summarized readily available science. What made her messaging politically potent was a compelling moral claim that world governments were offloading their most pressing crisis onto her generation of children. The claim was straightforward and unassailable if certain premises were accepted, including that climate scientists were correct and that contemporary efforts to avert the forewarned crisis were insufficient due to human inaction. However, policies consistent with climate action were incompatible with conservative political aims. As such, conservatives found themselves in the position of having to rebut a convincing moral demand. Their situation was made doubly morally fraught in that the demand came from a child, and rebutting the words of a child required restraint not accorded to most actors in the rough and tumble public sphere. Republicans had also declared themselves the party of “family values” since the early 1990s; appearing to attack a child over differences in political beliefs threatened to undermine one of the key elements of the conservative “brand.” Failure to exercise restraint would threaten the avowal of moral probity at the heart of the conservative claim to embody the true American rightfully.

Why We Don't Worry that Thunberg is Right. Only a handful of texts responding to Thunberg made any attempt to challenge climate science on its merits; most presented climate science as long since debunked or obviously absurd to the rational eye. This may be because the partisan divide regarding climate science is more than 20 years old, and the notion that climate science is not a concern has achieved the status of conventional wisdom on the right. This possibility is supported by statements like *News Target's* critique of Thunberg's message that “we're never told what this crisis actually is, other than some vague references to planetary warming and other such long

disproven nonsense” (Huff, 2019c, para. 8). Similar statements included “No matter how many times climate change is exposed as a total hoax, there’s still a contingency of the populace that believes it to be the gospel truth (Holt, 2020, para. 4) and “It’s a new decade, so it’s time for a new round of panic about the weather killing us all” (Traicher, 2020, para. 1). In this kind of discourse, the dismissal of climate science is often represented as a performance of conservative rationality.

That performance of rationality often involved showing contempt for anyone who took Thunberg’s concerns seriously. *The Horn News*, in one instance, reacted to Thunberg’s statement that the earth was on the verge of a mass extinction event with “people who can believe that will believe anything” (Holmes, 2019, para. 30). Another writer remarked that “Thunberg believes the world is burning, slowly crisping itself into an over-eager filmmaker’s version of hell. Let that sink in for a second” (Kirchoff, 2019a, para. 3), inviting other conservatives to pause and marvel at the irrationality of not only Thunberg but also anyone who shared her concerns. A third writer quoted a tweet that dismissed people who believe in climate science by saying, ““These people are why commercials have *do not try this at home* disclaimers and airlines have to show everyone how to put on a seatbelt”” (Laila, 2020, para. 9), which, the writer claimed, “sums it up perfectly” (2020, para. 9). Presented as these passages were without additional argumentation, they suggested that rational conservatives could see that climate science was so ludicrous that ridiculing Thunberg’s concerns was morally acceptable.

As in Kirschoff’s passage above describing Thunberg’s idea of the world as a “filmmaker’s version of hell,” conservative media often heightened the apparent

irrationality of Thunberg's claims by distorting or exaggerating them. The greater the irrationality on display, the more the left was simultaneously portrayed as hysterical or otherwise irrational for believing any of it. Such overstatements of Thunberg's concerns included calling it "vacuous fire and brimstone" (Harsanyi, 2019, para. 3), consisting of "a radical view that the world faces immediate extinction" (Dowling, 2019, para. 1), in which "half a degree of warming over a century will have us all choking to death in the streets" (Chadwell, 2019, para. 4) because of "cattle farts and SUVs" (J. Heyes, 2020, para. 3). In one such instance, *Breitbart's* James Delingpole, a frequent critic of Thunberg, characterized her message as calling for "dismantling Western Industrial Civilisation" (2019, para. 10) to "stop all the baby polar bears melting" (2019, para. 5). Delingpole's characterization of Thunberg's message in crossing the ocean on a yacht was, of course, deeply distorted. However, painting her message in preposterous terms, laughable to a non-gullible person—not to be found among Thunberg's supporters—created space for conservatives to view their dismissal of her mission as stemming from their inherent rationality, which provided moral cover for rejecting Thunberg's concerns.

Fanaticism: How the Entire Left Can Be Irrational. Accusing half of society of irrationality in accepting Thunberg's concerns as legitimate is a significant claim. One way conservative media addressed the discursive challenge of making that claim was by accusing the left of something that had caused widespread irrationality before—that of fanatical religion, as described in the previous section. Climate science was frequently portrayed as a non-intellectual leftist cult, with Thunberg presented as an ersatz saint or prophet.

The predication of the left as prey to the absurd, which conversely constituted the right as immune to the absurd, included accusations that the left constituted a “cult” that treated science as a “false religion (Klinghoffer, 2020, para. 6) and were guilty of “quasi hysterical behaviour” that was typical of apocalyptic doomsday cults” (Richardson, 2019, para. 17). Leftists were said to “worship” (Huff, 2019d) Thunberg, treating her as a “saint” (Arama, 2020a; Voshell, 2019), “messiah” (Delingpole, 2019; O’Neill, 2019), “false idol” (Trejo, 2019, para. 12), and “prophet” (Donaldson, 2020; Ewert, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 2019). This portrayal of the left reinforced the spiritual bona fides of the right, presenting theirs as a rational spirituality and further buttressing their defense against charges of immorality for rejecting Thunberg’s pleas for justice.

According to *American Thinker*, “Thunberg -- for now at least -- has become the secular equivalent of Joan of Arc, whose portraits and statues are depicted with a similar expression denoting transcendent holiness” (Voshell, 2019, para. 2). The article implied that climate science represented the same kind of abstract apocalypse embraced by fanatics throughout history:

That is the way it always is for religionists of every stripe who desert the human race for the sake of an abstract future that may never materialize. After all, that is the way it has been for fundamentalists who set a date for the return of Christ only to find the Son of Man does not comply with their speculative and abstract end time predictions. That is the way it is with secular religionists who also prophesy end apocalypse now or in twelve years’ time. (2019, para. 9)

While Christian faith as a value was frequently attributed to the right in the data (Chadwell, 2019; Glass, 2019; Root, 2020), climate science was described as a

different kind of religion: a doomsday sect given to unseemly fanaticism. This was not the sensible faith that conservatives embrace, but rather superstition or derangement.

The distinction between faith and fanaticism is apparent in a *Spiked Online* article entitled “The Cult of Greta Thunberg,” in which the author wrote, “There is something chilling and positively pre-modern about Ms. Thunberg. One can imagine her in a sparse wooden church in the Plymouth Colony in the 1600s warning parishioners of the hellfire that will rain upon them if they fail to give up their witches” (O’Neill, 2019, para. 1). This account conjures up images of the unreasoning witch-trying churches of popular imagination, distinct from the modern church that conservative media describe as places of worship and fellowship. A *Blaze Media* article identified the “climate cult” of which Thunberg was an involuntary member as the product of mental illness, arguing that “the girl who just admitted she hardly spent any time talking to people before this year of pagan jubilee was programmed by her parents to live in such fear of a climate Armageddon that one neurosis was simply traded for another... Because that’s what cult members do” (Deace, 2019, para. 1). The mental disarray of progressives, in this article, led to “inglorious groupthink” (2019, para. 9), a fate unlikely to befall the rational right. By predicating the left as in thrall to an irrational, cult-like quasi-religion and juxtaposing them against the rational right, whose faith is sensible and moderate, conservative content producers strengthened the plausibility of their moral justification for rejecting Thunberg’s message.

Why Only We Can See the Harm to the Child. The belief that Thunberg’s concerns were irrational could plausibly justify ignoring her. Speaking out against her was another matter, especially given her youth. One of the most prominent strategies conservative

authors employed to meet this challenge was to predicate conservative identity as morally clear-sighted enough to view Thunberg's concerns as stemming from the abusive machinations of her parents or other political entities. This provided conservative media a way to dismiss Thunberg's moral appeal while maintaining a stance of moral rectitude and authority on family values. Thunberg's alleged victimization was the subject of numerous headlines, including "Greta Thunberg isn't a hero. She's a victim of the leftist progressive cult" (Deace, 2019), "Eco-hysteria girl "Greta" a victim of extreme psychological terrorism by radical left-wing handlers... it's time to #RescueGreta" (Adams, 2019), "Greta's handlers: political pedophiles" (al-Blogunov, 2019), "The left's abusive use of Greta Thunberg" (Erickson, 2019), and "Free Greta Thunberg from her cruel political exploitation by leftists" (Schlichter, 2019). These headlines established the pervasive theme that conservatives revered the rights of the child. This quality was presented as unique to conservatives, who cared for Thunberg more than the adults around her, including her own parents. Greta's life was "precious" and mattered "perhaps more to us" (Schlichter, 2019, para. 14) than to the "leftists" (Morefield, 2019, para. 10) who were "perfectly content to take advantage of Thunberg, and her disability, for their own end" (Morefield, 2019, para. 10). While the left would leave Thunberg "exploited and then deserted" (Voshell, 2019, para. 3), the right would "hope and pray she will grow and mature" (2020, para. 12).

The narrative of most of these articles was that Thunberg was being exploited and abused by leftist adults. "There's no excuse, none, for this shameless and despicable exploitation of a vulnerable girl. What kind of person would do that to a child? The kind that considers other people collateral damage in their quest for a leftist

utopia” (Schlichter, 2019, para. 2), one author wrote. Another exclaimed that “It’s child abuse, through and through” (Huff, 2019a, para. 2), while another condemned the adults in Thunberg’s life for “mentally abusing her with their lies claiming humankind’s modern technology is destroying the planet” (J. Heyes, 2020, para. 4). This quality was presented as unique to conservatives, such that Greta’s life was “precious” and mattered “perhaps more to us” (Schlichter, 2019, para. 14) than to the “leftists” (Morefield, 2019, para. 10) adults who were “perfectly content to take advantage of Thunberg, and her disability, for their own end” (Morefield, 2019, para. 10). While the left would leave Thunberg “exploited and then deserted” (Voshell, 2019, para. 3), the right would “hope and pray she will grow and mature” (para. 12).

The moral horror surrounding Thunberg’s “abuse,” attributed to the right’s perceived moral clarity, took on a distinctly parental tone when conservative media forwarded authoritative arguments regarding what Thunberg’s parents *should* be doing and the role that Thunberg, as a child, ought to have in the world. Some writers suggested that childhood should be a time free from worry, as one author asserted that “adults around [Thunberg] have scared the hell out of her and denied her an enjoyable childhood substituting, instead, visions of impending doom” (Erickson, 2019, para. 2). Another writer characterized the left as failing in what conservatives deemed a parental duty to protect children from adult burdens. “I have great sympathy for her,” (Harsanyi, 2019, para. 6) he wrote. “Rather than helping Greta overcome this irrational dread, her parents sacrificed her childhood to Gaia” (2019, para. 13), he concluded. This statement revealed parental concern and reinforced the perception of science as an irrational, false religion, compounding the harm done to Thunberg. Another approach to adopting

a parental perspective was to address Thunberg directly, as would an adult in a position of authority would guide a child. One writer did this while also performing a critique of her parents, stating, “Dear Greta Thunberg, I hate the UN more than you could imagine, but they didn’t steal your dreams or childhood — your parents did. They should be jailed for the sickening child abuse they put you through. They’ve scared you into an extremist” (Hadfield, 2019, para. 3). In this manner, the writer positioned himself as qualified to assume a superior educational role over her unqualified, irresponsible parents.

Some writers directly referenced their own experiences as parents, contrasting their responsible choices with the less responsible ones of Thunberg’s parents and the left. Columnist Joel Glass, for example, shared insights in an article about a conversation he had with his 6-year-old daughter regarding Thunberg’s UN speech. The child was unfamiliar with Thunberg because “We don’t discuss climate issues at our house with the children. Too many other important things to do. Such as work on feeding the dog, learning to tell time, tie shoes, do the math, study the bible and animal books” (2019, paras. 1–2). According to Glass, the child wondered if Thunberg was upset because she had fallen on her bicycle, which Glass explained was due to their daily “bike hike” (para. 7). When told that Thunberg thought nature was falling apart, the child replied that the forest looked “just the same as always” (para. 9), to which Glass agreed. Throughout the article, Glass modeled conservative parenthood as bible-focused, family-oriented, wholesomely rural, and dedicated to the traditional education of children, contrasting it with the irrational Thunberg family, whose parental choices

were morally flawed. This, too, strengthened the conservative claim to represent the appropriate moral core of the American identity.

Why We Are Compelled to Criticize Thunberg's Celebrity. Conservative media anticipated the threat to their moral legitimacy that hostility toward Thunberg or her message would create, as evidenced by article titles such as “Should the Right Fight Back Against Greta Thunberg?” (Morefield, 2019b) and “By All Means, Let's Criticize Greta Thunberg” (Wirtz, 2019). Within those articles and others like them, conservative text producers presented criticism of Thunberg or her message as an expression of conservative frankness in the face of weaponized political correctness. The white nationalist outlet *VDare*, for instance, noted that “Greta's rise to international fame has resulted in her and her allies criticizing those who draw attention to her peculiar behavior and looks, branding them ‘haters’” (Welton, 2019, para. 2), portraying critics of the right as slanderous. Rather than being guilty of “hating” Thunberg, conservative text producers argued that their objections to Thunberg's project stemmed from conservative forthrightness about moral truths that they were uniquely equipped to recognize.

In a *Louder with Crowder* article praising British celebrity Jeremy Clarkson for calling Thunberg a “stupid idiot,” the author, Courtney Kirchoff, used first-person language throughout, modeling her admiration for Clarkson's frankness and her own practice of caustic bluntness toward Thunberg. “Liquify this interview and mainline it into my carotid artery” (Kirchoff, 2019b, para. 1), the article began. Kirchoff approvingly described Clarkson in terms of his outspokenness, writing, “If you're at all familiar with Clarkson, you'll know the man has no effs to spare. He says whatever thought pops into

his mind with zero apologies given, and probably gets a chuckle out of people getting triggered. Let's just say, Clarkson's vestige has a place on my spirit animal totem” (2019b, para. 1). Kirchoff admired Clarkson for his unwillingness to conform to norms of speech regarding children and applauded his refusal to defend himself in moral terms.

Text producers who valorized conservative frankness sometimes did so from a parental perspective. Trump, for instance, was described in parental terms after he drew fire for a tweet in which he recommended that Thunberg learn anger management and “chill.” In defense of Trump, the *Independent Women’s Forum* wrote, “C’mon, it sounds like pretty good Dad-like advice for Greta, whose hot, almost palpable anger when she spoke before the United Nations was truly chilling” (Hays, 2019, para. 11). The writer argued that Trump “was behaving as an adult; this was right-on, avuncular advice. It was constructive criticism. Oh, and it was an adult not kowtowing to a kid. Refreshing” (para. 14). The writer occupied a parental role, that of an authority on the appropriate relationship between adult and child, from which to morally justify Trump’s response to Thunberg’s recognition as what a good parent or uncle *should* say to an angry, emotional child. However, only

As with the perspective of the principled dissident, the perspective of the responsible parent was constructed from the building blocks of predication. Conservative content creators presented the right as too rational to accept the fact-free, emotional rhetoric of Thunberg and the environmentalist left, too morally convicted to participate in her abuse at the hands of cynical power-seekers, and too forthright to withhold their reservations for fear of hurting Thunberg’s feelings. From this perspective, conservatives had a discourse that they could leverage in defense of themselves and

their refusal to heed Thunberg's scathing moral call for society to act on the advice of science.

Predication and The Morally Plausible Avoidance of Science

Above, I have identified similarities in the ways that Thunberg and Fauci were interpreted and in the ways conservative media used predications of conservative identity to address the common threat that both Thunberg and Fauci ostensibly presented to the right. I argued that these discourses served to bolster the moral legitimacy of the right while taking stances that could be perceived as immoral. Here, I want to point out one more important function that this strategy or predication afforded the right. Predication-based rationalizations of hostility to science, I argue, in both cases provided conservatives a way to dismiss science communication outright without disputing the science itself. While most studies of science denial discourse focus on texts that do challenge science, I argue that much of the discourse that generates political will to reject science does so without questioning the quality of the research upon which it is based. In the Thunberg and Fauci cases, conservative text producers avoided discussing science by explaining why engaging with science communicators was dangerous or wrong. To entertain Fauci's communication was to open the door to tyranny, which a courageous patriot could not countenance. To entertain Thunberg's communication was to be complicit in the abuse of a child, which the blunt, family-oriented, and moral right was duty-bound to oppose. In each case, conservative media left open the possibility that conservatives were willing to accept science from less impeachable sources, thereby protecting the conservative claim to intellectual

legitimacy. In the following chapter, I examine how predication was used in discourses that did challenge COVID-19 and climate sciences on their merits.

Chapter 4: How Conservative Media Predicated and Legitimated Conservative Identity as Pro-Expertise

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I showed how conservative media leveraged conservative identity in discourses of resistance to the science messaging from Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated how conservative content creators mapped science communicators onto a pre-existing populist contest between cultures competing for social dominance. In Chapter 3, I argued that conservative content creators utilized conservative identity traits to explain why conservatives felt duty-bound to reject both Thunberg and Fauci as legitimate public communicators categorically. Both discourses were possible to create, and were often created, without directly disputing the scientific claims presented by these messengers. However, some conservative content creators did directly challenge the messengers' claims regarding climate or COVID-19 science. This chapter discusses how those creators articulated the relationships between conservative identity and conservative hostility toward experts' findings.

Discourses that directly challenge science, often referred to as science denialism, have engaged theorists for many years. One of the issues that some theorists find troubling about science denialism is its implications for one of the conditions considered most critical to the functioning of democratic public spheres: the existence of some shared idea of what is true. In the West, the primary source of shared

truth is orthodox science conducted by experts to rigorous standards, subject to peer review by other experts, and legitimized by expert consensus (Edis, 2020). When a significant political identity group within the population seems to abandon that traditional convention, addressing public crises can become complicated, as evidenced by conservatives contesting the scientific council in the cases of COVID-19 and climate change. Therefore, it is important for science communicators to grasp the relationships between political identity and hostility toward the work of experts.

One of the most popular explanations for the conservative embrace of climate and COVID-19 “denialist” discourses is that conservatives are inclined to reject expertise as a facet of populist hostility to elites (Edis, 2020). However, little research has explored how conservative content producers verbalize the relationships between conservative identity and expertise while discussing science. This oversight is problematic for two reasons. The first is ethical; as stated above, those who prefer that public policy be guided by expertise tend to view those who do not as guilty of a breach of Western norms of reason. This is a critical position, and as such, conservative voices and perspectives should be carefully considered lest uninformed misunderstandings calcify in academic research and further hamper an already strained communicative relationship between experts and their political critics. Secondly, the richer and more comprehensive that our academic understanding of the relationships that exist between political identity and attitudes toward science is, the greater the chance of identifying avenues for improved communication between science communicators and the public, and thus the nation’s ability to address science-informed public issues.

In this chapter, I employ the PDT concepts of predication and legitimation to analyze conservative media texts that respond to Thunberg and Fauci, aiming to shed light on how conservatives perceived their own positions on expertise. In the following section, I review how scholars have approached the relationship between conservative identity and scientific expertise while identifying puzzling contradictions in the literature. I then explain why I believe the PDT concepts of identity predication and legitimation can clarify the relationship between identity and attitudes toward science experts. In the findings section, I discuss how conservative content producers articulated that conservatives could “know” the experts were wrong about the science in their responses to Thunberg and Fauci. In the discussion section, I demonstrate that conservative text producers predicate conservative identity as pro-expertise and argue that conservative media employ the predications of moral clarity and canniness to justify their assertions that some experts are wrong. I also contend that this framework is best understood as a strategy to defend the legitimacy of the right in the contest over which identity group represents America.

Literature Review

Many theorists observing what appears to be a conservative populist turn in politics worldwide have argued that sentiments common to an anti-elite strain of populism explain the conservative dismissal of scientific expertise (Agius et al., 2020; Edis, 2020; Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020). By this account, many conservatives who doubt science tend to rely instead on the reasoning of ordinary people, whether themselves or others, to reach alternative conclusions about scientific truth (Azevedo & Jost, 2021; Chen et al., 2023). This “common sense” reasoning involves what Wight (2018) calls a

privileging of belief, opinion, and knowledge derived from experience over knowledge obtained from expertise, especially when expert knowledge is inconsistent with what a person has observed or believes (Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Staerklé et al., 2022).

Populists who place common sense on par with expertise have rejected climate science based on the commonsense argument that the weather is always changing (Hatzisavvidou, 2021), vaccines based on personal anecdotes of harm (Bricker & Justice, 2019), and COVID-19 science based on not seeing a local impact of the disease (Brubaker, 2021). These studies suggest that the reason conservative populists disbelieve science is that they accept “common sense” and personal experience as equal to or superior to expertise.

Conservatives who challenge the findings of experts are also perceived by some as anti-intellectual (Bar-On & Molas, 2021; Fuchs, 2021; Kou et al., 2017; Lewandowsky, 2014), a stance against a specific group of elites whose presumed expertise is traditionally thought to entitle them to determine what constitutes truth and correct action. Anti-intellectualism is defined as “distrust and dislike of scientists, academics, and experts” (Motta, 2018, p. 466) and is often characterized by skepticism about the motives of intellectuals (Chen et al., 2023; Hofstadter, 2012). Anti-intellectual discourse may include accusations that experts are self-serving (Chen et al., 2023), promoting their own value systems (Evans & Hargittai, 2020), or beholden to a corrupt government or international powers (Boberg et al., 2020; Edis, 2020; Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Trifiro et al., 2021). By many such accounts, science deniers categorically view experts as fundamentally malfeasant.

Yet the notion that anti-elitist dispositions or specifically anti-intellectual sensibilities drive hostility towards the work of experts is complicated by scholars who note that conservatives frequently express support for expertise. For instance, science denial relying on pseudoscience or contrarian scientists to argue that mainstream science is wrong (Hansson, 2018; Jacques et al., 2008; Oreskes & Conway, 2022) depends on the performance of counter-expertise for legitimacy. Furthermore, several theorists have noted that conservative science deniers often present themselves as pro-science and profess great respect for expertise (Kovaka, 2021; Mann & Schleifer, 2020; Prasad, 2022; Schmid-Petri, 2017), a phenomenon Kovaka termed “pro-science science denial” (2021, p. 2357). Szabados (2019) found that an anti-science trend did not accompany the global rise of populism. Furthermore, science deniers sometimes argue that issues with some scientific claims stem from studies not being conducted scientifically *enough*, allowing bias and political values to contaminate them (F. Fischer, 2019; Matthews, 2015; Schmid-Petri, 2017). In a study of science denial discourses on COVID-19, Prasad found that pro-science commitments in COVID-19 misinformation were so prominent that she caustically observed that “it is, minimally, intellectually lazy to argue that anti-science claims are a result of a rejection of scientific objectivity and value neutrality of science” (2022, p. 92). These accounts challenge the notion that conservative science denial originates from a populist distrust of all experts and expertise.

These puzzling discrepancies in accounts of how conservatives perceive experts and expertise are compounded by the work of several theorists who have observed that conservative identity has long maintained a strong relationship with expertise. Foucault

(1977) recognized expertise as a tool of dominance of a traditional or conservative order, as it was used to pathologize nonconformist individuals as deviant, legitimizing the surveillance, control, and authority of the criminal justice system. Agamben (2005) noted the role of expertise in identifying the crisis conditions that justify shifts toward authoritarianism. Edis also pointed out that “a defense of established expertise is...a conservative act, shoring up the power of existing institutions and recognized authorities” (2020, p. 9). For decades, conservative think tanks have promoted experts to legitimize conservative policy preferences (Djelic, 2014; Jacques et al., 2008). Clearly, additional work is needed to elucidate how conservative political identity informs attitudes toward expertise so that science communicators can better understand how to approach partisan publics with expert information. To address these uncertainties, I examined how conservative media text producers contested what Fauci and Thunberg said about the conclusions of experts on COVID-19 and climate change to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What attitudes toward expertise were demonstrated in conservative media discourse that responded to Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci?

RQ 2: How did conservative media account for the relationships between conservative traits and characteristics and conservative attitudes toward the expertise informing Thunberg and Fauci’s communications to the public?

RQ3: What can account for the conservative media discursive practices of relating conservative identity and conservative attitudes toward scientific expertise and claims of scientific truth?

This third research question draws from the Political Discourse Theory process of hypothesis generation. As noted in the chapter on theory and method, political discourse analysis aims to generate hypotheses that can explain puzzling phenomena in the politico/social world. PDT hypotheses emerge from the analytical process of retrodution, which holds that a hypothesis should be entertained if the phenomenon under study would “be explicable as a matter of course” (Hansen, 2018, p. 86) if the hypothesis were true. With this research question, I aim to formulate a hypothesis that explains why conservative content creators utilize identity in their discourse about COVID-19 and climate science, but not in their discourse about Fauci and Thunberg.

Political Discourse Theory: Predication and Legitimation

To address the question of how conservative media approached counter-attitudinal expertise, I return to the analytical concept of predication. In a society that broadly agrees that the best way to make decisions about science-related matters is to consult experts, rejecting experts is risky because it exposes one to charges of thinking and arguing in bad faith, such as believing only what one wants to believe, being narrow-minded or easily duped, or simply making guesses (Cassam, 2016). This threatens the political legitimacy of the conservative identity. When habitual, these “epistemic vices” are perceived as arising from delegitimizing traits, such as gullibility, dogmatism, and narrow-mindedness (Cassam, 2016), which amounts to an identity threat. It follows that members of a political identity group striving for societal dominance must defend their shared identity against accusations of possessing such delegitimizing traits. This defense necessarily involves predication, for, as I explained in the preceding

chapter, predication is the practice of assigning and managing the meaning of the traits and characteristics that political identity groups identify in themselves and others.

When political identity contests involve disputes over what constitutes fact, the PDT concept of *legitimation* provides a useful analytical tool for uncovering how identity groups defend against allegations of epistemic vice. According to PDT, legitimation practices explain why a group's predications of self or other are correct (Nymalm, 2020). Thus, when disputing the findings of experts, conservatives must legitimize their positions to maintain their claims that their group represents the appropriate moral core of American culture. By examining what conservative text producers present as evidence or sound reasoning when assessing expertise, one can gain a nuanced understanding of how conservatives perceive and articulate their attitudes toward experts.

How Conservative Media Predicate Epistemology As A Dimension Of Identity In Selective Science Hostility Discourse

Conservatives As Pro-Science

When conservative media chose to engage with science claims instead of focusing on other aspects of Thunberg or Fauci's celebrity, they often presented themselves as advocates of good science. In the following examples, conservative content creators expressed respect and support for science that was executed well. One writer compared the faulty science of COVID-19 by comparing it to the scientific ideal:

When science is good, it is very good. The picture most people have of science is one of objectivity, integrity, good faith, and miracles. People of noble character use

time-honored experimental procedures to give us a truthful picture of the reality we find ourselves situated in. (Makow, 2020, para. 16)

The practice of comparing COVID or climate science with a scientific ideal was a common way of professing respect for science while critiquing politically disadvantageous science. Such statements often established the framework within which the work of science communicators could be critiqued, as when one writer set up a dispute with Fauci's messaging by stating that "It is incontestable that the public is best served when opinions and policy are based on the prevailing evidence and science, and able to withstand the scrutiny of medical professionals" (Shilhavy, 2020, para. 9). Papazian began an article focused on Fauci's self-reversals by noting that, "Science is a collection of hypotheses and theories that are challenged repeatedly to determine whether they can withstand re-examination with new tools, techniques and methodologies." This process, she argued, unfolds over long periods of time. Fauci's self-reversals were happening at such a fast pace that, she argued, his statements did not reflect sober science but erratic thinking and excuse-making. In each of the above cases, the authors went on to explain why the left did not respect science to the same extent as the right.

Distinguishing Legitimate and Spurious Science and Experts

Some language, at first glance, could be interpreted as indicating hostility toward all expertise and to science itself. Scare quotes were often used around the word "expert" (Brodigan, 2020; Harris, 2020; Thompson, 2020; Unruh, 2020; Velisek, 2020), for example. This use of scare quotes could convey doubt about the existence of experts exist, as when conservative writers place the terms "white privilege" or "non-binary" in

quotes. Furthermore, many authors appeared to dismiss certain scientific claims as fundamentally dishonest, employing words such as hoax (Huff, 2019; Nimmo, 2019; Schlichter, 2019), fake (Delingpole, 2019; Holt, 2020), and propaganda (Zanotti, 2020) to characterize them. However, a closer analysis revealed that these linguistic performances of reservation were typically applied to experts or scientific concepts that conservative authors aimed to distinguish from those considered worthy of respect.

One author attempted to discredit Thunberg's messaging by suggesting that her claims were not consistent with the work of reputable scientists. At the outset, the use of scare quotes around the term "climate science" appears to cast doubt on the validity of the discipline:

Thunberg's team has been notoriously silent about who is coaching her on "climate science" and whether she pens her own speeches and social media missives, insisting that Thunberg is investigating the issue for herself and that, while she may have assistance, she is ultimately responsible for her own material and branding. (Zanotti, 2020, para. 6)

However, in the next paragraph, the author asserted that, "Those predictions don't necessarily track with climate scientists" (2020, para. 7). Here, the author referred to climate scientists without using scare quotes, indicating acceptance of the expertise of those scientists whose work did not "track" with Thunberg's claims. This differentiation, common in the data, portrayed conservatives as supporters of scientific expertise, who objected to climate and COVID-19 science because they were products of dubious expertise.

Resistance to Accusations of Being Anti-Science

Conservative content creators also presented conservatives as pro-science by demonstrating resentment of accusations that they did not respect science, as when prolific conservative writer Ethan Huff lamented the social costs of hostility to Fauci's messaging:

That the general public is even questioning Fauci's shift from *no masks necessary to everyone should wear a mask*, among other shifty advice, automatically means that Americans hate science and refuse to trust those who apparently know everything there is to know about it. (Huff, 2020, para. 2)

Here, the author exclusively defended the right's respect for expertise, as the left was not noted for protesting masking policies. Similarly, the Heartland Institute decried the left's hostile reception of a young German woman who spoke out against Thunberg. "The left is already dismissing Naomi Seibt as some drooling, knuckle-dragging science-denying moron. Naturally...because destroying her reputation is far easier than interacting with the actual ideas she puts forward" (Walker, 2020, para. 1-2), the writer said. Here, the author implied that Seibt (and by extension, others who challenged climate science) was unjustly accused of rejecting science, while the left was guilty of that epistemic vice for refusing to entertain Seibt's ideas.

Conservatives, according to another writer, were indeed more likely to be guided by science than their opponents, because the "demands of Americans to resume their lives are as science-based—if not more so—as the prohibitions they are seeking to have rescinded" (Papazian, 2020, p. 9). And one very scientifically-worded rebuttal of Thunberg's concerns legitimized a counter-expert by pointing out that the expert was

“not a climate-change denier. He says he's mainly concerned ‘about getting the facts and science right’” (“Climate Expert Shreds AOC and Thunberg Claims,” 2020, para. 6). In both cases, conservative content creators claimed that the right were more grounded in science than was the left, and indeed held science to a higher standard than did the left.

Academic Institutional Authority

Conservative content producers often legitimized counter-experts by citing their academic credentials and relationships with academic institutions. If conservative identity were dismissive of expertise, one would expect conservative media to downplay such credentials when speaking to the right, but instead, traditional expert credentials were used to bolster claims of fact. When a counter expert could claim a connection with a prestigious university, for instance, conservative content creators made much of it, as in the case of HCQ advocate Harvey Risch. “Dr. Harvey Risch, the renowned Yale epidemiologist...is an expert at evaluating research data and study designs, publishing over 300 articles” (Shilhavy, 2020, para. 9), one author noted. Indeed, nearly every conservative media article referencing Risch mentioned Yale as a means of lending weight to his riposte to Fauci’s stance on HCQ.

This pattern also emerged in the few Thunberg articles that took aim at the science Thunberg referenced. In one rebuttal to a Thunberg message, a writer noted that “a few well-informed writers on climate and energy issues have already plowed this ground, so we can take advantage of their analysis” (Lyman, 2020, para. 5). The author went on to cite one, assuring readers that he was “a frequent writer on science and innovation subjects with the University of Colorado. Here, the writer’s use of the first-

person “we” to signify who was likely to appreciate the expertise of the University of Colorado scholar. In a similar instance, a writer cited “Grove City College professor Mark W. Hendrickson” who “said adults are using Greta ‘as a puppet and a mouthpiece to advance their own agenda’” (Richardson, 2019, para. 6). The author did not reference what Hendrickson taught (economics) or why Grove City College (a conservative Christian college), was especially legitimizing. The use of the words “professor” and “college” without supporting language suggests that the author assumed that *any* academic credential would impress his conservative audience.

Furthermore, the work of academic research institutions was presented as authoritative, at least when it supported conservative positions. For instance, among the academic products that conservative content creators used to support challenges to Fauci’s authority were infection and mortality data from Johns Hopkins University (Betz, 2020; Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2020; Harris, 2020; van Brugen, 2020), a report from the University of Oxford on “economic suicides” (Jones, 2020), a University of Pittsburgh statement on vaccine development (Limbaugh, 2020), comments on side effects of vaccines by “researchers at Harvard and other medical sciences institutions” (Redwood & Holland, 2020, para. 4), and a statement from the University of Wurzburg that was provided to vindicate a claim about Fauci’s alleged corruption (Makow, 2020).

Language of Academic Excellence

A heuristic commonly used by laypeople to assess truth claims is to refer to the reputation of the people or institutions from whence they came (Battersby, 2019). Academia has a vernacular of accreditation specific to the establishment of reputation, which employs such terms as “eminent,” “groundbreaking,” “distinguished,” and

“esteemed.” By using this traditional vernacular to legitimize experts, conservative content creators predicated conservative identity as respectful of the institutionalized language of academic prestige. This often appeared in author bios, as when an editor described author Matt Walsh as “a key member” (Walsh, 2020, para. 15) of the board of contributing editors at *The Barnes Review*, which they described as “considered by historians as the world’s most **prestigious** (boldfacing here and below mine) source of bone fide essays and information” (2020, para. 15). Another author supported a rebuttal to a Fauci claim regarding risks to school children infected with COVID-19 with “a 2016 study published in one of the **pre-eminent** childhood illness journals, *Pediatrics*” (Bostom, in Hoft, 2020a, para. 12) that presented the risks as slight. Early in the COVID-19 crisis, when Fauci was seen as an asset to Trump, conservative content creators often accused mainstream media of trying to poison their relationship. In these instances, terminology used to describe Fauci was consistent with traditional accolades for institutional experts, as when a writer argued that “some journalists actually seem eager to prod and goad Trump into severing his relationship with the **eminent** public health expert” (Benson, 2020, para. 1). The use of these terms presented conservatives as respectful of science expertise that was embraced by other experts.

Some terms denoting high academic reputation to explain the credibility of scientific sources included “eminent” (Benson, 2020, para. 1; Hendrickson, 2019, para. 5; Shilhavy, 2020, para. 11), “prestigious” (Heyes, 2020b, para. 6; Vliet, 2020, para. 10), “esteemed” (Hennessy, 2020, para. 7), “prominent” (Durden, 2020, para. 7; Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2020, para. 28; News Wire, 2020, para. 3; Thompson, 2020, para. 3) “leading” (Greenberg, 2020, para. 1; Hanson, 2020, para. 1) and “renowned” (Weiss,

2020, para. 6), among others. This discursive performance, which conservative content creators clearly believed would be perceived as legitimizing to their conservative audiences, suggests that they did not cite experts *despite* their academic credentials, but rather *because* of them.

Academic Publication as Legitimizing

Conservative media often presented publication in academic journals and books as an appropriate way to legitimize a scientific claim, thereby embracing the entire system of peer review and publication as a useful gauge of scientific credibility. In the Thunberg case, one author referenced “a 2016 paper in the journal *Nature Climate Change*” (Agresti, 2019, para. 10) to argue that climate change was a net positive. The article also referenced *Nature*, *Science*, *Theoretical and Applied Climatology*, *Hydrology*, *Nature Communications*, *Lancet*, and the *British Medical Journal* to support its claims. fit. Some of the copious citations found in other articles included the *New England Journal of Medicine* (Papazian, 2020), the “prestigious” *American Journal of Medicine* (Vliet, 2020, para. 10), *Nature* (Eastman, 2020; Howley, 2020), *The Virology Journal* (B. Fischer, 2020), the “premier journal” *Lancet*, (Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2020, p. 26), and the *New England Journal of Medicine* (Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2020).

Conservative editors and content curators also embraced the esoteric language of academic journals, as when multiple outlets reprinted an article by a doctor who claimed that the “pathophysiological rationale and protocol published in the prestigious *American Journal of Medicine* gives much needed hope for physicians and patients around the world” (Vliet, 2020, para. 11) who wished to prescribe HCQ for COVID-19. One author even flaunted the conservative embrace of academic journal material as a

refutation of the leftist image of the right as anti-science, writing that “For those of you who shout “science” like it’s a Tourette tick, this is from the New England Journal of Medicine on May 21, 2020” (Hennessy, 2020, para. 2). Here, the author extensively cited an article appearing to argue against the use of masks to prevent virus transfer and declared that pro-scientist leftists would have to concede that the matter was settled and masks were of no benefit. In this case and many others, with the use of reference to journal articles, conservatives presented themselves as having out-science the pro-science left.

Respect for Scientific Methodology

Conservative text producers often portrayed conservatives as upholding higher standards for science than their opponents by arguing that the research supporting opposing claims had not been conducted to high standards or subjected to adequate expert review. Conversely, studies that supported the right were said to be the work of qualified experts employing rigorous methods and undergoing peer review, which opponents were frequently accused of neglecting. Even Fauci was accused of failing to demonstrate adequate respect for rigorous science when it did not suit him to do so. One writer accused that “as major peer-reviewed studies confirmed hydroxychloroquine’s usefulness, Fauci remained silent. He was doing the best he could for his class. Not for us. This is not how scientists behave. Much less is it how doctors behave who take seriously the Hippocratic Oath” (Codevilla, 2020, para. 19). Here, the author showed respect for the peer review process and presented Fauci as undeserving of being called a scientist and even less a doctor, both figures who, presumably, were experts worthy of respect when practicing with professionalism.

Another article lauded technology that had been vetted by experts, claiming that a “peer-reviewed algorithm by lead author Baylor cardiologist Peter McCullough, M.D., and colleagues from major US and Italian medical centers shows the widely available, safe medicines targeted for each stage of COVID-19 illness” (Vliet, 2020, para. 6). When technology was cast into doubt, as in widespread accusations that COVID-19 testing was producing false positives, the reasoning presented took an equally pro-science tone:

Tony Fauci makes a point of saying the PCR COVID test is useless and misleading when the test is run at “35 cycles or higher.” A positive result, indicating infection, cannot be accepted or believed...What Fauci failed to say on the video is: the FDA, which authorizes the test for public use, recommends the test should be run up to 40 cycles. Not 35. (Rappoport, 2020, paras. 7 & 13)

In this example, the author accused the FDA of engaging in widespread fraud by practicing unscientific virus testing, and accused Fauci, whose revelation of the correct procedures was interpreted as an accidental slip-up, of complicity. This article was widely reprinted by conservative media who performed the assumption that their audiences included science-minded conservatives who would recognize and decry the bad science practiced by COVID-19 experts.

Science as the Solution to Climate Change and COVID-19

Finally, in both cases, some text producers argued that expertise would eventually address the situations Fauci and Thunberg warned of, thus presenting themselves as having more faith in expertise than did the left. This argument appeared several times in the body of articles rebuffing Thunberg’s scientific concerns. One

author accused Thunberg herself of lacking adequate faith in experts, arguing that “climate situation calls for skilled and bold entrepreneurs who can invent, and market, climate-benefitting tools for the twenty-first century. The solution lies in making such decisions that would make a real change, instead of sending general accusations against those who are making a positive impact’ (Ewert, 2019, para. 4). This appeared to be a useful tactic for some conservatives who accepted climate science on some level, but who balked at Thunberg’s call to take action. One such conservative was the British personality Jeremy Clarkson, who professes to accept that climate change is real, but who still called Thunberg “an idiot because scientists will solve this, and nobody is going to solve it by running around and going on strike and not going to school, because then you’re not in your science lessons, so she’s a fool” (Saavedra, 2019, para. 6).

A similar discourse emerged in the responses to the work of epidemiologists during the outbreak of COVID-19. One of the numerous writers who claimed that laissez-faire policies in Sweden were more effective than those of the US argued that “their strategy appears to be working and that ‘herd immunity could be reached in the capital Stockholm in a matter of weeks” (Hoft, 2020a, para. 1). Swedish Health Minister Anders Tegnell was credited with having curbed the spread of the illness. For this reason, the writer argued, “Trump needs to dump Fauci and Birx and hire this hero of the civilized world!” (2020a, para. 4). Here, the author identified a scientist as the source of the solution to the COVID-19 crisis and associated that “good” science with what it meant to live in a civilized world. These authors predicated conservatives as reasonable

people who understood the value of good science and who wished to protect quality expertise against contamination from corrupt or inept experts.

In the excerpts presented above, I have shown that, while ardent critics of certain science findings and those who communicated them, conservatives predicated themselves as respectful, even reverent, of science and expertise. In the next section, I discuss how conservative content creators explain the connections between the traits and characteristics of a conservative identity and the rejection of specific experts and their expertise.

The Conservative Account: Moral Discernment

Conservatives who disputed climate and COVID-19 science did so while rejecting truth claims produced by the scientific establishment, including highly regarded experts. In this section, I demonstrate that conservative content creators explained this apparent inconsistency as reasonable by referencing several aspects of conservative identity. These foundational aspects, including the canniness and moral clarity described in the previous chapter, as well as the pro-science rationality outlined here, were routinely cited to explain how conservatives alone were equipped to discern between the “good” experts that science-respecting people could trust and the “bad” experts, whose immorality disqualified them as potential sources of truth. Such ad hominem attacks are a common part of political discourse, but these arguments are widely regarded as a logical fallacy since the character of an expert is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of their claims. However, conservative content creators asserted that conservatives were uniquely qualified to consider the character of truth claimants because of the conservative traits of canniness and moral clarity. In the previous

chapter, morality was used to explain why paying attention to science messengers was immoral or dangerous. In those articles, science itself did not merit consideration. In the texts analyzed in this chapter, where scientific truth claims *did* receive at least some consideration, the immorality of one of the experts making conflicting truth claims was offered as a valid method for moral conservatives to determine which claim had greater merit. As such, I identify the discursive practice of evaluating expert truth claims using character as a crucial criterion in an *epistemology of moral discernment*.

Before I continue, I wish to note that the analysis presented here was carried out entirely on the data in the Fauci case. This is because the typical pattern of science challenge in the Thunberg case involved a challenge to climate science from a counter-expert and a companion claim that Thunberg or those who sided with her were immoral. Only four articles in the Thunberg case mentioned a climate scientist by name, and only two addressed the morality of one or more scientists. It seemed that conservative content producers responding to Thunberg chose to dismiss climate scientists entirely and present climate science as a product of mainstream media, leftist politicians, environmental activists, and globalists who were twisting science to their own ends. This may be because, as discussed previously, the illegitimacy of climate science has long since reached the level of orthodoxy on the right. However, COVID-19 was a new phenomenon in 2020, so the right did not have a bank of well-developed perspectives about it. Therefore, the Fauci case offered a rich opportunity to observe conservative media build discourses that navigated the tensions between conservative identity as pro-science and the need to justify rejecting the work of scientific experts.

Immorality of Experts as a Disqualifier as a Source of Truth

Articles challenging COVID-19 science shared several characteristics. Very few were authored by individuals claiming the necessary expertise to contest COVID-19 science. Instead, most referenced, at least to some extent, the work of contrarian experts. Many such references were cursory, sometimes limited to a single link purporting to lead to off-screen scientific proof that COVID-19 science was incorrect. Other scientific arguments were lengthy and detailed, referencing numerous seemingly well-informed points from contrarian experts who critiqued issues of method, sampling errors, or data analysis by COVID-19 scientists. In either case, the tension between these competing expert accounts was often resolved by asserting that mainstream experts working on COVID-19 were immoral in ways only the morally discerning right could appreciate. This alleged immorality was cited as a reason to exclude that expert's claims from the discussion, thus clearing the field for contrarian experts to assert their claims unchallenged.

Dishonesty. Perhaps the most detailed, expertise-based argument of the 200 analyzed in the Fauci case was a 6,700-word article written by Torsten Engelbrecht and Konstantin Demeter for *OffGuardian*, entitled "Anthony Fauci: 40 Years of Lies From AZT to Remdesivir" (2020). The two authors claimed that toxic drug treatments, rather than the COVID-19 virus, explained most deaths attributed to the pandemic and provided an array of citations to make their case. Among their expert sources were the *Virology Journal*, "Yale epidemiologist Harvey Risch" (Hydroxychloroquine illustrates, para. 11); "American sociology professor Steven Epstein" (Hydroxychloroquine illustrates, para. 17); "Allan Brandt, a medical historian at Harvard

Medical School” (Hydroxychloroquine illustrates, para. 18); “Harvard analyst” John Lauritsen (Calling AZT trials, Para. 3); “respected prominent leaders in the medical community — such as Steven Nissen MD, the chief academic officer at the Cleveland Clinic and Eric Topol MD, director and founder of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in California” (Same old scam, para. 26) and “Charles Thomas, molecular biologist and former professor of biochemistry at Harvard and John Hopkins Universities” (Fauci’s history, para. 11). These citations demonstrated their conviction that their audience shared the common cultural belief that expertise legitimized truth claims.

However, most of those expert citations supported an argument that Fauci was an immoral scientist rather than an incorrect one. A full 40 percent of the article’s argumentation purported to prove that Fauci had acted dishonestly during the AIDS crisis and the bird flu pandemic of 2003. The article also accused Fauci of deliberately downplaying credible research, knowingly elevating invalid and fraudulent studies, trying to silence critics, promoting panic, and refusing to answer questions in a way that “smells of misconduct” (Calling AZT trials, 2020, para. 1). Additionally, it claimed he was promoting highly toxic drugs and misleading the world on topics including AIDS treatments, the value of masking, and the relative efficacy of HCQ and other medications.

Besides the legitimizing evidence provided by experts, the authors also relied on the conservative trait of canniness to argue for Fauci’s immorality, advising readers to “follow the money” (Fauci’s history, 2020, para. 11). Since Fauci had sponsored the clinical studies that supported remdesivir, an alternative to HCQ, the authors asserted

that Fauci and his associates “obviously are on the side of pharmaceutical companies” (Fauci Follows, 2020, para. 2). While the authors did present some expert critique of the scientific practices behind the claims that certain drugs were useful for treating COVID-19, the overwhelming bulk of the article’s argument was that Fauci was not moral, and therefore conservatives should know to disregard any scientific claims he made. In this case and many similar ones, the experts presented as legitimate were not always contrarian scientists but rather scientists whose words could be made to appear to support counter-expert claims. However, whether the sympathetic experts were mainstream or well-known contrarian experts such as Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., much of their expertise was employed to create the impression that majoritarian COVID-19 scientists were immoral.

Sexual immorality. Much of the above example focused on a specific moral failing on Fauci’s part: dishonesty. Lying, of course, is uniquely relevant to a communicator’s credibility. However, conservative content producers pointed to many other moral failings that ostensibly disqualified Fauci as a source of truth. An example of such a charge was sexual immorality. On one occasion, an interviewer asked Fauci about the risks of using dating or sex apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr, a dating and sex app for gay men, during the lockdown. Fauci responded that such decisions were risky but ultimately up to the individual (Hamby, 2020). Conservative authors accused Fauci of tacit approval of sexual promiscuity, which was given as a reason to disqualify Fauci as a source of truth (Blount, 2020; Codevilla, 2020). One four-paragraph article purported to show that Fauci had been wrong about science too many times to remain credible (Blount, 2020). In a single-sentence paragraph, the author named nine

scientific issues about which off-screen experts claimed Fauci had allegedly been wrong. The next paragraph reminded readers that Fauci had “encouraged degenerates to hook up on Grindr for perverted sex with strangers” (Blount, 2020, para. 3). The writer singled out gay sex as “perverted,” a moral judgment not shared by the left. This evidence of immorality, discernible only to the right, received as much attention in the story as the claims of nine experts, and provided the justification for the referenced offscreen experts to have the last word on Fauci’s science claims.

Similarly, another author cited experts to argue that the danger of COVID-19 was exaggerated and disqualified Fauci’s expertise by accusing him of a history of immorality that included sexual harassment, among other things (Nelson, 2020b). A third article argued that unnamed scientific studies showed COVID-19 to be less dangerous than Fauci claimed. The author then offered in support of the unnamed experts three examples of Fauci’s immorality, including hypocrisy over masking, lying about HCQ 's efficacy (that claim backed by other off-screen studies) and Fauci’s greater support for “sex with strangers” than “holy communion” as pandemic behaviors (Codevilla, 2020, para. 17). The entire article relied on proving that Fauci’s expert claims about science were not true, but it was Fauci’s morality, rather than his scientific credibility, that factored most strongly into the argument over which experts were correct. Furthermore, the ability to make that distinction hinged in part on the moral clarity predicated to conservative identity that allowed them to understand, where Fauci did not, that communion was a higher moral priority than sex with strangers.

Egotism. Another common moral accusation used to disqualify Fauci as a source of truth was that of egotism. In one instance, an article titled “Christmas Panto: Fauci’s

Dangerous Media Performance Artistry” (News Wire, 2020) presented Fauci as “egotistically exclaiming how he himself saved Christmas this year, after he traveled to the North Pole and vaccinated Santa Claus” (para. 2). This alone, the article contended, “should be grounds to ‘Cancel Fauci’” (para. 2) and that we should instead attend to the “prominent academics and professionals in the medical and scientific community have also coming out strongly [sic] against Fauci” (para. 3) for not serving the people well. In this instance, Fauci’s immorality categorically disqualified him as a source of truth, leading experts who challenged him on any front to be deemed more credible by default.

In several instances (B. Fischer, 2020; Lennox, 2020), the conservative trait of canniness was cited alongside alternative experts as evidence that Fauci was motivated by ego, suggesting that his challengers should be believed. One article (Lennox, 2020) claimed that COVID-19 testing was flawed and that more people were invulnerable to the illness than Fauci suggested. The author referred to several counter-experts and off-screen studies that contradicted Fauci’s positions and mentioned that he had previously changed his stance on whether masking was an effective way to reduce the spread of the illness. However, the author’s primary argument against Fauci’s scientific claims was that he enjoyed attention. The author noted that Fauci had appeared on the cover of several magazines, concluding that “One could believe Fauci is enjoying his notoriety, with attention lavished on him largely because he is a foil to President Trump. To maintain that position, he often uses weasel words to avoid the president’s wrath” (Lennox, 2020, para. 5). The phrase “one could believe” indicated

that the writer expected the audience *to conclude*, based on their understanding of the world, that Fauci was motivated primarily by public approval.

Greed. Greed was another moral failing commonly said to both characterize and motivate Fauci, which was presented as a reason to believe counter-experts over him. For instance, when Fauci was named *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" in 2020, an article in *RT* (Buyniski, 2020) argued that Fauci had a track record of being wrong about science. The focus of the article was not to disprove those points; although it linked to other texts claiming to provide expert proof of Fauci's inaccuracies, its main aim was to argue that Fauci was not a good source of truth in any instance because he was immoral in several ways. As many others did, the writer accused him of exploiting COVID-19 in the pursuit of power, which, of course, carried with it the charge of the moral failing of megalomania. But the long-term trait that defined and discredited Fauci, according to the author, was greed. "The man has always put profits before people" (2020, para. 6), the author claimed and referenced several instances in which Fauci had appeared to be motivated by wealth.

Greed, like egotism, was often "proven" by mobilizing the predicated conservative traits of moral clarity and canniness. When authors proffered evidence that there was money to be made, that alone sufficed to prove that scientists were inevitably self-serving. "Fauci is fast-tracking Remdesivir, a therapy that has never been approved and whose cost is \$1000 per dose," an *All News Pipeline* article argued in one instance (Velisek, 2020). "The success rate is about 50%. Fauci is ignoring the known fact that HCQ is 90% effective when administered correctly." No source was provided to support the claim that HCQ was 90% effective; the cost of remdesivir versus that of HCQ

sufficed to adjudicate between the competing truth claims if one accepted the assumption that conservatives could divine Fauci's true motives merely by noting that a financial incentive was plausible.

Intriguingly, conservative content producers did not need to show evidence that Fauci *himself* stood to gain from his recommendations to assign his motivations to greed. It was sufficient to imply that a profit motive was plausible. For instance, a *National Pulse* article stated that "A document no longer available from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration regarding 'Emergency Use Authorization' of potential COVID-19 treatments appears to suggest that hydroxychloroquine satisfies the criteria for the classification, but would stand in the way of lucrative other drugs, and a vaccine" ("Exclusive," 2020, para. 1). The article cited a study that contradicted Fauci's position on HCQ. But rather than comparing the evidence offered in each competing assertion about HCQ, the article implied that the higher-cost drug was chosen simply because it was more expensive. Who this would benefit was not stated; the author expected conservative readers to conclude that because *someone* stood to profit, Fauci's motive for rejecting HCQ as a COVID-19 treatment was legible as greed, and that this evidence of Fauci's moral failing of greed disqualified him as a suitable expert source of truth.

Moral Valorization of Counter-Experts

Conservative writers did not place as much emphasis on the morality of the experts they relied on as they did on the immorality of the experts they wished to discredit. However, some authors did morally valorize conservatives' scientific allies in an apparent effort to strengthen their cases that such counter-experts were valid sources of truth. Courage was a moral trait ascribed to those experts who "stood up" to

mainstream science. One of the most prominent experts to contradict Fauci's truth claims was Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., whose organization, Children's Health Defense, published several impactful articles claiming that vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine, were dangerous. *Gateway Pundit* (Hoft, 2020c) published a "greed" story accusing Fauci of standing to profit from a COVID-19 vaccine. In the article, Kennedy, Jr. claimed that such vaccines were dangerous, for which he was portrayed in glowing moral terms as a courageous truth-teller. "Bobby Kennedy gave his life for this country," the author wrote. "His son would make him proud" (2020c, para. 11). The article contained no reference to scientific evidence beyond Kennedy's word; the only device presented to support his claim over Fauci's was that Fauci was not moral, while Kennedy was morally admirable.

Similarly, Dr. Judy Mikovits, the subject of *Plandemic* (Mahadevan, 2020), a trilogy of documentaries purporting to show that vaccine science was a money-making scam, was a controversial researcher who claimed to have witnessed Fauci acting unethically on multiple occasions. *Gateway Pundit* (Hoft, 2020) described Mikovits as selflessly risking her promising career to speak out against vaccines. Another article claimed that a Chinese whistleblower, Dr. Li-Meng Yan (Clayton, 2020), had to "flee Communist China because of her whistleblowing about the virus being created in the lab in Wuhan" (2020, para. 1). Framing Li-Meng as risking retaliation from communists established her as both courageous and aligned with the anti-communist right. These moral accreditations worked in the texts to assure conservatives that the voices of contrarian scientists outweighed those of more respected experts because the former demonstrated moral rectitude, while the latter were perceived by those on the right as

morally flawed.

The Moral Superiority of the Practitioner. Another means by which counter-experts were morally valorized was to accord greater moral worth to those who practiced medicine than to those who merely “theorized.” Bryan Fischer, (Velisek, 2020) whose editorial accusing Fauci of knowing since 2005 that HCQ could treat coronaviruses was one of the most influential anti-Fauci pieces in the spring of 2020, characterized Fauci as a disconnected, elitist theorist prone to “tut-tutting and pooh-poohing HCQ” (2020, para. 18). On the other hand, Fischer presented Didier Raoult and Vladimir Zelenko, two doctors who claimed to be using HCQ successfully to treat COVID-19, as workers in the trenches who were “out there saving lives at \$20 a pop” (2020, para. 18). Fischer concluded that “we should spend more time listening to [the doctors] than the wizards-of-smart bureaucrats the Talking Snake Media fawns over” (2020, para. 18). The anecdotal evidence offered by these physicians was accorded more credibility than that offered by the more credentialed Fauci in large part because of the presumed moral superiority of practitioners.

Similarly, an open letter written by three doctors to Fauci, which was widely reprinted in conservative media, referred to “impassioned pleas from hundreds of frontline physicians” (Fareed et. Al, in Shilhavy, 2020, Conclusion, para. 3) who wished to prescribe HCQ for COVID-19 despite Fauci’s refusal to endorse it. The authors described the doctor-patient relationship as “sacred and revered,” portraying the wisdom of practitioners as a more credible source of truth than the expertise of multiple scientists, as practitioners’ knowledge was acquired more nobly. Another article argued that home-based treatments were superior to Fauci’s inpatient treatment model, also

distinguishing between working physicians and theorists as moral agents. The author, a physician named Elizabeth Vliet, referred to the success of cardiologist Peter McCullough, who, with a “team of experts” (2020, para. 7), found HCQ effective in combination with other drugs to treat COVID-19. “Dr. McCullough is not just theorizing,” the writer assured. “He is actually treating COVID patients who remain in their own homes” (2020, para. 10). Vliet went on to claim that McCullough’s modality was “not just theory for me either. I have personally collaborated with Dr. McCullough using this home-based model of care for my own seriously ill COVID patients who live in other states” (2020, para. 11). Throughout articles such as these, doctors were portrayed as morally laudable by virtue of being workers and therefore were accredited as potential sources of truth, as opposed to the expert disqualified by membership in a parasitic bureaucracy.

Moral Epistemology as Political Strategy?

So far in this chapter, I have presented expressions of conservative attitudes toward science and expertise as positive, and I have argued that conservatives presented the morality of the scientist as a criterion for belief in a truth. Here, we arrive at a fork in the road. It is possible that conservative media content producers leveraged conservatives’ identity commitments to respect for science and moral clarity in a good faith effort to differentiate between credible claimants and those whose immorality disqualified them from consideration. However, I will argue here that the discourse suggesting that conservatives were uniquely equipped to parse truth claims based on the morality of the experts providing them was better understood as a political strategy

of moral legitimation for hostility to science motivated by political rather than scientific considerations.

I base this argument on two observations. The first is that many inconsistencies in the arguments presented against climate science and epidemiology suggest that these arguments were produced ad hoc, without demonstrating evidence of an underlying set of beliefs about scientific truth. This calls into question the notion that a coherent moral epistemology has provided a logic that conservatives rely on to identify truth. The second observation is that, in the Fauci case, the one consistent predictor of whether conservatives embraced or rejected Fauci as a moral agent was whether his messages supported or undermined the right in its populist political struggle against the left for the power to embody the true American. I begin by discussing the inconsistencies, then demonstrate how attitudes toward Fauci as a moral agent changed in conservative media throughout 2020, depending on how Fauci's statements reflected on then-President Donald Trump.

Inconsistency

Although conservative content creators were nearly unanimous in rejecting specific climate and COVID-19 science claims, they varied widely in what they claimed was true. Most content creators operated on the assumption that the COVID-19 virus was real—as one writer noted, “It’s not that the virus is fake — of course it isn’t” (Heyes, 2020c, para. 7), and opted instead to claim that the dangers were overstated, that recommended preventative measures were ineffective, dangerous, or unnecessary, or that people were manipulating science to achieve self-serving ends. However, this was not universal. One writer, for instance, termed the virus a “hoax scandemic” (Slavo,

2020, para. 1), another described COVID-19 as “a novel virus that only exists by postulated computational computer models” (Scruggs, 2020, para. 2), and others theorized that COVID-19 was mild at worst and that deaths associated with the illness were owing to the drugs prescribed, not the virus itself (Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2020).

Conservative content creators were similarly divided on the veracity of anthropogenic climate change. Prominent British Thunberg critic Jeremy Clarkson, for example, acknowledged that “we've been aware of climate change for quite some time” but criticized Thunberg for her communication methods, the impracticality of her recommendations, and a lack of faith in science to address the issue in a timely manner. Many other authors, however, simply dismissed climate change as a hoax (Crane, 2019; Nimmo, 2019; Schlichter, 2019; Tap News Wire, 2020). It did not appear that conservatives contested COVID-19 and climate science from a shared conviction about what was true in that science, but rather from a shared conviction that the science was detrimental to the political fortunes of conservatives.

Furthermore, conservative content creators occasionally demonstrated differing assessments of the credibility of a single expert or set of experts within a single article, depending on whether the experts' arguments supported conservative claims. In one *Sons of Liberty* (Hamner, 2020) article claiming that 5G technology could cause COVID-19, the author decried Fauci and the National Institute of Health as “medical quacks” and “clowns” (2020, para. 6), who were suppressing a paper that purported to prove the connection. The author clearly conflated Fauci with the NIH, as reflected in the article's title: “Fauci's NIH Study Reveals 5G Technology Can Produce Coronavirus in Human Cells” (2020). The author reasoned that “Fauci's NIH” publishing the study proved that

Fauci was aware of it but not discussing it. However, the 5G study was deemed credible *because* it was published by “Fauci’s NIH.”

In the same article, the author cited an “article written by Fauci, Redfield, and Lane in the New England Journal of Medicine declaring the mortality rate of the coronavirus is the same as that of the influenza virus at 0.1%” (2020, para. 6), a common conservative talking point. In the next paragraph, however, the author denounced “medical quacks like Fauci, Birx, and Redfield” as creating “fear porn” to help state governors persist in “infringing upon the God-given individual rights of the people” (2020, para. 7). The experts’ NEJM article’s credibility was not questioned because it supported a conservative effort to downplay the risks of contracting COVID-19. The only discernible reason that the same experts were denounced in the following paragraph was that, elsewhere, they were perceived as emphasizing the same risk conservatives wished to downplay. This set of inconsistencies suggests that some conservative content creators produced arguments against science on an ad hoc basis; where expertise appeared to support the right, it was embraced, and where the same expertise weakened the position of the right, it was discredited.

Climate science denier James Agresti (2019) took a similar tack regarding the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In one paragraph of an article titled “Analysis: Climate Change Fears of Teen Activist Are Empirically Baseless” (2019), he characterized a leading scientist in the IPCC as “willing to tell half-truths and compromise honesty” (2020, para. 6) when needed to produce a political outcome. Yet, later in the story, when claiming that Thunberg was wrong about global hurricane frequency being related to climate change, he noted that “the IPCC reported in 2012:

‘There is low confidence in any observed long-term (i.e., 40 years or more) increases in tropical cyclone activity’” (2019, para. 4). The IPCC was described as corrupt when it advocated for policies unwelcome on the right. However, it was cited as a legitimizing source when one of its studies supported a claim that the author wished to make. Throughout the article, the author “proved” that Thunberg’s concerns were unfounded by citing articles from the same high-profile journals that elsewhere supported the scientific consensus. Given these examples and others like them, it appeared that the only consistent characteristic of the scientific claims and sources cited by conservative text producers arguing against mainstream science was that those claims and sources supported a conservative political narrative. Nowhere was this more evident than in the shifting evaluations of Fauci’s morality and credibility that appeared in conservative media throughout 2020.

The Fauci Flip: How Moral Assessments of Fauci Followed Fauci’s Reflection on Trump. Conservative media attention began to focus on Fauci toward the end of February 2020, following his appointment to the coronavirus task force on January 29, 2020 (Behrmann & Santucci, 2020). Throughout most of March, conservative content producers almost universally praised Fauci and presented him as a moral source of truth. During this time, they largely agreed that Fauci’s presence on Trump’s coronavirus task force reflected positively on Trump’s COVID-19 response strategy. However, in late March, Fauci publicly disagreed with Trump’s optimism regarding the potential of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 and restore normalcy to the nation. For the next month, conservative media began to question Fauci’s moral standing. As the president and Fauci continued to diverge on the efficacy of HCQ and their disagreements expanded to include assessments of the United States’ performance on

virus testing and the necessity of extending stay-at-home policies, conservative media increasingly portrayed Fauci as morally flawed. By early May, as Fauci's statements increasingly reflected poorly on Trump's handling of the pandemic, conservative content producers were nearly unanimous in condemning him as a moral figure. This condemnation was understood in conservative media as grounds for conservatives to disqualify Fauci as a source of truth. Below, I describe these three time periods in 2020, including how Fauci's comments were perceived in relation to Trump's leadership and how he was depicted as a moral figure during those phases. While this correlation does not prove that Fauci's evolving reflections on Trump caused the shift in how he was portrayed as a moral agent, I argue that the correlation is striking enough to warrant further consideration and research.

Fauci as Morally and Scientifically Legitimizing: February through March 20

Through March 20, Fauci was portrayed in conservative media as a valuable source for countering media narratives about the pandemic that could undermine public faith in Trump. Throughout March, Trump consistently depicted COVID-19 as a crisis that would swiftly fade away (Gore et al., 2020), and, according to conservative media, Fauci's comments supported Trump's optimism. On March 9, when CNN labeled the new virus a "pandemic," a *Newsbusters* article reported that Fauci "suggested that people not get 'all bent out of shape about what you call it'" (Finkelstein, 2020, para. 4). The article continued by asserting that "In fact, it's fair to assume that getting people 'all bent out of shape' is exactly what CNN has in mind" (2020, para. 5). Fauci's statements were presented as a defense against the perceived political sabotage by the mainstream media.

A week later, the Trump administration faced criticism for not providing citizens with coronavirus tests as quickly as several other countries had. During a March 15 press conference, a CNN reporter asked if Fauci would test himself for the illness after sharing a microphone with Trump. Fauci retorted, “Let’s get real, here,” stating that there was no reason for him to test because he exhibited no symptoms. Opinion columnist Rebecca Diserio (2020a) interpreted Fauci’s comments to imply that testing was only necessary for those with symptoms, which she framed as a rebuff of the mainstream media, which had been “trashing President Donald Trump by making wild accusations about COVID-19,” and creating a “coronavirus panic 24/7” (Diserio, 2020a, para. 1). Diserio told her audience that “You’ll love this,” calling Fauci’s response a “‘mic drop’ moment” in which he had “scolded” the mainstream media (para. 1). She also interpreted Fauci’s dismissal of the necessity for a COVID-19 test as evidence that the “issue about ‘testing’ needs to be put into perspective” (para. 13) and that a Democrat-aligned media had been exaggerating the matter. Diserio concluded, “Let’s all follow Dr. Fauci’s lead. If you find anyone making ridiculous remarks or ratcheting up the panic, just tell them: ‘the guy handling this outbreak in America says: let’s get real, here’” (para. 22). Throughout, Fauci was depicted as an authoritative figure who capably defended Trump against his political foes.

Fauci was used as a cudgel against the left in several other early controversies as well. When he supported Trump’s decision to close off travel from China and Europe, conservative content producers leveraged his approval against leftist accusations that the travel bans were racist or xenophobic. Nick Arama (2020), writing for *Red State*, claimed that “[l]iberal media” were angry that “there were white men on the task force”

and that Joe Biden had “suggested that the China travel ban was ‘xenophobic’ (2020, para. 7). In his rebuttal, Arama reposted a tweet reading, “‘Dr. Fauci recommended the Europe travel ban, says it’s a ‘prudent choice,’ & ‘the right public health call.’ When will Biden be quiet and let the experts speak?’” (para. 8). Similarly, after Fauci told a radio show host that the slow rollout of COVID-19 tests was not Trump’s fault, *White House Dossier* surmised that “Democrats don’t want to hear it” (Koffler, 2020, para. 1). In these articles and others like them, Fauci’s expertise was accepted and leveraged without question.

During this period, conservative content producers also tended to present Fauci as a highly moral figure. *White House Dossier* lionized Fauci in its article in which he defended Trump’s test rollout, saying, “Dr. Anthony Fauci is kind of the George Washington of infectious disease control. Everyone praises him and trusts in his probity, across party lines” (Koffler, 2020, para. 1). *Breitbart* (“Anthony Fauci,” 2020) reprinted an article headlined “America’s Coronavirus ‘Hero’ Lets Science Do the Talking” that credited Fauci with “long striving to ensure the science conveyed to the public is clear and accurate” (2020, para. 1) in every major medical crisis of the previous 40 years. By this account, Fauci was an “evidence-driven straight shooter” with a “calm, professorial demeanor” (2020, para. 4), at once highly knowledgeable, conscientious, and hard-working. *Blaze Media* ran a similarly lionizing headline claiming that “Despite Joe Biden's False Attacks, Coronavirus Hero Dr. Fauci Says Trump Always Listens To Him.” In the article, the author referred to Fauci as a “Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient” and a “world-renowned immunologist” who was “undoubtedly the country’s most respected expert on the COVID-19 pandemic.” Even Fox personality Laura Ingraham,

later a harsh critic of Fauci (Staff, 2024), welcomed him to her Fox show on March 17 by thanking him for “all of your efforts on behalf of the American people” (Garcia, 2020, para. 39) and praised him for “working around the clock” (2020, para. 38), thus painting him as a patriot with a strong work ethic. Fauci was considered a highly credible and moral figure in conservative media almost universally until March 20, when a rift began to open between him and Trump that would widen for the rest of the year.

Post HCQ Dispute: Fauci’s Moral and Expert Credibility Trend Down: March 20 - April

On March 19, eager to reopen the country, Trump announced that the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) could prove a “game changer” that would put COVID-19 in the rearview mirror (Cathey, 2020). However, Fauci cautioned the public the next day that evidence supporting HCQ was, at that point, only anecdotal (Behrmann & Santucci, 2020). On April 5, the two publicly differed on the matter for a second time. On April 12, Fauci told CNN that lives could have been saved had the country locked down earlier but noted that there was not the political will to do so at the time. Later that night, Trump retweeted a tweet containing the hashtag #firefauci (Orr & Levine, 2020). The two maintained a public posture of cooperation; Trump told the press the following day that he and Fauci had been “on the same page” from the beginning, and Fauci insisted that his speech was unrestricted by the White House. On March 24, Fauci told the press that focusing on differences between him and Trump was counterproductive and described the relationship as strong. As Fauci’s benefit to the president began to come into question, conservative media also began to call his character into question.

Certainly, conservative media knew the political implications of losing Fauci's apparent support. A writer at *The Conservative Opinion* warned that, "It would set off a political storm if Trump were to sideline him in the middle of a pandemic" (Nelson, 2020a, para. 2). Some conservative content creators, recognizing the legitimacy that Fauci conferred on Trump, attempted to portray the rift between the highly popular Fauci and the embattled Trump as a strategy of an anti-Trump media. *Neon Nettle* reported that Fauci, in insisting that he was unfiltered by the White House, had "dropped the hammer on the media for trying to create a divide between himself and the president" (Greenberg, 2020, para. 1). When Fauci told a radio host that he would, under certain circumstances, prescribe HCQ to a COVID-19 patient, the *Western Journal* (Saunders, 2020) opined that Fauci's equivocal blessing "might not have been as resounding an affirmative as sane Americans would hope, but no doubt came as a disappointment to the mainstream media journalists who've criticized Trump's touting of the drug's potential" (2020, para. 6). The *National Sentinel* likewise reported that Fauci had "swatted down" (Dougherty, 2020, para. 2) a CNN reporter's "gotcha" question the author paraphrased as "would there have been fewer deaths if only the Bad Orange Man had done something sooner" (para. 5). The writer described Fauci's response as a win for Trump, writing, "The good Dr. Fauci cannot be any clearer than he was: 'We didn't see the virus showing up in our country so that's why we didn't do mitigation earlier'" (para. 7). These authors appeared to hope to preserve Fauci as a legitimizing figure for the right.

Many other content producers, through the three weeks following the March 20 rift, however, started to question Fauci's morality. Three days after Fauci dashed cold

water on Trump's HCQ optimism, a *Gateway Pundit* (Taylor, 2020) writer noted that Fauci had seemed disrespectful to Trump in a *Science* magazine interview, warning that Fauci was "heading down the path of those who show-up the boss in a time of crisis" (2020, para. 2). The writer also included a copy of a supportive email that Fauci had sent to Trump's 2016 political opponent Hillary Clinton seven years earlier, apparently implying that Fauci's loyalty to Trump might be questionable. *American Thinker* ran articles decrying him, including one entitled "Fauci squandered the time we gained by closing our border to China" (Brown, 2020), arguing that Fauci had not advised Trump well to that point. The calmness that other outlets had praised when Fauci explained why testing had been slow to roll out was presented as evidence that Fauci was indifferent to America's struggle: "Fauci admitted there was a 'glitch' in the system. 'Glitch' seemed an understatement and a breezy way to describe what occurred in the face of the looming threat that landed on our shores" (Brown, 2020, para. 3). The writer also suggested that Fauci might have been downplaying the severity of the situation to cover his own inadequacies, accusing the doctor of both callousness and dishonesty.

Some writers attempted to explain reversals in their moral estimations of Fauci as Fauci became less of an asset to Trump by leveraging conservative canniness to suggest that it was obvious to the observant that Fauci had become politically compromised. An April 13 *Flopping Aces* (Dr. John, 2020) article expressed one writer's rationalization of the turn against Fauci. After listing several instances in which Fauci had seemingly reversed himself on COVID-19 policy or predications, the writer concluded, "I am very disappointed in Fauci. He proves that too long a tenure in the limelight tends to make one act more and more politically. Fauci is now a political animal

more than he is a doctor” (2020, paragraph 13). Although Fauci’s conservative defenders continued to try to explain away or minimize the growing divide between Trump and Fauci, their numbers decreased through the month of April and had all but vanished by the month’s end.

Fauci Demonized: May to December

As Fauci’s fanbase on the right dwindled, outlets that had lionized him in March and April began to demonize him. *Mad World News* (Diserio, 2020b), which had a month earlier praised Fauci for “scolding” CNN over the matter of testing and urged conservatives to follow Fauci’s expert lead, now advocated the opposite. The author accused Fauci of engaging in a plot to keep the government shut down for political reasons and concluded that conservatives should “Stand up for the president and let him know you no longer will sit back and watch as our country is destroyed by these sinister forces who don’t care about the American people at all” (2020a, para. 25). In her revision, Diserio portrayed Fauci as a heartless political operative intent on damaging Trump’s re-election prospects. *Natural News*, which in March had cited Fauci as a source of quality information about the pandemic (Heyes, 2020a), in an April 7 article (Adams, 2020) called him a “liar and a tyrant” (2020, para. 15) who, if not checked, would bring about a state in which “America will be lost and the people will be left to suffer and die in order to protect an industry of death and destruction” (para. 16). The discourse that Fauci was immoral and therefore a “bad” expert who could not be entertained as a truth source prevailed for the remainder of the year, as described in the previous section. This conservative media reversal regarding Fauci’s moral rectitude, which closely followed Fauci’s increasing political liability to Trump, suggests that the

epistemology of moral discernment was better understood as a legitimizing tactic than as reflective of a genuine cultural epistemology.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained how conservatives view themselves as thinkers about science and expertise. I demonstrated that conservatives predicate themselves as pro-science and pro-expertise but also claim to be morally discerning in ways that leftists were not and unwilling to entertain the truth claims put forth by people they identify as immoral. I then discussed how conservatives use those predications in practice, valorizing experts who support their views and morally demonizing those who did not. I then discussed some inconsistencies in these practices, which suggest that they are performative and contingent on political necessity rather than reflective of a consistently shared epistemological system.

I conclude this chapter with a hypothesis for future research. Here I return to PDT's retroductive approach to theory, which begins with an interrogation of the relationships between political identity and the proposed definitions of signifiers that confer legitimacy on a political identity group engaged in a contest for cultural dominance. Once a complete account of those relationships is established, any explanation that can clarify the confusion surrounding what is occurring in a discursive regime becomes a proposed truth for others to consider, challenge, or build upon. I wish to propose the following explanation for the puzzling phenomenon of a conservative American identity group claiming to embrace science and expertise as ways of knowing while rejecting the work produced by the dominant system of science and expertise. I suggest that, when the risks of potential consequences appear low enough,

conservatives would prefer to risk the consequences that scientists warn of rather than yield ground in a political contest for cultural dominance. From this perspective, science denial discourse can be understood as a political strategy to maintain moral and intellectual legitimacy while rejecting science with negative political implications.

By this account, whether conservatives believe in science or not becomes irrelevant to the extent that the consequences of losing political ground outweigh the risks of ignoring science. That is, had COVID-19 presented symptoms similar to those of Ebola, or if the climate crisis had involved a meteor set to strike the planet within a month, conservatives might have been motivated to hold a different set of beliefs about Fauci's messages. However, the likelihood of dying from COVID-19 was indeed low for most Americans. Climate change progresses gradually enough to appear less like an imminent threat and more like a bridge to be crossed at some future point. I describe this as "cigarette smoker thinking" because the practice of taking immediate rewards despite scientific warnings of future harm resembles, in many ways, the deferral of smoking cessation to some later date in spite of scientific warnings of potential harmful consequences.

Testing this hypothesis would be a challenging undertaking, but some efforts are already demonstrating its possibility. One study used experimental data to find that when people were compensated for giving correct answers to politically charged questions, the accuracy of responses increased by as much as 80% (Bullock et al., 2015). If beliefs in science are indeed dependent on a cost/benefit assessment in which the cost of giving political ground to the Other is higher than that of assuming the risks warned of by scientists, then experimental studies such as this that increase the

benefits and/or reduce the costs of believing science communication would likely demonstrate it. Another scholar recently identified differences in the language of belief that appear in discourse when people are discussing things they believe based on empirical experience and things they believe based on imaginings associated with identity commitments (Van Leeuwen, 2023). This work opens the possibility of studying the language of selective science hostility for markers of the two different modes of belief.

My hypothesis also addresses another source of confusion regarding what appears to many as irrationality practiced on a bewilderingly large scale. Rejecting science at the risk of serious consequences can seem quite irrational when viewed from outside the identity group involved. However, if my proposal possesses explanatory power, this course of action seems more understandable. The struggle for cultural dominance has motivated many groups to confront catastrophic and immediate risks, including war, imprisonment, and death. The ability to shape a nation's cultural direction is a notoriously potent motivator. It should not be surprising to find that conservatives fighting for the mantle of true citizenship are willing to adopt a certain indifference to science in pursuit of it.

This explanation leaves us in a troubling place. What can be done to reduce resistance to politically relevant science when a majority prefers to act? Clearly, decoupling science from partisan considerations is a worthwhile goal. Perhaps if Dr. Fauci had found some way to handle the dispute over HCQ that did not involve making Trump look bad, for instance, conservatives might have been less determined to pursue it. But such a course of action would be challenging. It is hard to imagine, for instance,

that resistance to climate science will easily soften while large industries, with much to lose if the nation reduces the use of fossil fuels, maintain deep ties with one of two competing groups. If the pitched battle between cultural identities continues to create deep divides in American society, the impulse for committed partisans to evaluate every emergent social issue through the lens of partisanship will probably persist. The populist dichotomization of the American people into two camps, consisting of a virtuous "People" and a hostile "Other," is by no means a phenomenon restricted to the right. For those who fall prey to the illusion that all conservatives are equalized by a desire to vanquish the left, the prospects for resolving tensions over politically consequential science may seem grim. Yet in the next chapter, I propose that, by aligning our thinking with the logic of difference that reminds us that society is comprised of far more than two groups, and that the needs and concerns of those groups do indeed vary greatly, we may find opportunities to reduce the impulse to selective science hostility in small but meaningful ways.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

I have built the case throughout this project that the hostility toward Thunberg and Fauci, evident in conservative media during the times when these communicators were most prominent on the public agenda, was fundamentally not about science. Rather, selective hostility toward science, I have argued, is one of a repertoire of strategies that conservative media employ in response to discourses that threaten the interests of the right in a long-running contest often referred to as a culture war between the traditionalist right and the progressive left. Thunberg and Fauci both communicated scientific conclusions that disadvantaged the right. Thunberg asserted a claim that the right has long attempted to suppress: that the use of fossil fuels has pushed the environment to the brink of an irreversible crisis with catastrophic implications for life on Earth. In simple terms, Thunberg's moral appeal painted the right in a negative light. Whether individual conservatives accept climate science or not, the right is historically linked to resistance against climate science. It cannot easily extricate itself from that commitment without a loss of face and thus credibility.

Fauci's communication about scientists' conclusions regarding the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic became increasingly damaging to the political fortunes of the right as he diverged more from Trump's chosen narratives and policies. The year 2020 was an election year, and the election would largely depend on the efficacy of Trump's

response to the crisis. Therefore, supporting Trump's position was imperative for the right. Conservative media, I have argued, defended the legitimacy of that practice by insisting that science was politicized and employed particular constructions of conservative identity to present the right as uniquely equipped to make that claim and prepared to defend the nation against such science.

I drew these conclusions over the course of four studies. In the first, I showed how conservative media interpreted the communication of both Thunberg and Fauci as part of the same long-running struggle between America's true people and a hostile, leftist Other. In both cases, this discursive strategy produced the same effect. In each case, conservative content creators' naming of science communicators as political actors made the differences between the science communicators and their respective issues irrelevant. This discursive practice could be applied in any case in which a strong science communicator was capturing enough public attention to affect public opinion and behavior in ways that disadvantaged the right. In the second study, I demonstrated how conservative media constructed a conservative identity, endowing it with the necessary attributes to justify embracing radically different accounts of reality than those presented by mainstream media and the left. I also noted the ways in which conservative media referenced aspects of the identity of the right versus that of the left to strengthen ties among constituent groups of the right by presenting a threat to any one of them as a threat to all. Finally, I noted that these discursive techniques allowed conservative media to rebuff the communication of Thunberg and Fauci without explicitly addressing whether the communicators were right about the science or whether the science they represented was itself accurate. Again, these discursive

practices could be customized to fit the unique circumstances of any instance in which science communication threatened conservative interests.

In the third study, I focused on the subset of conservative media arguments that involved assessments of whether the truth claims made by Fauci or Thunberg were credible. This set of discourses, I argued, differed from the majority in that they claimed the authority to distinguish fact from opinion, and were therefore an epistemological project. I showed that conservative media constructed an epistemology of moral discernment as a unique feature of conservative identity, endowing conservatives with the ability to dismiss truth claims made by immoral actors. I reinforced that claim in a fourth study, which demonstrated that moral assessments of Fauci were associated with how his communications reflected on Trump. Finally, I reviewed the implications of the four studies collectively and, based on the PDT analytical process of retroduction, proposed a hypothesis that when conservatives would rather risk being wrong about science than losing political ground, conservative media would employ these justification techniques to preserve the appearance of good faith reasoning while rejecting science for political reasons.

Contributions and Future Research

In Chapter 1, I outlined the scholarly contributions that this research brings to the field of communication. I provide support for theorists who argue that efforts to reduce hostility toward science cannot succeed if predicated entirely on the assumption that the solution is to better educate people about science. I argue that conservative media discourse offers evidence that such hostility occurs for reasons that have little to do with the accuracy of scientific claims. I suggest that selective science hostility is better

understood as a strategy of legitimation for politically motivated resistance to science than as proceeding from misperceptions. I also complicate assumptions that conservatives are hostile to expertise, demonstrating that a major tenet of conservative identity is a deep respect for expertise. I also show that one function of identity work in selective science hostility discourse is to build justifications for acting in defiance of expertise when politically convenient. Thirdly, I challenge the notion that selective science hostility is inherently irrational, driven by tribalism or emotionalism. Instead, I argue that the choice to express hostility toward science proceeds, at least to a degree, from a rational cost-benefit analysis that favors party over science. In this section, I want to reflect on these three contributions and consider the questions that my analyses have raised. In each arena, I propose further research to address those questions in the hope that such research could further the project of de-escalating the tensions that motivate selective science hostility.

Justification

While most research on the relationship between partisan identity and politically motivated science denial suggests that science denial discourses serve as justifications for politically driven beliefs, many studies stop short of stating this explicitly. In this dissertation, I contend that science-hostile discourses are best understood as strategic justifications for politically motivated positions. I base this argument on my observation that the most consistent predictor of whether conservative media endorse or reject a science claim is its implications for the political fortunes of the right. I demonstrate that conservative media discourses justify anti-science positions by asserting that science communicators do not act on behalf of science but instead represent their political

adversaries. Furthermore, I show that conservative media asserts that conservatives possess characteristics that enable them to see through these machinations and respond appropriately. While I do not claim to read minds, I argue that justification offers a more compelling explanation for the phenomenon of partisan hostility to science than the assertion by conservative media that conservatives genuinely perceive science communicators as part of a widespread conspiracy to marginalize the right.

However, my argument raises the question of whom this justification is intended for. It seems unlikely that most conservative content creators believe the discourses they produce to justify resistance to science would carry much weight outside of their own identity group. The fundamental premise of selective science-hostility discourse is that science communicators or scientists are not what they appear to be, but rather agents of the left. In other words, this discourse does not so much aim to appeal to centrists and the left as it aims to accuse the left of being part of a project to annihilate the right. The additional layers of justification that characterize selective science hostility are even less likely to be compelling to anyone outside the sphere of the right.

Attempting to persuade the left or the center that right-wing individuals possess unique traits that allow them to perceive the perfidy of leftist agents masquerading as experts or advocates of science would indeed be a questionable strategy. Presenting the right as moral authorities capable of discerning immorality that the left overlooks would similarly be unlikely to convince the left that conservative resistance to science is reasonable. Furthermore, I would be surprised if the producers of content for all but the largest conservative outlets believe their audiences include anyone but fellow conservatives.

Therefore, it seems possible that selective science hostility discourse is a justification strategy intended for the *right*. In other words, science hostility discourse may aim to defend and reinforce the positive self-regard that Bilgrami (2006) identified as a crucial part of political identity. It may also serve to equip conservatives with talking points they can present to individuals outside their ingroup as evidence that the right has reasons for their hostility toward science, even if those reasons are unlikely to persuade outsiders. Future research, perhaps utilizing content analysis of what conservatives express about politically significant science when directly addressing people outside their identity group, could differentiate between discourses that conservative media construct for internal and external audiences and what they intend each set of discourses to achieve.

Rationality

A second piece of conventional wisdom regarding conservative hostility to science is that it represents irrationality; that tribalism or emotionalism have led many conservatives to blind themselves to reality at risk of harm to themselves or others. I have offered another perspective, that what motivates science-hostile discourse is a desire to (re)establish conservative culture as the standard for American culture. Where science stands in the way of that project, I argue, conservatives will dispute that science if the risks of being wrong about the science appear less onerous than the risks of losing political ground.

This observation raises further questions. What exactly do conservatives find more worrisome than COVID-19? I have proposed a fairly high-level concern, consistent with findings of Hochschild (2016) and others, that conservatives fear their culture being

sidelined in the United States. I have also suggested that a better understanding of the rational fears of conservatives could contribute to productive discussions toward détente vis-à-vis science. But what do those fears look like? A second question is what conservatives hoped to accomplish by expressing hostility toward Fauci's messaging during COVID-19. The conservative project regarding climate science is reasonably well understood as a means of warding off legislation that could damage the business prospects of conservatism's largest benefactors. But how did the refusal to mask, stay home for the holidays, or get vaccinated help support conservative political goals? An inquiry into how hostility to science was perceived as a blow for conservatism during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps through content analyses of conservative social media discourse, could help predict partisan reactions to future politically relevant science. A third question that arises is: at what point does concern for oneself outweigh political considerations? A study of the relationships between conservative identity, age, and willingness to comply with recommended public health practices could reveal if rises in perceived risk accompany reduced hostility to science.

Belief

My committee co-chair, Matt Powers, once asked the members of a panel of scholars studying science denial, of which I was a member, why conservatives believed as they did. Why did conservatives accept misinformation instead of the science that most scientists consider credible? My response at that time was that I was unsure that conservatives genuinely believed it, and I still hold that perspective. Scholars of epistemic virtues and vices have, in addition to the usual array of vices including motivated reasoning, dogmatism, unwillingness to listen to others' perspectives, and

regurgitation of unexamined talking points, identified the vice of “bullshitting” (MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2020). This vice involves “indifference to, or contempt for, the truth” (2020, pg. 3), such that the “bullshitter’s aim is not to describe reality correctly; he is ‘faking things’ and is a ‘phony’ and what he says has no connection to the truth” (2020, pgs. 3-4). For someone who has determined that they would rather take on the risks that science communicators are right than risk losing political ground, belief may become irrelevant. In other words, a person may not care what the truth is and will adopt certain discourses and courses of action based not on their beliefs about what is true, but on an indifference to what is true.

This proposal also raises questions that merit further investigation. If conservatives are not acting on their beliefs about science, what beliefs *are* they acting on? I suspect that what they believe is that they are becoming marginalized in American life. Throughout the media content I analyzed, this sense of beleaguerment was the animus that remained consistent, the source of the energy that drove the discourse. However, despite the difference-erasing discourse of the logic of equivalence in conservative media, the constituent groups of the right do have differing concerns. Discovering what beliefs members of these groups hold about the threats presented to them individually by the left could reveal hidden rationalities that might create opportunities for productive communication across partisan differences. It is easy to surmise that the tenets of conservative culture defended by conservative media reduce to commitments that others cannot yield on, such as racism, anti-feminism, industrialism, unfettered capitalism, nationalism, and so on. Indeed, no ground should be given where conscience forbids it. However, should we assume that we fully

understand the aims of all conservatives? More research could help identify pain points that could be addressed.

A recent flurry of news stories has sent reporters to the heartland to find out whether Trump voters regret their votes in light of Trump's imposition of steep tariffs that could financially harm them. From those interviews, some insights into more mundane concerns have surfaced. One farmer told a visiting reporter that he and other farmers felt they *had* responded to appeals to make their practices more climate-friendly. They had adjusted how they disposed of cattle waste, when they watered their crops, and some of the products they used in farming. However, he noted that this had made farming more expensive but had not increased the value of farm products. Furthermore, the farmers' efforts had gone largely unrecognized by mainstream media. It is easy to understand how farmers who share these sentiments might feel as if they are being extinguished and that their contributions to the national well-being are undervalued. It is also clear how resentment and fear of ongoing marginalization and invisibility could harden one against messages that appear to promote the political objectives of the "other side." How many opportunities have been missed to recognize the legitimate concerns and grievances that ordinary conservatives feel? Could addressing these, where feasible, lower political temperatures enough to enhance the national capacity to tackle science-related crises? I believe it is worth considering.

In Sum

PDT holds that when we arrive at a comprehensible and plausible account of the constituent parts of a phenomenon, we will be able to imagine other alternative realities. I would like to propose one. I can envision a reality in which people of good faith attempt

to locate each other across the us/them divide. I can imagine those individuals strongly disagreeing with one another on matters related to egalitarianism and other commitments that are irreconcilable. I can also picture them possibly discovering that there are areas on both sides of the us/them line where ground can be given without violence to principles. Such compromises are unlikely to fully or quickly resolve the partisanship that has gripped America in recent decades. Yet, as with opposing tectonic plates, catastrophic outcomes occur when pressures exceed certain thresholds. Failure to address climate change is one such catastrophic outcome. A future pandemic, or resurgences of deadly diseases such as measles and polio, once subdued by vaccines, represent other potential catastrophes. Reducing tensions along our fault lines whenever feasible could suffice to lower the political pressure enough to diminish the likelihood that one political group will find resistance more appealing than political concession. This is, of course, beyond the capabilities of science communicators alone. This is a task for all thoughtful communicators who contribute to political discourse. It is hoped, however, that this research may contribute, in some small way, to that effort.

Limitations

This research has been limited by several factors. I will highlight three of them here. The first is that it tackled a high number of themes. Although 400 articles represent a very large sample by discourse analysis standards, it is still a tiny fraction of the more than 12,000 articles in the corpus. These results could be strengthened through machine-assisted, quantitative analyses of conservative media to test relationships that may exist between specific aspects of conservative identity and specific themes, such as family values and Thunberg's youth.

Secondly, some of the inferences from this project were made from even smaller samples, subsets of the 400 articles analyzed. One subset consisted of articles that informed my discussion of the epistemology of moral discernment as a predicated aspect of conservative identity, explaining how conservatives could identify science that should not be trusted or considered when evaluating truth. Future studies could test that inference using a larger sample and narrow the focus of that study to just that topic. The inferences drawn about the “Fauci flip,” in which I observed that changes in conservative media assessments of Fauci’s moral character corresponded to changes in the degree to which Fauci’s communication reflected well on Trump, were also based on a subset of 105 articles. A machine-assisted, quantitative study could test the strength of that relationship and provide greater (or lesser) confidence in my inferences.

Thirdly, the sampling process for this research was flawed due to the differences between the strategy used to sample the first round of Fauci data, which was discovered too late, and its poor transferability to the Thunberg data. This was addressed in the second round of sampling, but other issues with the sampling process remain. Since duplicates were omitted from the analysis, it is possible that minority discourses were overrepresented. Future studies could investigate the prevalence of specific discourses in conservative media’s responses to science communicators.

Ultimately, this project did not aim to identify the original sources of the discourses mentioned. If most of these themes and talking points originated from a small number of elites, the implications differ significantly compared to if a substantial portion emerged from the crowd. This project highlighted the talking points that were amplified and recirculated by a wide range of conservative media outlets, from major

networks to smaller platforms; however, much remains unknown about whether these talking points were spontaneous expressions of distributed media or centrally orchestrated.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Data and methods

The animating questions for this research was: How and why are questions of science associated with political identity? As stated in the section on theory, I chose to use qualitative textual analysis because of the broadness of the question, which was geared to allow further questions to emerge as the analysis continued. “How” and “why” questions are often addressed with qualitative methods to provide rich descriptions of social phenomena that allow for deep understanding of social practices in a specific context. In this section, I discuss why I chose to study responses to Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci in conservative media to address the overarching question. I then explain how I gathered the data and selected samples. Finally, I explain my coding process.

The Study Site: Conservative media

I chose media of the far right as a site of study to address the question of how identity becomes germane to political identity for several reasons. The first was that the two most consequential instances of science denial in recent years involved climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, conservative identity was the strongest predictor of opposition to orthodox science (Björnberg et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2021; Conway et al., 2021; Hoffman, 2012). Science denial was also found to be associated with the consumption of right-wing media in the cases of COVID-19 (De Coninck et al., 2021) and climate change (Carmichael et al., 2017). Although this is not a media effects study in which data were selected based on the assumption of media influence, the correlation suggested that discourse associating science with identity

could be found in conservative media. Partisan media are also implicated in constructing partisan identity (Bauer & Nadler, 2019; Kreiss, 2018; Nadler, 2022; Peck, 2019; Ruud, 2003). As such, it stood to reason that discursive connections between identity and scientific matters would be visible in conservative media content.

While many studies of conservative media limit their focus to a select few of the largest and most influential outlets, such as Fox and *Breitbart*, I included conservative media outlets of all sizes in this study. I did so because this is not a media effects study in which one might focus on the conservative outlets with the largest reach and influence. Instead, this study examines how conservative media construct meaning around science. Meaning-making is most visible in media content that expresses opinions and analyzes news events. Larger outlets like *Breitbart* and Fox tend to avoid editorialization in their news content, although their pundits produce opinions and analyses (Trifiro et al., 2021). Therefore, the analysis of news content from larger organizations is of limited value in teasing out interpretive discourse, especially since this study focuses on overt rather than latent communication about science and identity. Content from Fox, *Breitbart*, and other major outlets was included in the study if it contained analysis or opinion, but legacy-style content from these outlets or any other site was not.

The smaller outlets in the conservative media ecosystem's long tail are produced by conservatives, for conservatives, and tend to focus on analyzing news produced by others rather than generating new news (Trifiro et al., 2021). MediaBiasFactCheck.org provides sufficient information about the ownership structures and known funding sources of the websites it lists to demonstrate that many conservative outlets in the long

tail are also produced by single individuals and small organizations, without the kind of financial incentives that may influence the agendas of professionalized outlets. Many small outlets operate without grant money and with very little advertising revenue and are the personal projects of highly partisan individuals, blurring the line between media and audience. While sites of the long tail are not generally prolific producers of content and many contain no original content, nor are they typically highly influential, they do reflect the choices of their operators in what ideas and content to amplify and curate, based on what they believe others will find interesting or compelling. This makes smaller sites, such as blogs, a good place to look for discourses that have traction within the right as a social identity group.

Additionally, whether conservative media qualify as a counter-public is a subject of debate; however, conservative media behave as if they are, portraying themselves as providing a public sphere for a marginalized population (Hemmer, 2016). Counter-publics are spaces where subaltern populations cultivate their identities, needs, strategies, and language, enabling marginalized individuals to comprehend and communicate their circumstances (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1992). Historically, much of this work has occurred within small counter-public media formats, like the “guerrilla television” of 1960s counterculture or the feminist media of the 1970s (Drüeke & Zobl, 2012). Although conservatives may not be a subaltern public, and considering the considerable wealth and power conservatives possess, advocating such an argument would be challenging, they see themselves as marginalized (Asen, 2009). Therefore, their media operates as a counter-public to some degree, serving as a space to discuss conservative identities, opinions, needs, and strategies. Conservative media

participating in counter-public style discourse are invaluable sources of “backstage” discourse among conservative true believers (Freed, 2012), in contrast to the “frontstage” discourses that conservative media outlets might anticipate being read and evaluated by progressives or centrists (Chapelan, 2021; Dowd, 2017).

The Cases: Why Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci

Science denial is a discursive project. Information about science reaches the public through discourses that appear in various media. Universities and research institutions often issue press releases upon completing major studies, which both mainstream media and specialized outlets, like *Scientific American*, may cover. Mainstream media also report on significant science discussions, such as the meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). At times, public figures succeed in attracting public attention to scientific matters, as Al Gore did by filming *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2007 (Elsasser & Dunlap, 2013) and as Rachel Carson did by writing *Silent Spring* about the harmful effects of pesticides in 1962 (Jasanoff, 2007). The messages of Gore and Carson spurred public debate that pro-industry voices sought to counter with their own narratives (Elsasser & Dunlap, 2013; Jasanoff, 2007). In both instances, business and political communicators competed with science communicators for favorable public opinion, as public sentiment influences the legitimacy of government policy. Instances where discourse converges around one or two prominent science communicators provide unique opportunities to observe how media engages in science denial alongside science communication, as the source of the communication is typically identified, and specific statements are addressed.

Like Carson and Gore, Greta Thunberg effectively captured the public's attention. In 2019, when she was 15, Thunberg's morally scathing call for governments to address the climate change crisis described by climate scientists—rather than deflecting their responsibilities onto her generation—struck a nerve. She appeared at the United Nations, the World Economic Forum, and European parliaments, and her messages were widely disseminated through the global press. For these reasons, she was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and was named by *Nature* magazine as one of the 10 people who mattered in science in 2019 (Schiermeier, 2019). The “Greta Effect” was credited with bringing climate change onto the global popular agenda in a way it hadn't been for a decade (Nevett, 2019), making Thunberg one of science's most effective communicators.

Thunberg was not a scientist, but that does not preclude her from being an important science communicator. Science communication is the “dissemination of scientific knowledge outside the circle of specialists” (Bischi, 2021, p. 7). Although it is typically associated with scientists who communicate with the public, it is not limited to them. Fähnrich and colleagues described activists as “‘alternative’ science communicators” (2020, p. 2) who “mobilise scientific knowledge with the intention of affecting political discourse” (2020, p. 3). Thunberg acted as a science communicator who effectively advocated for and amplified scientists' work in the public sphere. She served as a catalyst for public discussion about climate change in 2019, making her an ideal subject for studying how conservative media interpreted her messages in their backstage discursive spaces.

Dr. Anthony Fauci has been a science communicator for over 40 years at the National Institute for Health. He served as the primary communicator of scientific expertise during the emergence of AIDS and every pandemic since, including Zika, Ebola, SARS, and, of course, COVID-19. In his case, crisis, not activism, transformed him into a consequential science communicator. During crises, the public turns to specific experts for information and advice. During the COVID-19 outbreak, Fauci, as chief medical advisor to President Trump, became the principal science communicator featured in the media and at press events, fulfilling that role. As the primary messenger delivering scientific information to the public, he became a focal point for conservative media.

Another important aspect that Thunberg and Fauci's science communication share is that they communicated at times when science was prominently featured on the public agenda. Fauci's communication about COVID-19 took place as the world faced the most dangerous pandemic in a century, prompting extraordinary measures to mitigate its impact. Thunberg herself elevated climate science to prominence; her distinct activism attracted global attention to climate change. Conservative media discourse closely mirrors mainstream attention regarding climate change, indicating that as mainstream media discussion around science increases, so does conservative media interest (Elsasser & Dunlap, 2013). Conservative media also closely followed Fauci's science messaging throughout the pandemic. One reason conservative media focus on science when it dominates the public agenda is that this is when the government is most likely to adopt policies based on scientific evidence (Elsasser & Dunlap, 2013). Thunberg's call to action on climate change pressured legislators to

respond. Conversely, many conservatives believed that adhering to Fauci's recommendations could damage the economy and undermine the political prospects of the right to maintain the White House. During periods when scientific messengers appear ready to influence policy or public opinion in ways that could politically disadvantage conservatives, conservative media actively work to mobilize significant, politically impactful resistance movements.

There is reason to believe that discourse about science aimed at a broad conservative audience differs from that produced for a small public that is perpetually interested in science denial, although research in this area is limited. For one thing, climate blog discourse tends to focus on science rather than on values, politics, and ideology (Sharman, 2014), which is also true for nearly all anti-vaccine websites (Kata, 2010). However, an analysis of conservative media responses to Greta Thunberg's messages found that most content did not center on the science she referenced. Instead, dominant themes included Thunberg's mental health, her connections to individuals and organizations that conservatives have already labeled as Other, such as Antifa and George Soros, along with ad hominem attacks (Dave et al., 2020).

But during the pandemic, conservative organizations communicating on Telegram rarely shared misinformation about science; instead, they discussed connections between COVID-19 and issues such as migration, globalism, and themes of freedom and oppression (McNeil-Wilson, 2020). An analysis of anti-Fauci tweets found that the most prevalent theme was delegitimizing the motives of scientists, including Fauci, rather than attempting to delegitimize the science (Chen et al., 2023). This suggests that during times of heightened public attention, when science may be

perceived as a threat to an identity group, laypeople might delegitimize the messages of science communicators in various ways that have little to do with the science itself. Certainly, it is important for those interested in the effectiveness of science communication to understand how lay partisan audiences receive, interpret, and respond to science messaging at moments when large, potentially politically consequential publics become engaged. The cases of Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci present an excellent opportunity to enhance that understanding.

Data collection and sampling

To find textual articles that responded to messaging from either Thunberg or Fauci, the unit of analysis was any article from conservative media that mentioned Thunberg or Fauci in the title. To keep the two data sets as similar as possible, the data were drawn from 12-month periods starting with the first month in which each science communicator trended upward in conservative media. For Thunberg, this was mid-March 2019, and for Fauci, it was January 2020. While the two data sets overlap for a 10-week period between January 1 and March 15, 2020, the number of articles related to either during this time was minimal, as attention to Thunberg waned while attention to COVID-19 slowly increased. The articles were drawn from the entire corpus of conservative media articles produced during the 12-month sampling frames, using the search terms in the title.

Assembling the corpus

A list of conservative media was compiled using MIT's Media Cloud (MIT Media Lab, 2020) list of right-wing media (unfortunately, Media Cloud was discontinued in 2020, shortly after the data collection process was completed) and Poynter's

MediaBiasFactCheck.org (MBFC) lists of right-biased media, questionable media, and conspiracy/pseudoscience media. This was done because the two sites employed different methodologies to identify conservative media. Media Cloud's list was created by identifying websites most frequently retweeted by Twitter users who also shared content supporting Trump. However, this method did not produce a list of purely conservative sites. Legacy news from regions with majority conservative populations, such as news sites in Texas and the rural Midwest, were also frequently retweeted by those who support Trump. Similarly, sites that were not partisan but appeared to interest Trump voters, like the financial site MarketWatch.com, were also included. Additionally, for some reason, Media Cloud's English language results returned many entries in languages other than English.

Media Cloud was searched using the site's now-defunct search function to select conservative media that referenced Thunberg or Fauci within the 12-month sampling frame. The analysis focused on textual media, as transcribing broadcast audio/visual media was not feasible; however, video and audio sites that included transcripts or summaries were included. Only US-facing sites—those whose content primarily addressed US politics—were considered. This was done for two reasons. First, some misinformation sites had been de-platformed by US hosting services and re-established on overseas platforms, meaning that limiting the analysis to sites published in the US would exclude them. One such site was the white supremacist group *Daily Stormer*, which has held multiple overseas domain names, including .rw, registered in Rwanda (Squire, 2023). Second, some Russian sites in the data, including *RT* and *Sputnik News*, produced news for US audiences and had become part of the US conservative

media ecosystem. In a few cases where sites in the Media Cloud list had non-US domain names or were strongly associated with other countries, such as the Russian sites mentioned above, their classification as US-facing conservative sites was determined by whether the majority of their headlines focused on American politics and included recognizable conservative themes, such as demonizing Hillary Clinton, claiming that Joe Biden was senile, and denouncing infringements on Second Amendment rights.

MBFC's lists are derived from qualitative analysis and categorized by their most prominent characteristics (their complete methodology is available on their website). For example, sites that are conservative but primarily promote conspiracy theories or misinformation are categorized as Conspiracy/Pseudoscience and Questionable, respectively. MBFC includes descriptions of each website they have analyzed. Those on the Questionable list feature a spectrum graphic that positions the site on a scale from extreme left to extreme right (see image A-1).

Figure 1: MBFC Scale for the Gateway Pundit from the Questionable List



Sites on the Conspiracy/Pseudoscience lists are not mapped onto a political spectrum graphic, but MBFC includes partisan bias in the site descriptions, as when *Science.News* was described as “an extreme right-wing biased source that frequently promotes false or misleading information regarding vaccines, alternative health, and

government conspiracies” (Van Zandt, 2022, para. 7). Three media lists—Right-leaning, Conspiracy/Pseudoscience, and Questionable—were downloaded from the MBFC site, and each website was compared with the Media Cloud list. Those appearing on both lists were automatically included. Those appearing only on the MBFC lists were included if they were on the Right Biased MBFC list. All sites on the Questionable list were included if they were charted to the right of right-center on the spectrum graphic. Those characterized as right or extreme right on the Conspiracy/Pseudoscience list were also included. Sites that appeared solely on the Media Cloud list were opened and examined. If they identified themselves as conservative or right-wing, they were included. If they did not refer to themselves as conservative, the content was evaluated based on the same criteria used to identify US-facing sites. The final list was compared with *Buzzfeed’s* list of hyper-partisan conservative media and *PolitiFact’s* list of right-wing media, but no new sites were identified.

The final list included 933 websites (see Appendix D). Those from the Media Cloud list were already narrowed to sites that had produced some content on either Fauci or Thunberg, but the sites found only on MBFC had not yet been searched for that content. Furthermore, articles referencing Thunberg or Fauci in their titles were sought, which Media Cloud had not identified. The following Google search strings were created in R to search all sites on the list for articles with Thunberg or Fauci in the title. For Fauci, I used **allintitle: fauci site:[domainname]**. For Thunberg, who was often referenced in titles as “Greta,” “Greta Thunberg,” or “Thunberg,” the search string was **allintitle: (Greta OR Thunberg) -Susteren site:[domainname]**. The argument

referencing Susteren was included to filter out titular references to conservative commentator Greta Van Susteren.

To ensure no relevant content was overlooked, stories that referenced Greta Thunberg in any capacity (Media Cloud offers this option) but did not mention her by name were analyzed for terms that identified her in titles. This is crucial because before someone becomes a “household name,” their names are often not included in titles. Those articles that referenced her but did not name her typically included the words “teen” and “climate” in the title, leading to the creation of another search string using those terms for an additional scrape. Once the lists were compiled, duplicates were removed using R. Ultimately, there were 3,606 articles across 394 websites that contained at least one story from March 15, 2019, to March 15, 2020, referencing Thunberg in the title, and 9,299 articles from 494 websites that included Fauci in the title during 2020. PDFs were generated from the URLs of each story. However, in many instances, the PDFs produced for the sample needed to be recreated from the original source due to inadequate replication of the articles in the PDFs generated by Python. The complete set of PDFs is available, but it should be noted that many are unusable in their current state due to issues such as pop-up artifacts obscuring text, line breaks erasing sections of text, or misalignments between text and advertising that result in jumbled text, necessitating manual recreation before analysis.

Sampling

Several factors complicated sampling. A traditional method of sampling news content involves using a constructed week sample in which the data are organized by the days of the week on which they appeared. Then, one or more dates are randomly

chosen from each weekday set, and all the data from those dates are included in the final sampling frame. This method assumes that the most important variable to control for in random news sampling is the influence of weekly cycles in the news. However, this method was unsuitable for several reasons. For one thing, the publishing schedule of blogs can be quite erratic, with content published multiple times daily on some large sites and less than once a week on others. Furthermore, an important practice of conservative media is curation; conservative media stories are frequently reprinted on other conservative websites, sometimes days or even weeks later. This means that the date on which a sample was found in the data does not necessarily correspond with the day it was first published. As such, there was no discernible consistent cycle associated with the days of the week in the data.

Another issue was that, while peaks and valleys of attention over time in the Fauci data were fairly evenly distributed across the year after a slow ramp-up from January to early March, the Thunberg data had a single significant peak. Attention was moderate for the first six months, including the Fridays for Future school strikes through June and the August yacht trip across the Atlantic to attend the UN Climate Session. Then, there was a huge spike in attention in the few days following Thunberg's Sept. 23, 2019, address to the UN. A constructed week or month scheme would have risked drastically under-sampling the data responding to that speech if the randomly chosen dates missed the period from approximately September 23-27. Additionally, a key aspect of my project was to examine how conservative media implicated identity while responding to science communication during moments of heightened public attention.

Thus, a random sample drawn from the entire corpus would naturally reflect moments of heightened attention in ways that constructed weeks or months would not.

Another factor that complicated the sampling scheme was that the first sampling plan, developed after the Fauci data had been compiled but before the Thunberg data was compiled, involved identifying three key discussion topics from each data set, analyzing the articles related to each topic, and comparing their similarities and differences. This approach had the advantage of focusing on moments of heightened attention and ensuring simplicity. The Fauci corpus was collected first. The corpus was searched for stories focused on hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), an inexpensive anti-malarial drug that Trump believed would treat COVID-19 but which Fauci refused to endorse; holiday advisories against large gatherings; and bans on international travel. These three topics were selected for their nearly equal attention and even distribution throughout the year, with travel bans occurring in late January and HCQ emerging as an issue in March, continuing through the summer. The holiday gathering advisories occurred during the holiday season. Since the plan was to start with samples of 100 from each data set, random samples of 33 were drawn from each topic set using a random number generator in R. Given that examining more than 13,000 articles for suitability prior to sampling was not feasible, samples were drawn and unusable articles were discarded until there were three sets of 33 articles, totaling 99 articles. One additional article was randomly selected from a combined list of the articles in the three sets, bringing the total to 100 articles. These were coded while the Thunberg data was being compiled and cleaned. However, when the Thunberg data was ready for sampling, it became apparent that attention was clustered around one dominant peak

so distinctly that attempting to repeat the sampling process would be futile.

Consequently, 100 articles were drawn at random from the corpus and coded.

Sample Size. There is no formal calculus for determining sample size in qualitative research (Sargeant, 2012). Instead, most qualitative studies continue analyzing data until reaching a point of “theoretical saturation,” a term derived from the work of Glaser and Strauss and defined as a point at which “no additional data are being found whereby the [researcher] can develop properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 61). This approach has been considered sufficient for decades of research (Guest et al., 2020), but Guest et al. (2020) developed a method to operationalize the concept of “saturation” to enhance analytical rigor. Three factors are taken into account for establishing the size of an initial sample set. The first factor is the base size; in other words, the size of the data set from which the sample will be drawn. When using the entire available data corpus as a base, as I did, the research can be confident to “reach saturation by default as there are no more data to consider” (2020, p. 6). The data is analyzed in sets until the ratio of new themes emerging per set falls below .05%. Studies have found that “the most prevalent, high-level themes are identified very early on in data collection,” meaning initial runs may involve as few as six interviews, with saturation reached at a dozen or fewer.

However, I would need a much larger data set for several reasons. The first is that many articles are quite short. Unlike an interview, the transcripts of which can reach into thousands of words, conservative media stories are often around 400 words, though some are much longer. Secondly, as I was conducting four studies, the number of high level themes that would be relevant to the entire project were potentially quite

high. To assess the feasibility of the project, I carried out a pilot study on just 10 articles. Nearly all of my highest-level themes, including the importance of communicator/scientist morality as a device to parse truth claims, the ubiquity of the existential threat of tyranny as marginalization of the traditionalist culture of the right, most of the traits and characteristics that conservative content creators ascribed to conservative identity and to the leftist Other, and the conservative avowal of respect for science, were identified in that set of 10. I did not know how many more themes might proceed from a larger sample set, but it was already clear that certain themes were frequently repeated.

I started with sample sets of 100 articles from each dataset. I suspected this number would be large enough to provide a good representation of the discourses that emerged over each 12-month span, enabling me to examine how the elements of discourse production were utilized in response to various shifts in the daily news cycle. A set of 200 articles was also manageable, especially since many texts are relatively short, but I was ready to expand my sample set if I felt there were unanswered questions at the end of the first round of analysis.

After coding the initial 200 articles, I was not confident that I had explored all potentially relevant themes. Therefore, I added a second set of 200, planning to code in rounds of 20 until a rough calculation of the new themes found dropped to fewer than one per round. I reached that threshold after coding approximately 100 articles in the second round, but I decided to finish coding the entire set to ensure I would have a robust collection of instances of each major theme upon which to base my findings. I continued to break large themes into subcategories well into the analysis phase,

applying those subcodes to all the articles coded for the larger categories. At other times, I would use a text search to identify passages containing keywords that pointed to content highly specific to subcategories without further subdivision. For example, I might search for the keyword “saint” to locate a specific instance of the code “idolatry” without creating an idolatry subcategory called “saint.” This process took more than a year, after which I was confident that I had developed a comprehensive account of the themes informed by my research questions.

Coding

Coding and analysis were conducted using Atlas.ti. The initial set of codes was derived from theory, and a grounded theory approach was employed during coding, allowing codes to emerge from the data. First, each article was coded for metadata, including article title, outlet, original outlet if different, date, and author. The codes developed from Political Discourse Theory aimed to highlight two main processes of identity production occurring in texts, as described in the theory chapter and in the individual chapters to which they are relevant: nomination and predication. Nomination is the process by which individuals are categorized into a dichotomized view of the world consisting of an ingroup and a putatively hostile outgroup. Preliminary nomination codes included “The People” and “The Other.” Since individuals are sorted based on what they are said to demand from society, which is one of the factors used to map people onto “chains of equivalence” within the ingroup or the outgroup, and since such demands are often presented as empty signifiers, there was also a code for “empty signifiers.”

While nomination addresses the questions of who “we” are and who “they” are, predication addresses the questions of what “we” are like and what “they” are like. This was initially captured by the codes “The People” and “The Other,” as it was unclear to what extent nomination and predication would be distinguishable. During the second coding round, the code “Predication” was used to mark discourse that assigned traits and characteristics to the ingroup and the outgroup, resulting in the identification of subcategories. A third category, “Messenger characteristics,” was created to capture the traits specifically assigned to Thunberg and Fauci. In the first coding round, there was a code called Science Challenge to capture epistemology. As categories of Science Challenge were identified, a list of subcategories was developed. Additionally, there was a code for legitimation to capture how fact claims were supported and a code for epistemology to indicate evidence of systems of reasoning, with subcategories emerging during coding.

In the second coding round, subcategories that emerged during the first coding round were formalized. Codes were created for subcategories only when they were too numerous or complex to analyze without formally accounting for them. Others were analyzed based on code comments and memos. The first set of 200 articles was recoded, and the second set of 200 was coded using those subcategories. The final coding scheme, including subcategories used for second-round coding, along with operational definitions and examples, is found in Appendix C.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted through coding, journaling, writing research memos, and commenting at the quote and document levels. As insights emerged, they were

recorded in research memos and in a free-form project journal that was used to develop ideas, process emotional responses to the material, express anxieties about confusing and conflicting phenomena, and so on. This allowed me to maintain awareness of my personal biases, preventing them from influencing my interpretations of the data. While coding for indicators of how conservative identity was represented in media content responding to science messaging, specific functions of that practice became apparent. I documented my understanding of those functions in code and document comments, memos, and the journal until I developed a thorough account that remained solid as I read and revisited all the articles, with no new insights emerging.

At that point, I wrote the chapter on nomination with a clear sense of how to approach the subsequent chapters on predication, the process by which the traits and characteristics of ingroups and outgroups are described. It became evident that conservative media were using predication as a strategy of moral defense by portraying science messengers and their associates as threats to conservative values. This also enabled conservative media to galvanize opposition to science messages while sidestepping discussions about the validity of the scientific claims made by each messenger. To test this inference, I posed two additional research questions: In what ways do conservative media engage in discourse hostile to Greta Thunberg or Anthony Fauci that predicates dimensions of conservative identity and the identity of the Other? And how do conservative media implicate dimensions of conservative identity and the Other in discourse hostile to Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci? I again drew on codes, comments, memos, and my journal to develop my inferences, moving back and forth between the data and the emerging insights until no new understandings arose.

Because it had become clear that challenges to science were distinct in some respects from challenges to the motives of science communicators and their associates, analyzing direct challenges to science involves understanding how people “know” what the truth is. The third study examined epistemology as a facet of identity with significant importance in countering messages derived from conventional science methods and practices of legitimation. It was becoming evident that the role of epistemology as a facet of identity in conservative media discourse, which directly disputed science, was to construct identity as including ways of knowing that allowed conservatives to see themselves as committed to conventional scientific methods. Conservative identity, as described by conservative media, also revealed a way of knowing that was presented as unique to conservatives: the ability of moral discernment, which is the capacity to recognize moral and immoral actors and the understanding that immoral actors could not make credible truth claims. This seemed to enable conservative media to explain why they rejected the findings arising from the same scientific processes they said that they believed in.

To test this emerging inference, I established the following guiding questions: What attitudes toward expertise were demonstrated in conservative media discourse that responded to Greta Thunberg and Anthony Fauci? How did conservative media account for the relationships between conservative traits and characteristics and conservative attitudes toward the expertise information in Thunberg and Fauci’s communication to the public? What could explain the discursive practices of conservative media in relating conservative identity and attitudes toward scientific expertise and claims of scientific truth? From the sample of 400 articles, I selected for

analysis only those that had been coded as sci-yes, indicating that there was some challenge to science itself present in the article. There were 21 such articles in the Thunberg set and 76 in the Fauci set, for a total of 97 articles. These were examined for how scientific arguments were legitimized, the attitudes demonstrated toward scientists and science, and evidence of systematic criteria for discerning between fact and opinion. Additionally, these articles were analyzed for relationships between predications of traits and characteristics of conservative identity and expressions referring to systems of evaluation of truth claims.

It should be noted that a fundamental weakness in this sample set was its overrepresentation of the Fauci case. As explained in Chapter 5, climate science skepticism and denial discourse has existed for decades and may have reached the level of hegemonic discourse, or discourse that has been established as conventional wisdom, on the right. Further research into the role of scientific argumentation in selective science hostility discourse toward climate science could provide additional clarity. However, comparing the two cases, including the relative scarcity of scientific discourse in the Thunberg set, proved analytically valuable in assessing how responses to science communication differed between emergent science issues and those that have long been in the public consciousness.

Finally, a fourth study focused specifically on how attitudes toward Fauci shifted between January and December of 2020. In the first round of coding and analysis, articles that presented Fauci positively were labeled as “pro-Fauci” and organized by date of publication. Articles that explicitly addressed changing attitudes toward Fauci were identified as “Fauci flip” and ordered by date. These articles were analyzed for

references to specific instances in the news cycle and how those instances informed discussions about Fauci or Fauci's messaging. All articles containing moral evaluations of Fauci (those that had previously been coded "sci challenge: moral") were also organized by date and analyzed for references to related news items. Once it became evident that a significant shift in attitude toward Fauci had occurred in March and April of 2020, all articles in the Fauci set dated between January and May, totaling 105 articles, were grouped into a study set called "Fauci Flip," and were ordered by date and analyzed based on the insights gleaned from the first round of analysis.

A note on references:

As noted earlier, conservative media content referencing Fauci or Thunberg in the title included numerous articles that had been published elsewhere or were themselves reprinted in other locations. The first instance of each article was coded, while subsequent copies were labeled "excluded: duplicate" and omitted from analysis, as it made no sense to code multiple duplicates of the same article. In cases where the coded article was not the original, the outlet where the original appeared was noted in the document comments. However, by the time the dissertation was completed, many of the coded documents could no longer be found at the URLs from which they were retrieved. Where possible, URLs in the reference section link to the sites from which they were retrieved, but when the original documents could not be accessed from those sites, the articles were located on the Wayback Machine, with the associated URLs included in the references. Several websites that have been deplatformed from the Wayback Machine for hate speech, including white nationalist sites, were still able to provide duplicate articles found on other archives, usually conservative news

aggregation sites. Only two articles referenced in this research are no longer available on the internet, but copies are accessible from the dataset.

A note on future studies:

All articles were saved and loaded into Atlas.ti as PDFs. In retrospect, this approach is inadvisable given the current capabilities of Atlas.ti. The PDFs contained marginalia, such as keywords, hashtags, advertisements, and links to other articles. They also included all comments left by readers on the articles. This was done because it was initially unclear what would be useful for analysis. However, PDFs cannot be edited once they are loaded into Atlas.ti. This limitation made machine-assisted coding impractical, as it applies to all instances of keywords in each document, including comments and marginalia, resulting in excessive results that did not derive from the content of the articles. Word documents are preferable for several reasons. First, they can be edited after being placed in Atlas.ti, allowing irrelevant material to be removed before the second round of coding begins. Second, comments can be made directly on Word documents and then coded alongside the content for easier retrieval. The third advantage of Word documents is that Atlas.ti can number paragraphs in them, but not in PDFs, which simplifies in-text citations of quotes drawn from blog posts. Finally, when creating a PDF of an article that includes social media posts like tweets, images are often stripped away, leaving only text. While this did not affect this research, as visual content analysis was outside the scope of the project, it could be significant for others conducting article analysis in Atlas.ti.

Appendix B: Codebook

Codes and subcodes were developed to identify patterns and relationships between identity construction and attitudes toward science communication in conservative media articles. There are two levels of coding: document and quote. Document-level codes (Table A-1) include metadata, science argument presence, and moment codes. Quotes are excerpts of text found within documents, and quote codes are categorized into four major groups. The first group includes codes for quotes related to concepts drawn from Political Discourse Theory concerning identity construction (Table B-2). The second consists of codes for quotes addressing science challenges (Table B-3). Subcodes reflect the nature of challenges to the veracity of science claims that a science communicator advocated. This group was derived iteratively until no new subcodes emerged, at which point the resultant code set was applied to all documents in the final coding rounds. The third group of quote-level codes is for quotes reflecting epistemology (Table B-4). The fourth group (Table B-5) comprises single words or short phrases that function as empty signifiers. Representative examples are provided for quote-level codes (Tables B-2 through B-4). Empty signifiers are excluded, as they tend to be single words synonymous with the code itself.

Note on terminology:

A group is a term for a collection of codes that do not function as a code on their own. For instance, while there was no specific code for nomination, there was a collection of codes organized in a folder labeled nomination.

Emergent code: This refers to a code that emerged during the first round of coding and was applied to all documents in subsequent rounds. Emergent codes were created only for categories of discourse that appeared to be prominent, surprising, or important.

Theoretical note: This note, included in the coding guide, reminded me of the concept's theoretical significance.

Note: A note is an explanatory comment added to the code definition for inclusion in this appendix. Notes clarify where codes have been condensed or split into multiple parts and highlight differences in their uses. For example, some codes were created to gather and analyze large groups of texts, while others were developed later simply to mark examples of an emerging theme, and so on.

Table B-1. Group and Code Descriptions for Document Level Codes

CODEGROUP/Codes/subcodes

Description

METADATA	
Author	The name or pen-name of the person the original document was attributed to.
Date	Date published. If it was not available, the date was drawn from the document metadata and included in the document title
Title	Title of the article
Outlet	The name of the outlet in which the document appeared
Excluded	<p>If a document was excluded for some reason, it was coded excluded and placed in a separate folder with a note explaining why it was excluded. Reasons included “video only,” “miscategorized,” “image only,” “legacy-style,” and “duplicate.”</p> <p>If an article was excluded for being a duplicate, the title and outlet of the coded document was noted.</p>
SCIENCE ARGUMENT	<p>This code group was to indicate whether a science-based argument was present in the document. A science-based argument was one that provided a fact-claim that supported a stated belief about science. This could include a link purporting to connect to an off-screen fact claim made in another source.</p>

Sci-Yes	Contained some fact claim or reference to a specific off-screen fact claim about the science advocated by the communicator in question. Could be a data-driven analysis original to the author or reference to empirical claims made by others.
Sci-No	No reference to a supported fact claim about science was present in the document
MOMENT	This code group whether the document reflected a moment in which science appeared to support a political identity group
MoLookBad	This described a document that reflected a moment in which science appeared to support the left.
MoLookGood	This described a document referencing a moment in which science appeared to support the right

Table B-2. Political Discourse Theoretical

CODEGROUP/Codes/subcodes	Definition
<p>NOMINATION</p>	<p>Nomination includes nouns used to signify an entity. Indicators include nouns (leach, communist, constitutionalist) that provide a clue as to what the named entity, whether individual or group, demands of society. May include empty signifiers (American, traitor), which are words with contested meanings that can confer legitimacy on one group or the other based on the definition established for the signifier.</p> <p>Nomination is also indicated by instances in which other actors are linked on a chain of equivalence to an entity, for example, linking Thunberg to George Soros based on a putative desire to institute communism in the US.</p>

Notes: Because of the massive array of nominations (puppet, communist, oligarch, deep state actor, bureaucrat, patriot, bumpkin, tyrant, worker, Democrat, Republican), that appeared in the texts, nominations were not coded beyond The People and The Other (which were also coded for predication and argumentation). Rather, several codes were created for who was being nominated so that reports could be run of nominations applied to entities of particular theoretical interest.

No subcodes for left/right or conservative/liberal were made, because those nominations cleaved so closely to the existing codes The Other/The People that to break them out by partisan affiliation would have been redundant.

	<p>Also, although the codes for The People and The Other are classified as nomination codes, the codes were also used for locating indicators of predication, see PREDICATION below</p>
<p>The People</p>	<p>The subject. The common identity. In PDT, the subject self, which is constructed and revised relative to the shifting, contingent other. Indicated by words such as “we”, “I”, “us,” conservatives. Indicated by the perspective from which the author communicates. Indicated by shared demand, desire, see Utopia/Dystopia. Indicated by performativity, including expressions of emotion where such emotion could reasonably be assumed to be shared by others of the People. Indicators also include empty signifiers, see EMPTY SIGNIFIERS.</p> <p>Theoretical Note: PDT highlights "logics of equivalence and difference." Difference is basically counterpublics, by Laclau's</p>

	<p>definiton, which go away when their demands aren't met and are subsumed by a logic of equivalence oriented to an adversary, creating the conditions necessary for a populist movement. What real world differences between "us" are elided as we orient to the "other?" What internal aspects of ourselves must be negated in order to be The People?</p>
<p>Example: Fauci attempted to convince the country he isn't an "authoritarian" while simultaneously telling Americans to "do what you're told." Excuse me? (TeaParty.org, 2020, para. 2)</p>	
<p>The Other</p>	<p>This code is for references to an entity or entities not a member of the people. Also for entites associated with members of the Other.</p> <p>Theoretical note: From PDT: When contingencies threaten the ontology upon which the subject's identity is founded, the other is constructed to explain it, and the self is reidentified in relationship to it.</p>
<p>Example: They would love to see a wedge driven between Trump and Fauci, because then they could yell about how "Trump doesn't believe the scientists!" which</p>	

fts neatly into their narrative. It's not a coordinated goal of the media to provoke Trump into doing this kind of stuff; it's a result of their stereotypical groupthink. Trump pushes their buttons by dressing them down to their faces, and they push his buttons in return by promoting their "Orange Man Bad" narrative. (Fisher, 2020, para. 8)

<p>Utopia/Dystopia</p>	<p>That set of demands that equalizes the self and the other.</p> <p>Utopia: Texts that offer glimpses of the characteristics of utopia when oriented to the obstacle associated with science. The demands that produce equivalence. Texts that answer the questions: What are "we" fighting for? What is the well-ordered world? What is the moral world? What will we do within it? What do we lack that we will have? What do we value that will no longer be threatened? What do we protect?</p> <p>Dystopia: is the context that will be created if the elements of the horrific dimension are realized by the other. It is what the Other wants, the demands that the other will or does make of society that distinguishes them from the people and makes them equal with</p>
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each other. Texts that answer the question:
What do they want? What do they value?
What do they not value that we value? What
will happen to us should they prevail? This
code is used for texts that offer glimpses of
dystopia when the other is science.

Theoretical Note: Dystopia is specifically
constructed to the other, and changes when
the other changes. Sharia law is a feature of
the dystopian future associated with the
Muslim other. Gulag is a feature of the
dystopian future imagined when the other is
government. hat offer glimpses of dystopia
when the other is science.

Theoretical note: the Logics are the
explanatory units of PDT and this has to do
with the third of three basic kinds of logics,
social, political and fantasmatic (Glynos,
Howarth, Norval and Speed). The
fantasmatic "involves the construction of a
narrative that promises a fullness-to-come
once a named or implied obstacle is

overcome – the beatific dimension of fantasy – or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves too threatening or insurmountable: the horrific dimension of fantasy. Images of omnipotence or of total control often represent the beatific dimension, while images of impotence or victimization frequently represent the horrific dimension of fantasmatic attempts to cover over the radical contingency of social relations."

Note: These were not broken out into individual codes because they were often too reciprocal to make a meaningful distinction. That is, when an author described dystopia, that author also constructed utopia as its inverse.

Example-Dystopia: The media is promoting mutant freaks as our moral betters and perhaps our new overlords. (Slavo, 2020, para. 9)

Example-Utopia: Freedom and peace are coming, and there's nothing politicians or the mainstream media can do about it. They will keep trying to lower people into a state of fear and panic. They will keep censoring those who speak up. They will keep trying to convince us that we belong enslaved to the ruling class and the elitists. But we

know better and we can now see. (Slavo, 2020, para. 9)	
Elite	Subcode highlighting a nomination for a known elite or synonym, such as a high profile investor (Soros), elected official (Trump, etc) or celebrity, or someone the article described as an elite.
Example: Everyone else gets to pick up the pieces when our useless elite breaks a few eggs along the way. (Schlichter, 2019, para. 2)	
Expert	Subcode highlighting a nomination made for an expert or someone described as an expert or synonym. Includes instances in which the word expert or a synonym appears in scare quotes used to indicate an illegitimate expert.
Example: The "experts" also have changed their mind before on wearing masks. (Unruh, 2020, para. 12)	
Science messenger	Subcode highlighting a nomination made for Thunberg, Fauci, or any other major science communicator introduced into the discourse (Gore,

	Brix, etc).
<p>Ingraham’s guest, Dr. Ramin Oskoui slammed Dr Fauci for his dishonesty! (McDonald, 2020, para. 3)</p>	
<p>PREDICATION (Code and Code Group)</p>	<p>Code: Predication means language used to describe what an entity is “like.” Indicators often appear in the form of an adjective, adverb, or description of actions and attitudes applied to the ingroup or the outgroup. This is reciprocal, in that predicating one group predicates the other as its diametrical opposite. Indicators also include embodied performance in which a content creator models conservative attitudes and actions. Another indicator of predication is the appropriation of empty signifiers such as American or patriot/patriotic with legitimizing power.</p> <p>NOTE: As with nominations, predications were too numerous to break out into individual subcodes.</p>

	<p>However, after the first round of coding, several major subcodes were created for major emergent themes and applied during the second round of coding.</p>
<p>Example: It is not that we don't believe in global warming or the need to be good stewards of our Earth, it's that we don't believe the extremists.</p> <p>If people believed them, investments in fossil fuels would cease and the Obamas wouldn't own a ten million dollar property on the water. (Dowling, 2019, paras. 6, 7)</p>	
<p>Idolatry</p>	<p>Any quote in which science is conflated with religion, or a science communicator is equated with a religious figure. False religion or idolatry, "golden calf" references and other biblical imagery referencing false gods, prophets, etc.</p> <p>Eschatological imagery to do with false prophets and the last days.</p> <p>Emergent code.</p>
<p>Example: After seeing the cover for Time magazine's "Person of the Year" award, who can still pretend the Left is irreligious? (Voshell, 2019, para. 1)</p>	
<p>Moral Horror/Appalling</p>	<p>Intensified disapproval of the actions</p>

	<p>of another. Indicators include norm-rupturing language such as profanity, comments that people should be jailed or killed, name-calling, strong emotional reaction (I am in tears), and statements assigning equivalence with notoriously egregious figures such as Hitler, Jeffrey Dahmer, etc. Enhanced outrage.</p> <p>Theoretical note: Indicates “Intensification,” from PDT, referencing discourse which is used to indicate the level of appropriate response to an action.</p> <p>Emergent code.</p>
<p>Example: Swedish news agency, Samhälls Nytt reports that a formal child abuse complaint has been filed with Swedish child protective services on behalf of UN child climate alarmist and Asperger’s sufferer, Greta Thunberg to investigate her Antifa-member parent-pimps and her George Soros-affiliated handler. (Bruce, 2019, para. 1)</p>	
<p>Wise</p>	<p>Any quotation in which the writer claims to be able to see or divine</p>

	<p>things hidden to others by virtue of experience with human nature, or enhanced intuition about others that is related to political identity. Also includes the ability to interpret, draw conclusions, or to infer, from things visible to all, things that others miss. Perspicacity. This is equivalent to the English “nose tap,” the “we’re in the know” nod of recognition and understanding between members of a privileged group.</p> <p>Emergent code</p>
<p>Example: The play-pretend “doctor,” encouraging Americans to follow his lead, apparently forgot which arm received the fake needle in his rush to explain that pain at the injection site is perfectly “normal” and something that everyone should expect. (Huff, 2020, para. 2)</p>	
<p>Rebellion/Resistance/Defiance</p>	<p>Any quote in which an author performatively breaks a norm, encourages others to break norms, praises those who have broken norms. Applies to breaking laws.</p>

	<p>Emergent code.</p> <p>Note: These codes began as different codes and were combined because they could not adequately be distinguished from one another.</p> <p>Emergent code</p>
<p>“Holy cow this is absolutely spectacular,” podcaster and author Dave Rubin, who lives in Los Angeles, tweeted on Thursday, along with footage of the posters.</p> <p>“We the people are fighting back,” he added. (“Hypocrites of 2020” 2020, paras. 9–10)</p>	
<p>Reason/Rational</p>	<p>Valorization, declaration, or embodied performance of logic, unemotional thought, embrace of fact, deductive reasoning, syllogistic reasoning. Includes dismissal of the patently absurd, because the skill to recognize the patently absurd is a function of rationality. The ability to make good decisions, to assess information, to research, consider pros and cons, “think for oneself,” etc.</p>

	<p>Emergent codes. Initially broken out into reason, which was valorization or embodiment of unemotional, fact-based thought, whereas rational was dismissal of the patently absurd.</p> <p>However, so much crossover occurred between the two that the codes were combined.</p>
<p>Example: But he is widely denounced as a ‘denier’ for wanting to clarify the facts from the emotional rhetoric. (Stirling, 2019, para. 6)</p>	
<p>Communicator Characteristics</p>	<p>Construction of science communicator. Can be standalone or relative to other scientists.</p> <p>Specific to human individuals, as opposed to science as a concept. What are the science communicators like? What is this science communicator like? Relative to scientists?</p>
<p>Example: Still Fauci is whining like a little child, calling the doctors (who have already been more accurate than Fauci has ever been), calling them a bunch of people spouting something that isn’t true. (“Weasel Fauci: Do as Your Told, Wear Masks after Vaccination!,” 2020, para. 1)</p>	
<p>Beliefs</p>	<p>This code is for excerpts that indicate something about what “we” or “they” believe.</p>

	<p>Comments for these quotes answered the questions: What do we/they believe is moral? In what way is it tied to what we believe about truth claims? What do we/they believe is true? What are the ways we/they know/believe things? What are legitimate ways of knowing among our people? In what ways are these things visibly oriented to the other in the piece?</p> <p>Theoretical Note: Upon interpellation into the ingroup, one learns what "we" believe.</p> <p>In PDT, this can also be understood as part of "predication," or attribution of features.</p> <p>Note: These codes informed the subcodes for the emergent code "epistemology."</p> <p>Note: This also includes contextual but unstated beliefs, indicated by answering the question: What do we need to understand/believe to make sense of this story? For example, references to environmentalists often carry no information</p>
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	beyond that. Yet the only way a text is legible is if “we” understand environmentalists not to be credible.
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Example: Just a century ago, life was back-breaking. Plentiful energy made better lives possible, without having to spend hours collecting firewood, polluting your household with smoke, achieving heat, cold, transportation, light, food and opportunities.

Life expectancy doubled. Plentiful energy, mostly from fossil fuels, has lifted more than a billion people out of poverty in just the past 25 years.

That is not evil – it is quite the opposite. (Morano, 2019, paras. 4–6)

Tastes/characteristics	<p>Indicators included descriptions of typical activities, patterns of consumption, use of colloquialisms, expression of emotion, and evaluations of things, ideas or people. Includes statements of what “we” or “I” like, do, eat, buy, wear, travel, etc., or how “I” or “we” express ourselves.</p> <p>Coded quotes address the questions: What do we like? What are our tastes? What are “their” tastes? What are our/their lifestyles? What do we/they enjoy doing? What does that say about us/them? What are our/their aspirations? These</p>
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coded quotes informed several of the emergent subcodes for “predication.”

Theoretical note: Whereas "our beliefs" have to do with ideology, "our tastes/characteristics" speak more to culture, as discussed by Peck (2019).

Part of the "logics of equivalence and difference" Groups based on difference are basically counter publics, by Laclau's definition, which go away when their demands aren't met and are subsumed by a “logic of equivalence” oriented to a single adversary, creating the conditions necessary for a populist movement. What real world differences between "us" are elided as we orient to the "other?" Is there evidence in the text of statements of individual attributes that may differ from the ingroup?

Example: President Trump distanced himself from “the models” in a recent press briefing joking that he, “wasn’t involved in a model, at least that kind of model. (Howerton, 2020, para. 7)

<p>ARGUMENTATION</p> <p>Code and Code Group</p>	<p>This code is for instances in which some “proof” is offered to support a predication.</p> <p>Note: This code was created for the third of the three studies. It was designed to identify instances of argumentation in favor of rationality or reason when disputing science in scientific terms. As a standalone code it was seldom used, because most things that counted as argumentation also fit the definition of legitimation, see below.</p>
<p>Legitimation</p>	<p>Code for things that count as reasons to believe someone’s claims of fact. Evidence that is offered to adjudicate disputes over fact.</p> <p>Symbols that legitimize a claim of fact in the eyes of the People, such as academic titles.</p>
<p>Example: When Rep. Blaine Luetkemeyer (R-MO) interjected that the study conducted the Henry Ford Health System was peer reviewed, Fauci denigrated the peer review process that is typically vaunted by academics, intellectuals and experts.(Trejo, 2020, para. 4)</p>	

Table B-3. Science Challenge

<p>SCIENCE CHALLENGE</p>	<p>Any reason given to discredit, dispute, or dismiss the science communicator or the science being referenced</p>
<p>Sci Challenge- Common Sense</p>	<p>Any instance in which reasoning available to lay people is considered sufficient to discredit science claims (I don't know anyone who has it. Muslim women still get sick.)</p> <p>Theoretical Note: Associated with populist epistemology.</p>
<p>Example: Worse, these goofy business-related policies — ‘the virus can’t hurt you in Walmart but it’ll get ya if you go to a gym or a restaurant’ — are nonsensical, devastating to business owners, and are being made by government representatives who aren’t losing a single dime’s worth of income. (Heyes, 2020, para. 9)</p>	
<p>Sci Challenge- Counterscience</p>	<p>This is a challenge to science claims that draws on other scienceclaims. (Here, the point is not to evaluate those claims for whether they are pseudoscience, disinfo, etc. It's merely to see how often science is challenged by other science.) A science claim is a claim that includes empirical evidence or reference to empirical evidence produced by an expert, whether the author or another source. Includes reference to studies, data, anecdotes from doctors and</p>

	<p>scientists, expert knowledge, graphs, proposed correlations between data sets, etc.</p> <p>To be clear, this refers to vague handwaving to some scientific “proof” to exist out there such as statements of “proven long ago,” all the way through extensive citations or performance of expertise. Does not refer to unexplained rejection of science. Can include in-text links.</p>
<p>Example: Dr. Didier Raoult, the Anthony Fauci of France, had such spectacular success using HCQ to treat victims of SARS-CoV-2 that he said way back on February 25 that “it’s game over” for coronavirus.(Fischer, 2020, para. 5)</p>	
<p>Sci Challenge- Counter Authority</p>	<p>Challenges to science that come from outside science-as when a government agency argues against a scientist, or a political elite, or an economist, or even a media figure.</p> <p>Someone presumed to be informed. An economist who says that the science measures are too onerous for the economy to bear.</p>
<p>Example: Dr.Li Meng Jan the virologist whistleblower has maintained this also saying they took a relatively harmless virus and modified it to be deadly. She is currently in hiding somewhere in the United States and has given interviews to Tucker Carlson and a few others. (Clayton, 2020, para. 20)</p>	
<p>Sci Challenge- minimizing</p>	<p>This is when science is said to be overstated or overhyped in some way, but there is nothing more said about it. There</p>

	<p>are no stats offered, no counterauthority or counterscientist. It relies on conventional wisdom. Also includes ridicule of the science.</p>
<p>Example: And with most of the West so eager to destroy its industrial capacity just because an annoying little girl in pigtails got radicalised by watching Ice Age 2, is it any wonder that China treats it with such ill-disguised contempt? (Delingpole, 2019, para. 13)</p>	
<p>Sci Challenge- Moral</p>	<p>This is when science messaging is rejected on the grounds that there is a reason to doubt the morals of a scientist(s) or science communicator.</p>
<p>Example: While he is a civilian, Hillary Clinton fanboy Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the NIH since 1984, is heading down the path of those who show-up the boss in a time of crisis. (Taylor, 2020, para. 2)</p>	
<p>Sci Challenge- Unreliable</p>	<p>This is anything that suggests that science is wrong a lot, whether in general, or in these specific cases. Does not necessarily include a counter expert. It's just saying one doesn't believe the science because the scientists have been or are unreliable-they are bad scientists.</p>
<p>Example: "It's tough when you don't have credibility to work with the president of the United States — I think that's a fair concern to have," Mr. Mulvaney said. "If you've been wrong a couple times, it makes somebody wonder if you're wrong again — that's only human nature. (Sherfinski, 2020, para. 4)</p>	

<p>Sci Challenge: Bad Motives</p>	<p>An accusation that a person is dishonest or otherwise immoral AND has a self-serving motive for the science claims they make. Only when given as a reason to dismiss the science claim or claimant; theoretically one could have personal motives to tell the truth, too.</p> <p>Note: I had this under "moral" for the first 20 docs. But now it seems I should break this out, because when I first thought about morality as an epistemology, I was thinking of the rhetorical device wherein one identifies something about someone else (adultery, criminal history, obesity, etc) that they can use to make an argument that the person is not moral and that's how we can distinguish from between those we should trust and those we should not. This, on the other hand, is supposition, conjecture. Clearly people with bad motives are not moral, but saying "my brother is liar who lied about liking Ma's cooking so we know we can't trust him" is different than saying "my brother just wants to get Ma to leave him everything in the will." The one could support the other, but the other could not support the one.</p>
<p>Example: A number of prominent academics and professionals in the medical and scientific community have also coming out strongly against Fauci – calling him an</p>	

institutional gatekeeper who has done very little for the American people during the alleged ‘pandemic,’ but has instead helped to line the deep pockets of a transnational corporate Pharmaceutical cartel, and helped to realize the globalist objectives of the UN, World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (News Wire, 2020, para. 3)

<p>Sci Challenge: Science is political</p>	<p>This is a subcategory of Sci Challenge: Bad Motive in which science/science communicator is said to be motivated not by science but by political goals.</p> <p>It was broken out of the Bad Motives code because of its high prevalence, which designated it as an emerging theme.</p>
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Example: I'm not taking any chances. Getting a full faced motorcycle helmet for the remainder of this pandemic, which I understand is due to disappear after Nov. 3. (Eastman, 2020, para. 11)

<p>Sci Challenge: Too Onerous</p>	<p>An emergent code for quotes in which the author argues that the science, regardless of accuracy or lack thereof, does not justify the extremity of the measures proposed to address it. Where appropriate, also code for the People, as it speaks to the demands of the people, in that what they don't want to give up speaks to what they value more than they value the results of compliance.</p>
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Example: Apparently Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin tripped over that liberal commandment of “Thou shalt not criticize Saint Greta” by suggesting that she take

<p>some time to study the economic disaster that her ideas such as eliminating all fossil fuels would bring. (Arama, 2020, para. 2)</p>	
<p>Sci Challenge: Evil Intent</p>	<p>Science as intentionally, deliberately malevolent. This is to do with the sort of sci-fi discourses that present something scientific as a tool to perpetrate evil. Think The Manchurian Candidate, or the Mark of the Beast, or tracking devices, etc.</p>
<p>Example: Moreover, Gates is funding both an under-the-skin vaccine history device that can be read with infrared-equipped smartphones and a remote-controlled contraceptive microchip to go under women’s skin. (Miguel, 2020, para. 17)</p>	
<p>Sci Challenge: Scary</p>	<p>Science as capable of accidentally causing harm. “What if” statements. Concern about error. “How do we know” statements.</p> <p>Note: I've seen this enough to where on 11/10/21 I created this code. It's about presenting science as scary, as something that could do something terrible. It underpins a lot of anti-vax discourse. It doesn't mean the scientists will intend that result; that's under the new code "evil intent." It's to do with the possibility of error. It's distinct from the science challenge "unreliable," because that has to do with pointing to the errors science has made in the past or that have been apparently made during the Covid even (masks,</p>

	etc) to suggest that science can't be held credible because it's not settled or that it goes back and forth, etc.
Example: The vaccine, which bears the ho-hum name of mRNA-1273, uses an unproven mRNA technology platform. (Redwood & Holland, 2020, para. 6)	

Table B-4. Epistemology

EPISTEMOLOGY	<p>This group of codes was for those quotes that indicated some way of knowing about what is or is not true about science.</p> <p>Note: There was crossover with the science challenge codes where the science challenges were made to dispute science, rather than dismiss a science communicator. The Science Challenge code “Sci-Challenge: Moral” evolved to become the “epistemology of moral discernment” discussed in Chapter 5.</p>
Common Sense	<p>Any instance in which reasoning available to lay people is considered sufficient to discredit science claims (I don't know anyone who has it. Muslim women still get sick even though they wear facemasks. It still gets cold in winter so the climate is fine.)</p> <p>Theoretical Note: Associated with populist epistemology.</p>

	<p>Note: A crossover code, also in the Science Challenge group.</p>
<p>AIDS does not have a vaccine. Nevertheless, we did not shut down the economy. We have developed good drug therapeutics to treat AIDS and HIV patients. So, why the harsh response to hydroxychloroquine which has shown such promise in multiple studies. (Diserio, 2020, para. 18)</p>	
<p>Empirical/Rational</p>	<p>This code is for any quote in which some science is framed as a positive thing. This demonstrates belief in science as a way of knowing. Applies to belief in mainstream or contrarian science. Indicators include reference to peer review, methodology, sampling, controls, variables, etc. Indicators also include positive language about science and/or scientific methods.</p>
<p>Example: But none of the words by which he has helped inflict chaos on America have reflected either medical or epidemiological facts. (Codevilla, 2020, para. 5)</p>	
<p>Conspiracist</p>	<p>Code is for quotes in which hidden powers are said to be responsible for world events. Pattern-based, relationship based. Evidence includes known or surmised relationships between people, concurrency of events, related events</p>

	<p>such as writings or happenings in other arenas of public life. Used to explain/prove what is “really going on.” Can refer to things that already occurred, are happening now, or things yet to come.</p>
<p>Example: <i>CNN</i> doesn’t spell it out for you, but they don’t really have to as far too many are waking up to what’s going on. Fauci is a criminal. He committed economic terrorism on an entire country so he could profit off a rushed and incredibly unsafe vaccine. It’s all coming out now. If you dislike the reality of this tyranny, it’s going to be a rough summer for your mental state.</p> <p>Because <i>CNN</i> refused to connect the dots, we’ve done it for them. (Slavo, 2020, para. 5)</p>	
<p>Postmodern</p>	<p>Anything that indicates the possibility of multiple truths or subjective truths. Relative truths. Any statement that allows for the possibility that there is more than one truth. Also any statement that the truth cannot be known.</p>
<p>Example: There is no “unassailable science” that tells us how the future looks: what technologies humans will devise, how they will adapt. One imagines a magazine such as <i>Time</i>, which once published pieces about now- discredited predictions of a “population bomb” and global cooling, might understand that the future is always more complicated than we imagine. (Harsanyi, 2019, para. 10)</p>	

Table B-5. Empty Signifiers

<p>EMPTY SIGNIFIER</p> <p>(Group and code)</p>	<p>Concept without definite meaning, the meaning of which carries political power and therefore is contested. Especially important are empty signifiers of lack, something the people are deprived of, for which the opponent is thought to be responsible.</p> <p>"discussion of criteria for successful empty signifiers, itself building on Laclau's (1990, 66) which argues that credible empty signifiers are those which resonate with the historicity and tradition of 'the basic principles informing the organization of a group'.</p> <p>Codes in the empty signifier category were only used for direct references to the word and did not include definitions. That is because the definitions are (by definition) contested. It was my task to analyze the uses of empty signifiers to see what meanings were assigned to those words in practices.</p>
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Patriot	Any synonym of patriot Emergent code
American	All inflected forms. Also “citizens” and synonyms. Emergent code
Christian/Religious Freedom	References to traits synonymous with or indicative of Christianity. Faith, church, worship, bible, scripture, etc. Emergent code
Freedom	Any synonym of freedom, such as liberty, autonomy. Emergent code

Appendix C

Example of Analysis

This group of documents provides an example of how this research was carried out. Included are an example of a coded article (B-1), a research memo centered on that article (B-2), the document comment attached to that article (B-3), and the comments attached to some of the coded quotes (B-4). (Language about what it demonstrates).

The coded article contains several codes that were not ultimately used for this project. When I began, I had intended to include an analysis of metanarratives, another PDT concept, in this research. However, that plan proved too ambitious to complete within the space and time constraints of the project. Prefixes to some of the codes reflect these earlier ambitions. For example, the code “Fantasmic: Inter: The People” initially referred to concepts drawn from theory about the fantasmatic logic of political discourse, with the subcategory of interpolation, under which the code “The People” was originally organized. This code was reduced to “The People” in the analysis.

Fauci's Flip Flops

He's been on every side of every important question about containment, mitigation, and treatment of COVID-19. And he's not alone.

By Ruth Papazian  June 1, 2020

Science is almost never "settled." Science is a collection of hypotheses and theories that are challenged repeatedly to determine whether they can withstand re-examination with new tools, techniques and methodologies.

Over the course of history, hypotheses and theories have been abandoned when the results or conclusions were later found to be based on falsified data, faulty methodology, or were not reproducible by other researchers. Often, this process takes years, particularly when findings quickly congeal into consensus—as was the case with the purported link between [vaccines and autism](#) (indeed, autism is the poster child for [debunked theories](#)).

But COVID "science" is being reversed—and reversed again—at a dizzying pace. At the center of these flip flops is none other than Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force and avowed [Hydroxychloroquine Hater](#).

With the notable exception of [hydroxychloroquine \(HCQ\)](#), Fauci has, um . . . *adjusted* all of his talking points. He's been on every side of every important question about containment, mitigation and treatment of COVID-19—and he's not alone.

101.L NY AMERICA Fauci's Flip Flops	Meta: Title	105.L Sci Yes
	Messenger characteristics	
	Meta: Author	Meta: Date
102.C Sci Science is almost never "settled." Science is a collection of hypotheses...	Empirical/Rational epistemology	
	Inter: Legitimation	
	Sci Challenge-Unreliable	
	Sci Challenge: Science is political	
103.B Bad COVID	Messenger characteristics	
107 With E.L.	Messenger characteristics	
	Sci Challenge-Unreliable	

That Was Then, This Is Now: Face Masks

March 2: U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams warned that wearing face masks could increase risk of contracting COVID-19, and advised non-healthcare workers to “stop buying

masks.”

April 1: In an article [published](#) in *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM), a group of Harvard public health experts wrote: “Wearing a mask outside health care facilities offers little, if any, protection from infection. Public health authorities define a significant exposure to Covid-19 as face-to-face contact within 6 feet with a patient with symptomatic Covid-19 that is sustained for at least a few minutes (and some say more than 10 minutes or even 30 minutes). The chance of catching Covid-19 from a passing interaction in a public space is therefore minimal. In many cases, the desire for widespread masking is a reflexive reaction to anxiety over the pandemic.”

April 3: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [recommended](#) that healthy people—who may be asymptomatic or “pre-symptomatic”—wear cloth face coverings in public settings like groceries and drug stores where maintaining six-foot social distancing is not possible. The purpose of wearing a mask was to protect asymptomatic transmission to vulnerable populations like the elderly, particularly in communities experiencing significant outbreaks.

April 5: Asked by a reporter during the then-daily White House Coronavirus Task Force briefing why he was not wearing a face mask, Fauci [offered](#) the *opposite* explanation as the CDC’s about the value of being masked: “The major reason to wear a face mask, is to protect you from infecting you,” adding that he had tested negative for COVID-19 the day before.

April 6: Surgeon General Adams had changed his mind, and was [demonstrating](#) how to

10:19 That Was Then, This Is Now: Face Masks March 2: U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams warned that wear... Inter: Legitimation

Sci Challenge-Unreliable

10:8 April 5: Ask... Messenger characteristics

masks.”

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is is Now: Face Masks March 2: U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams warned that wear...

10:8 April 5: Ask...

Messenger characteristics

May 27: Fauci reversed himself, telling CNN's Jim Sciutto he wears a mask in public "because I believe it is effective. . . . I do it when I am in public for the reason that I want to protect myself and protect others, and also because I want to make it be a symbol for people to see that that's the kind of thing you should be doing."

May 28: Since the onset of the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) advised against healthy people wearing face masks, and reiterated its recommendation that people without COVID-19 symptoms need to wear a mask *only* when caring for someone who has contracted the virus. Those who are coughing or sneezing should also wear a mask.

That Was Then, This Is Now: Stay Home, Save Lives

March 15: A group of 22 public health professionals published an open letter in *USA Today* recommending steps to mitigate COVID-19 spread to ensure adequate hospital capacity to care for stricken patients, that included the advice to "STAY AT HOME as much as possible. . . even if you have no symptoms. That means avoiding play dates, sleepovers, bars, restaurants, parties or houses of worship. Avoid all crowds."

May 19: A group of 600 physicians sent a letter to President Trump calling state lockdowns that have kept businesses closed and kids home from school a "mass casualty incident" with "exponentially growing health consequences" and urging him to reopen the country.

10:9 May 27: Fa...	Messenger characteristics
10:20 That Was Then, This Is Now: Stay Home, Save Lives M	Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia Inter: Legitimation Sci Challenge-Unreliable
10:14 May...	Fantasmic: Inter: The People Intensifier

May 20: An Italian study contradicted conventional wisdom that keeping elders socially isolated from their families has a protective effect against contracting and dying from COVID-19.

May 21: The head of trauma at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek implored California Governor Gavin Newsom (D) to end his lockdown orders because “we’ve seen a year’s worth of suicide attempts in the last four weeks.”

May 22: A J.P. Morgan strategist published a report concluding that “flawed scientific papers” panicked governments into imposing “inefficient or late” lockdowns administered with “little consideration that they might not only cause economic devastation but potentially more deaths than Covid-19 itself . . . the fact that re-opening did not change the course of the pandemic is consistent with studies showing that initiation of full lockdowns did not alter the course of the pandemic either.”

The same day, Fauci changed his mind about the lockdowns in an interview with CNBC’s Meg Tirrell: “We can’t stay locked down for such a considerable period of time that you might do irreparable damage and have unintended consequences, including consequences for health.”

May 26: A month after reopening gyms, hair and nail salons and parks, Georgia hasn’t seen the spike in new COVID-19 cases public health experts warned about. The same is true in

15: A group of 22 public health professiona...

10:41 An It...
Fantasmic: Inter: The People
Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia

10:15 The...
Intensifier
Sci Challenge-Other

10:42 The...
Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia

10:47 A J.P. Morgan strateg...
Sci Challenge-Counter authority

10:16 A J.P. Mor...
Intensifier

10:48 the f...
Sci Challenge-Counterscience

10:10 The same...
Messenger characteristics

10:44 A mon...
Fantasmic: Inter: The People

Florida, after the state began easing lockdown restrictions on May 4—as well as in Arizona, Colorado and other states.

May 30: Dr. John Carlo, former medical director of Dallas County’s health department, told Dallas Morning News that looters, rioters and arsonists laying waste to entire neighborhoods nationwide are less at risk of contracting or passing on COVID-19 than people attending an indoor gathering (like a church service, maybe?).

That Was Then, This Is Now: Surface Contamination

March 17: A study published in NEJM suggested that COVID-19 can remain infectious on surfaces for hours to days under consistent laboratory conditions (room temperature, 65 percent humidity). For instance, coronavirus was viable on cardboard for up to 24 hours, and on plastic and stainless steel for up to 72 hours.

March 26: CDC notes, “Current evidence suggests that [COVID-19] may remain viable for hours to days on surfaces made from a variety of materials. Cleaning of visibly dirty surfaces followed by disinfection is a best practice measure for prevention of COVID-19 and other viral respiratory illnesses in households and community settings.”

May 22: CDC updates its guidance: “It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. This is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads, but we are still learning more about how this virus spreads.”

10:17 Dr. John C...	Inter: Legitimation
10:17 Dr. John C...	Intensifier
10:21 That Was Then, This Is Now: Surface Contamination March 17: A study pu...	

That Was Then, This Is Now: HCQ

March 28: Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) allowing HCQ and chloroquine (CQ) to be used to treat certain patients hospitalized with COVID-19.

April 24: FDA warned that HCQ and CQ, alone or combined with azithromycin, are associated with heart rhythm problems and issued a warning that they should be “limited to clinical trial settings or for treating certain hospitalized [COVID-19] patients under the EUA.

April 27: The Arizona chapter of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons sent a letter to Governor Doug Ducey asking him to rescind his executive order forbidding prophylactic use of CQ or HCQ based on “clear and convincing evidence of benefit both pre-exposure and post-exposure.” A press release announcing the letter states that studies show the drugs can “decrease the number of days when a patient is contagious, reduce the need for ventilators, and shorten the time to clinical recovery.”

May 19: After President Trump divulged that he had begun taking HCQ prophylactically after his butler tested positive for coronavirus, FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn said, “The decision to take any drug is ultimately a decision between a patient and their doctor.” By the way, on May 26, El Salvador President Nayib Bukele said he also uses HCQ prophylactically, and that “most” world leaders do as well.

May 22: *Lancet* published a retrospective observational study that found no therapeutic

Inter: Legitimation

America/America

Inter: Legitimation

Inter: Metanarrative

10:22 That Was Then, This Is Now: HCQ March 28: Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued an emergency us...
10:50 April 27: The Arizona chapter of the Association of Am...
10:31 May 19: After Pr...
10:4...

benefit associated with HCQ or CQ, and increased risks of ventricular arrhythmias and in-hospital death with COVID-19." As a result, WHO suspended its clinical trial of HCQ on May 27.

May 30: More than 160 clinicians, medical researchers, statisticians, and ethicists worldwide signed an open letter addressed to the *Lancet* pointing to serious problems with the study design and data sets underlying the findings. "In the interests of transparency" they requested the pre-publication peer review comments on the manuscript be made public.

That Was Then, This Is Now: Second Wave

April 29: During a White House Coronavirus Task Force presser, Fauci said a second wave of coronavirus in the United States is "inevitable," and that if states ease lockdown restrictions too soon new infection rates could skyrocket and deaths could outpace projections.

May 27: Fauci said, "I want people to really appreciate that [a second wave] could happen, but it is not inevitable. If we do the kinds of things that we're putting in place now, to have the workforce, the system, and the will to do the kinds of things that are the clear and effective identification, isolation and contact tracing, we can prevent this second wave that we're talking about."

That Was Then, This Is Now: COVID Antibodies

10/30 May 30: More L. Inter: Legitimation

10/28 That Was Then, This Is Now: Second Wave April 29 Inter: Legitimation

10/28 T Messenger characteristics

10/28 T Inter: Legitimation

April 14: David Walt, professor of pathology at Harvard Medical School, told Bloomberg News, "There is no proof at this point that the development of an antibody response will be protective. There is no evidence yet that people can't be re-infected with the virus."

April 24: WHO issued a statement warning that "There is currently no evidence that people who have recovered from COVID-19 and have antibodies are protected from a second infection."

April 25: WHO walked back its April 24 statement: "We expect that most people who are infected with #COVID-19 will develop an antibody response that will provide some level of protection."

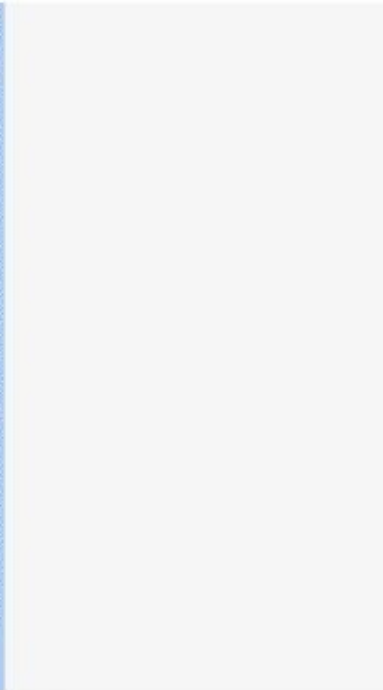
April 29: A study published in *Nature Medicine* found that people who recovered from COVID-19 developed antibodies against re-infection within two to three weeks of the onset of symptoms.

May 12: Asked by Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) during a Senate hearing whether recovering from coronavirus confers immunity to re-infection, Fauci said, "[W]hen you have antibodies present it very likely indicates a degree of protection . . . but natural history studies over a period of months to years will then definitively tell you if that's the case."

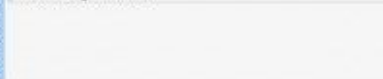
That Was Then, This Is Now: When a Vaccine Will be Available

Was Then, This Is Now: COVID Antibodies April 14: David Walt, professor of pathology at Harvard.

10:26 That Was



Inter: Legitimation



March 3: Fauci pooh-poohed the idea of speeding up development of a vaccine against COVID-19: “The whole process is going to take a year, a year and a half, at least.”

May 18: Biotechnology firm Moderna released preliminary phase-one clinical trial data showing its COVID-19 vaccine was safe, and produced protective antibodies in eight healthy volunteers ages 18 to 55 years old.

May 22: Fauci told NPR, “I think it is conceivable . . . that we could have a vaccine that we could be beginning to deploy at the end of this calendar year, December 2020, or into January, 2021.”

May 27: Fauci predicted on CNN that “We have a good chance—if all the things fall in the right place—that we might have a vaccine that would be deployable by the end of the year, by November-December.”

May 29: Moderna’s vaccine enters phase-two clinical trials. Roughly 600 participants in eight states were recruited, half of them between 18 and 55 years old and half older than 55. They will be tracked for 12 months after receiving either a placebo or two doses of the vaccine 28 days apart.

Scientists are still trying to figure out this never-before-seen virus, so we should cut them some slack. Unfortunately, public health officials seize on each study finding to refute or validate policy and guidelines that they seem to be making up as they go along.

1017 March 3: Fauci pooh-poohed the idea of speeding up development...
Messenger characteristics

Fantasmic: Inter: The Other
Fantasmic: Inter: The People

1013 Inter: Prescription

1013 Inter: Metanarrative

1013 Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia

Not to be outdone, politicians are apewing contradictory and seemingly capricious edicts issued in the name of "science." For instance, Mayor Eric Garcetti told Los Angeles beachgoers that it's "safe" to be on wet sand but not on dry sand, whereas New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio said the opposite and threatened to have police forcibly remove people from the water.

Americans are understandably starting to question the judgement of public health officials and elected officials, and losing patience with nonsensical prohibitions on planting a garden, getting a mammogram, and joining their congregation in worship.

Thousands of people around the country are taking to the streets to demand that their states reopen schools, small businesses and workplaces. Some intrepid business owners whose communities are not coronavirus hot spots are also defying lockdown orders—even at the risk of license suspension or being jailed.

The science is "evolving," and the demands of Americans to resume their lives are as science-based—if not more so—as the prohibitions they are seeking to have rescinded.



About Ruth Papazian

Ruth Papazian is a Bronx-based health and medical writer, and a political junkie.

 Author

Inter: Legitimation
Meta: Notes

Fantasmic: Inter: Hero/Relief
Fantasmic: Inter: The Other
Fantasmic: Inter: The People
Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia
Inter: Legitimation
Inter: Prescription

Fantasmic: Inter: Hero/Relief
Fantasmic: Inter: The People
Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia
Inter: Prescription
America/America

Fantasmic: Inter: The Other
Fantasmic: Inter: The People
Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia
Inter: Metanarrative

Meta: Notes
Meta: Notes

Fantasmic: Inter: Hero/Relief
Fantasmic: Inter: The People
Fantasmic: Inter: Utopia/Dystopia
Inter: Prescription

Appendix C-2: Document Analysis

Quotes and Comments from Sample Document

10:6 p 2 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Report of quotations that included quotation comments

Content:

But COVID “science” is being reversed—and reversed again—at a dizzying pace. At the center of these flip flops is none other than Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force and avowed Hydroxychloroquine Hater.

Comment:

Unreliable and unreasonable.

10:13 p 2 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

Science is almost never “settled.” Science is a collection of hypotheses and theories that are challenged repeatedly to determine whether they can withstand re-examination with new tools, techniques and methodologies.

Over the course of history, hypotheses and theories have been abandoned when the results or conclusions were later found to be based on falsified data, faulty methodology, or were not reproducible by other researchers. Often, this process takes years, particularly when findings quickly congeal into consensus—as was the case with

the purported link between vaccines and autism (indeed, autism is the poster child for debunked theories).

But COVID “science” is being reversed—and reversed again—at a dizzying pace. At the center of these flip flops is none other than Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force and avowed Hydroxychloroquine Hater.

Comment:

Legitimation seems to lie here in the epistemological posture of reason—yes, science is a process that involves discarding bad and embracing good info, but this is not that. Like, we're reasonable, and we can see that science is a process, but THIS is not that.

Rhetorical demonstration of reason.

10:15 p 5 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

The head of trauma at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek implored California Governor Gavin Newsom (D) to end his lockdown orders because “we’ve seen a year’s worth of suicide attempts in the last four weeks.

Comment:

Sci Challenge: Other: This is another example of “science overreacts,” or the countermeasures are not worth it. This is actually a key discourse in climate science pushback, not that the science is wrong, necessarily, but that the cure is worse than the disease.

an indoor gathering (like a church service, maybe?).

10:18 p 11 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

For instance, Mayor Eric Garcetti told Los Angeles beachgoers that it's "safe" to be on wet sand but not on dry sand, whereas New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio said the opposite and threatened to have police forcibly remove people from the water.

Comment:

In May Los Angeles authorities reopened public beaches that had been closed to slow the spread of the coronavirus. The updated rules limited activities to exercise and active recreation. In order to encourage continued social distancing, the rules continued to ban sunbathing, lying or sitting on the beach, along with some other more leisurely activities

In a May 13 interview with CNN, LA Mayor Eric Garcetti illustrated the new limits by distinguishing between wet sand, good for running or walking, and dry sand, better for planting a beach chair and umbrella. There is no explicit prohibition regarding the type of sand people may have contact with. If people want to walk or run on dry sand, they are free to do so.

<https://repustar.com/fact-briefs/did-los-angeles-restrictions-beach-use-prohibit-contact-dry-sand>

Also, De Blasio wanted people off the beaches, period, with limited exceptions for locals who wanted to walk on the beach.

10:19 pp 2 – 4 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

That Was Then, This Is Now: Face Masks March 2: U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams warned that wearing face masks could increase risk of contracting COVID-19, and advised non-healthcare workers to “stop buying

masks.” April 1: In an article published in New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM), a group of Harvard public health experts wrote: “Wearing a mask outside health care facilities offers little, if any, protection from infection. Public health authorities define a significant exposure to Covid-19 as face-to-face contact within 6 feet with a patient with symptomatic Covid-19 that is sustained for at least a few minutes (and some say more than 10 minutes or even 30 minutes). The chance of catching Covid-19 from a passing interaction in a public space is therefore minimal. In many cases, the desire for widespread masking is a reflexive reaction to anxiety over the pandemic.” April 3:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that healthy people—who may be asymptomatic or “pre-symptomatic”—wear cloth face coverings in public settings like groceries and drug stores where maintaining six-foot social distancing is not possible. The purpose of wearing a mask was to protect asymptomatic transmission to vulnerable populations like the elderly, particularly in communities experiencing significant outbreaks.

April 5: Asked by a reporter during the then-daily White House Coronavirus Task Force briefing why he was not wearing a face mask, Fauci offered the opposite explanation as the CDC’s about the value of being masked: “The major reason to wear a face mask, is to protect you from infecting you,” adding that he had tested negative for COVID-19 the day before.

April 6: Surgeon General Adams had changed his mind, and was demonstrating how to make cloth masks.

May 27: Fauci reversed himself, telling CNN's Jim Sciutto he wears a mask in public "because I believe it is effective. . . . I do it when I am in public for the reason that I want to protect myself and protect others, and also because I want to make it be a symbol for people to see that that's the kind of thing you should be doing." May 28: Since the onset of the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) advised against healthy people wearing face masks, and reiterated its recommendation that people without COVID-19 symptoms need to wear a mask only when caring for someone who has contracted the virus. Those who are coughing or sneezing should also wear a mask.

Comment:

This passage is coded in its entirety because the juxtaposition of these anecdotes is presented as the proof, the legitimation, of the prescription and the hero's strategy (offscreen and unmentioned, but present in the context, that Trump wanted to reopen). Also, this long series of anecdotes legitimates the author as hero and the people as hero at the end of the story.

10:21 p 6 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

That Was Then, This Is Now: Surface Contamination March 17: A study published in NEJM suggested that COVID-19 can remain infectious on surfaces for hours to days under consistent laboratory conditions (room temperature, 65 percent humidity). For

instance, coronavirus was viable on cardboard for up to 24 hours, and on plastic and stainless steel for up to 72 hours.

March 26: CDC notes, “Current evidence suggests that [COVID-19] may remain viable for hours to days on surfaces made from a variety of materials. Cleaning of visibly dirty surfaces followed by disinfection is a best practice measure for prevention of COVID-19 and other viral respiratory illnesses in households and community settings.” May 22: CDC updates its guidance: “It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. This is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads, but we are still learning more about how this virus spreads.”

Comment:

Also, um, all three of these anecdotes are in harmony with each other?

10:23 p 8 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci’s Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

That Was Then, This Is Now: Second Wave April 29: During a White House Coronavirus Task Force presser, Fauci said a second wave of coronavirus in the United States is “inevitable,” and that if states ease lockdown restrictions too soon new infection rates could skyrocket and deaths could outpace projections.

May 27: Fauci said, “I want people to really appreciate that [a second wave] could happen, but it is not inevitable. If we do the kinds of things that we’re putting in place now, to have the workforce, the system, and the will to do the kinds of things that are

the clear and effective identification, isolation, and contact tracing, we can prevent this second wave that we're talking about.

Comment:

As above, the juxtaposition is meant to legitimize distrusting and disregarding the experts and relying on common sense instead. But here, as in several of the other passages, there is no inherent contradiction between the juxtaposed anecdotes. Fauci said a second wave was inevitable but could be forestalled if people took aggressive action.

10:25 pp 9 – 10 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

That Was Then, This Is Now: When a Vaccine Will be Available

March 3: Fauci pooh-poohed the idea of speeding up development of a vaccine against COVID-19: "The whole process is going to take a year, a year and a half, at least." May

18: Biotechnology firm Moderna released preliminary phase-one clinical trial data showing its COVID-19 vaccine was safe, and produced protective antibodies in eight healthy volunteers ages 18 to 55 years old.

May 22: Fauci told NPR, "I think it is conceivable . . . that we could have a vaccine that we could be beginning to deploy at the end of this calendar year, December 2020, or into January, 2021." May 27: Fauci predicted on CNN that "We have a good chance—if all the things fall in the right place—that we might have a vaccine that would be deployable by the end of the year, by November-December." May 29: Moderna's

vaccine enters phase-two clinical trials. Roughly 600 participants in eight states were recruited, half of them between 18 and 55 years old and half older than 55.

They will be tracked for 12 months after receiving either a placebo or two doses of the vaccine 28 days apart.

Comment:

Note, the only thing that happens here is that Fauci revises his estimate of how long it will take to develop a vaccine by about 6 months.

10:28 p 11 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

planting a garden,

Comment:

The link, honest to god, goes here: <https://www.michiganradio.org/health/2020-04-10/garden-centers-at-large-stores-must-close-under-governors-order> In which it is totally and completely clear that the prohibition was not on planting gardens on large garden stores, which didn't make the cut as essential services. It was Big Gretch, though, bugbear of the right. The story is explicitly clear that people are misinterpreting it as saying plant starts are a risk. But even that is not saying that planting a garden is a risk.

10:29 p 11 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

getting a mammogram

Comment:

Eye-watering. This link goes to the NYT, to a story about the difficulties people have getting life-saving care because of overburdened hospitals and the fear people had at the time of going to hospitals where Covid patients might be. It is mentioned in one word in passing that among the sensible steps facilities took to reduce pressure on the system was cutting out elective procedures, including routine mammograms. In no way was a mammogram prohibited by anyone. it's hard to stay clinical when reading this shit. Am I not focused enough on sheer outrage content? Like, we will get people opposed to Covid safety measures by pissing them off over ostensibly stupid things? I think the common sense stuff is that part, the part where it is proposed that something is so stupid any fool could see that, but in reality, the situation is nothing like the description meant to cause outrage.

10:30 p 6 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

May 30: Dr. John Carlo, former medical director of Dallas County's health department, told Dallas Morning News that looters, rioters and arsonists laying waste to entire neighborhoods nationwide are less at risk of contracting or passing on COVID-19 than people attending an indoor gathering (like a church service, maybe?).

Comment:

Meta: The left privileges racial issues over religion.

10:46 p 7 in AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

Content:

FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn said, "The decision to take any drug is ultimately a decision between a patient and their doctor.

Comment:

I think the whole "patient/doctor" vs central authority speaks to the meta that Hochschild talked about, that of the local vs the distant.

Table D-2: Document Comment from Sample Document

Document Comment AmGrea_6-1_Fauci's Flip Flops - American Greatness

This setup is that science does naturally flip-flop, but when that process is legitimate, it goes slowly, over long periods. The implication is that the rapidity of the reversals in the COVID story is due to something else.

Much of what follows are juxtaposed anecdotes that serve as evidence of the wrongness and rapidity of reversals, with the assumption that the reversals are owing to something other than the learning process that is part of good science.

This whole story is meant to be evidence-based; however, it is proof that the science is untrustworthy. There is a statement that science takes time, so it gives scientists a break in that way. Likely because if it is going to make a claim that science supports its position, it doesn't do to undermine science altogether.

The reversal of face masks,

Analysis:

Begins with an immediate embrace of empirical, traditional science. The moral element is introduced first; good scientists throw things out when there is falsified data, or when there are other things.

Interestingly, the author believes emphatically that there is no link between autism and vaccines, possibly trying to distance herself from anti-vax ideologues.

First, the COVID process is portrayed as inconsistent with good scientific work. It's not slow and measured, but flip-flopping fast, and Fauci is at the center. At first blush, this is a critique of his legitimacy as a scientist, except he is described as an HCQ hater, which immediately injects a moral note; he is prejudiced and irrational.

One common device is the moral nose tap, the wink and nod that says we know what's really going on here. The "um" serves that purpose here.

Fauci is shown as having adjusted (rather than glaringly revealing his own incompetence); that is, this is a polite way to say what he did.

The first one is the mask reversal. Several agencies, not just Fauci, are shown to be involved in reversing messages on masks.

Next is the stay-at-home orders.

It shows that there was not a 100 percent consensus on shutdowns. Fauci even said that there was such a thing as too much.

This is all seemingly scientific until the end, which, like the previous section, concludes with a metanarrative, and rather abruptly at that. May 30: Dr. John Carlo, former medical director of Dallas County's health department, told the Dallas Morning News that looters, rioters, and arsonists laying waste to entire neighborhoods nationwide are less at risk of contracting or passing on COVID-19 than people attending an indoor gathering (like a church service, maybe?).

Here, a scientist (and a former one at that) is shown to be aligned with looters, rioters and arsonists who are supporting BLM, and against church goers. This introduces the ideological/identity element. This proposes an explanation for the lockdowns. They aren't necessary, and the science establishment knows it. However, they weaponize them in ways that specifically target the right-church goers, while giving free reign to the people who call the right racist, who are creating a morally charged environment in which one must be careful not to appear racist—feelings rules, last in lineism, etc. Different people will likely feel different facets of the metanarratives more keenly- some will be more mad about the BLM piece, others will be a little uneasy about that, but indignant about the church thing.

Next is surface contamination. Shows three differing accounts that took place within 9 days regarding surface contamination. Two of them agree perfectly, and the third does not contradict it in any way. Hard to see what the author was trying to do there.

Then HCQ:

Shows the back and forth on HCQ. Fauci is not named.

Then a second wave:

Fauci first said a second wave was inevitable, then said it could be forestalled with lockdowns, etc.

Antibodies. Again, shows that people learned things.

Vaccine:

Fauci pooh-poohs something. This is certainly consistent with what a leftist would do in a context in which the left is constantly deriding the right.

Then, a list of nonsensical prohibited public health activities is listed, including planting a garden, getting a mammogram, and going to church. Note that two out of three of these activities can be tied to the rural, religious right. Those who resist lockdowns in low-infection areas are called "intrepid." They are described as at risk of being jailed, speaking to a tyranny motif.

The final claim is that those who oppose Covid-related prohibitions are more science-based than those who do not.

Table D3: Research memo from the day of first coding

With much fear and trembling, I am building out a chapter solely on the logic of equivalence in science denial. I have run a report of all quotes and comments. Now I want to both check my perceptions and make a much stronger case than the one I had already built for what I am arguing exists, to wit:

That the nature of the equivalent self is indicated through the techniques of performance (me language) assumption (we language) emulation (our hero language) signification (appropriation of empty signifiers to sequester political legitimacy), rejection (they language) exclusion (they are trying to exclude us) moralization (we are moral).

This constitutes both culture and identity because the two are conflated.

Various aspects of the constructed self are made salient in response to the contingencies of the news cycle.

The nature of the equivalent self is moral, knowing, patriotic, brave, cautious, independent, defiant, Christian, angry, rational.

As I review these quotes, I want to note indicators of:

- Nature of the equivalent self
- Salient aspects and the moments they meet
- Techniques of equivalence
- Epistemology of the self.

Peck gave the aspects of the self as working class and populist, with working-class taste and common sense. There was a common sense epistemology there, but he also noted the incongruity of the legitimation by expertise.

OK, here I go.

3:8. Epistemology: foes of Fauci are legitimized thus: A number of prominent academics and professionals in the medical and scientific community have also coming out strongly against Fauci. This is only legitimizing if "we" believe that prominence in academics, medicine, and science is legitimizing. Fauci has all that, of course, so he is delegitimized by the opposition of his peers, but also by bad motive: he is making his cronies wealthy, he

is trying to realize the objectives of globalists in the UN and WEF and Gates. This is supposedly what the prominent experts have been saying, it's not what "We" have divined so this is trust epistemology. We can trust those who are prominent. No other legitimation is offered, except that they agree with "us." Performed epistemology: Trust. Intrinsic epistemology: agrees with us, beyond that, don't care. Note: there's no aside to explain, and here's what the globalists want. I often think what is NOT in these accounts is as important as what is. If it's not explicated, it's assumed "we" already know what the globalists are up to.

3:10 Nature of the equivalent self

Salient aspects and the moments they meet or the prescriptions they meet

Techniques of equivalence: Exclusion: big tech tried to silence Trump, who represents the people, here "the public".

Epistemology of the self. Here, the premise that Fauci is in the pocket of Big Pharma (not a metanarrative, that would be bad for everyone) is legitimized first because Trump spotted it and called it out. Now these academics and prominent experts are joining in. I believe the story claims that the media is being forced to change its tune.

3:11 Epistemology here is that if you click this link, you will get a good argument for why Fauci vaccinating Santa is nefarious. A gesture to proof.

3:13 Jeffrey Tucker is legitimized by the title "economist." Again, trust epistemology. We trust experts. The ones we don't trust, we have reasons to distrust. Their motives are bad. Here, Fauci's motives are fame, attention, and pleasing his benefactors. He is also delegitimized by "flip-flopping" or reversing himself on occasion. This seems to be proof of either incompetence or corruption- implies a criterion of discernment: the truth is the truth, and if you know the truth, you don't flip-flop. Very modernist. Also makes no allowance for people learning things as they go along. Science here is scare-quoted about what Fauci presents. This means science is real; what Fauci is presenting is pseudoscience. There is nothing populist here, except the implicit suggestion that the people can discern the difference between good and bad experts. Pandemic is also scare-quoted. Tucker Carlson is legitimizing. Ergo, mass media in general is not delegitimizing. What is legitimizing here is the intellectual position taken. He speaks for us, not them. Epistemology of agreement, which is not a real epistemology, it's a preference, a plausible option that preserves the legitimacy of the Self, we have reasons for believing as we do, look, this expert and this high-level journalist gave us this information. Note, they are rarely legitimized on moral grounds. Bad morals are delegitimizing, but good morals are seldom referenced as legitimizing.

3:19: This responds to a moment in which Fauci endearingly told kids he vaccinated Santa. The other here is egotistical and cynical, taking advantage of "hapless" children. The reference to the clown's mask: What does that do? The clown is both ridiculous (he's a clown) and a mask that conceals something. Moral discernment: Fauci is trying to take credit for saving Christmas. Epistemology: assumed. The assumption is that you will recognize this as disqualifying.

3:21 Fauci is discredited for suppressing cheap and safe drugs for the people. Moral, again, motive, greed.

AmGrea_6-1_

10:14: First off, the title is Fauci's Flip Flops, so it goes to the idea that the truth is the truth and if you know it, you don't change your mind. Evidence of perfidy or incompetence. 600 physicians legitimize the case that lockdowns as bad. Again, qualified by expertise. But also, evidence is given that the science has been inconsistent, because 22 health officials said something contradictory earlier.

10:20 This entire passage is coded in its entirety because it is the juxtaposition of these anecdotes that is presented as the proof, the legitimation, of the prescription and the hero's strategy (offscreen and unmentioned, but present in the context, that Trump wanted to reopen). Also, the author as hero and the people as hero at the end of the story are legitimized by this long series of anecdotes, in juxtaposition. It seems that this is the case where numbers are legitimizing. In this story, 22 health professionals told everyone to stay home, but 600 physicians said staying home is bad for us all. The things that are made impossible are play dates, sleepovers, bars, restaurants, parties, and houses of worship. This speaks to families with kids, ordinary entertainment, social gatherings, and church. These are the things it is presumed we would miss. Again, looking at what isn't there is instructive: universities, shopping malls, the symphony, etc. So: we value family, friends, and church. And bars and restaurants.

10:27 Equivalence by signification: "Americans" are starting to question the judgment of public health officials and elected officials, losing patience with nonsensical things like limits on mammograms, planting a garden, and getting a mammogram. So this goes directly to the canniness of "we." It certainly wasn't the left doing all that questioning. But the "Americans" can see things that are plainly ridiculous. The Other is ridiculous and believes all sorts of things that are ludicrous. But we can see these things that should be obvious to everyone. We are the only sane ones, the adults in the room. Also, we include women, worshippers, and gardeners (a rural pastime). Why is churchgoing being elevated to salience in this piece? Because Fauci has interfered with Christmas?

10:34: Politicians are also self-contradictory, plainly inconsistent. Note that these are Democrat officials. It says one leader said wet sand was safe and another said dry sand was safe and threatened to get people out of the water. OK, googling this. OK, Garcetti said wet sand is safe for running and walking, dry sand for planting a beach chair or sunbathing. De Blasio just made a swim ban. Can't find anything giving an opinion on sand. Anyway. If this were true, it would certainly be absurd. Again, it's the right that sees the Emperor has no clothes. Dems are capricious.

10:35. Same article, here science is not scare-quoted. This is when "Americans" are, as if not more, science-based than the prohibitions. So again, we believe in science. But we are using science right.

10:36: Thousands of people are taking to the streets. This was in June. Here, again, numbers are legitimizing. But in the same story, people "rioting and burning and looting" (perhaps the distinction is moral; to go to the street to demand something is virtuous, intrepid, etc. But the others doing it are doing it immorally, violently. Small business owners who defy lockdown orders where common sense dictates they should be able to operate are intrepid. Intrepid is held up as something to emulate. That and defiance. This encourages "us" to be inspired. The other is dictatorial.

10:38: Makes an important distinction between scientists, who are legitimizing, and officials, who are capricious. Again, we believe in scientists and the scientific process, which can take some time. The Other is ridiculous, capricious, irrational. We are rational. What was the news peg here? What was the moment that all this defiance, courage, and common sense was elevated to address? And patriotism?

10:41: An Italian study by scientists is legitimizing. So clearly, being non-American is not disqualifying, at least if you are agreeing. The entire article is an argument against social distancing. The head of Trauma (legitimized by expertise and title and institution) at John Muir in Walnut Creek is against lockdowns.

10:42: A strategist at JP Morgan says that the economic devastation will be deadlier than COVID. Here, expertise provides legitimacy. And the science that is contradictory is flawed. That's how we continue to believe in science, but not the COVID scientists.

10:44: States that reopened haven't had spikes. (NOTE: This was true a month after opening in April. By June, the cases went way up. Later that summer, Georgia had the highest infection rate in the nation for a short time.) But this is an empirical argument based on statistics reported in the news.

10:45. For a story ostensibly about Fauci's flip flops, there wasn't much attention to said flip flops. Here, another doctor (an expert) told the morning news (here not delegitimizing).

Here, it is very clear that "we" go to church and "they" riot. This is an attack on who "we" are. But above all, we are united by our savvy, our courage, and that we are targeted.

Analysis

OK, reread the story. It lists topics upon which Fauci and the bad scientists reversed themselves. The whole argument is that real science learns, but slowly. This rapid flip-flopping is not consistent with real science. Considered on its merits, the arguments are weak, merely reporting the ongoing understanding emerging on COVID-19. But the epistemology here is that of empiricism. Here is proof. A list of examples that shows a pattern. The takeaway is that the Americans the writer has repeatedly mentioned have science-based reasons for wanting everything reopened.

To me, this springs from a fear that the country would stay closed and America would do better than other countries or better than expected, and Fauci would look right and Trump wrong. Also, a discourse in circulation at that time was that Trump's strength was the economy, and if the economy was in bad shape come November, he'd lose. But really, it might boil down to wanting the short-term good and being willing to take the long-term risk. On the left, the idea seemed to be that "we" sacrifice to protect our weakest and each other and to help the medical community. Science is presented here that does speak to the moral issue of isolating the elderly according to one Italian study. Not as good to study the relationship between aspect salience and news peg, as this is an enterprise piece. But there is a correlation between aspect salience and prescription: Salient aspects are savviness and courage, and the prescription is defiance. Defiance is morally justifiable here because the science combined with the people's ability to tell

good science from bad, or savviness, acuteness, and rationality, makes their actions OK.

This is a good example of moral epistemology. This is a science denial piece that threads the needle of why some science is bad and some good and establishes epistemological criteria for telling the difference, to include faith in real science. The argument that rapidly changing science is bad science, with Fauci and others presented as absurd. The logic of equivalence here includes an epistemology. Rationalism. Also a good example of aspect salience, here oriented to the moral justification for the prescription (we have better science on our side and besides, we are rational thinkers) and courage, which defiance requires.

Appendix D: Master Media Conservative Outlet List

Table D-1: Master List of Conservative Media

100percentfedup.com
1055thebeat.iheart.com
1075theriver.iheart.com
10news.one
1190kex.iheart.com
21stcenturywire.com
2gb-am.fire.iheart.com
2ndvote.com
79Days.News
a1apac.org
aa.com.tr
AbcBusinessNews.com
Abort73.com
abovetopsecret.com
ac2news.com
academia.org
ACLJ.org
activistpost.com
acton.org
adflegal.org
aei.org
afpc.org
ageofautism.com
ahtribune.com
aim.org
aim4truth.org
aina.org
ALEC.org
alethonews.com
alphanewsmn.com
alternativenews.com
althouse.blogspot.com
altnewsmedia.net
altright.com
amac.us
americanactionnews.com
americanconsequences.com

americanconservativemedia.com
americandigitalnews.com
americanexperiment.org
americanfreepress.net
americanjournalreview.com
americanlibertyreport.com
americanmind.org
americanpeopledaily.com
americanpolicy.org
americanprinciplesproject.org
americansforprosperity.org
americanthinker.com
americanupdate.com
americaoutloud.com
americarisingspac.org
americasfreedomfighters.com
americasfrontlinedoctors.com
americasvoice.news
amgreatness.com
amimagazine.org
ammoland.com
amren.com
amtvmedia.com
analyzingamerica.org
angrypatriotmovement.com
arizonadailyindependent.com
armstrongeconomics.com
axiomnewsnetwork.com
babalublog.com
badgerinstitute.org
bannedinformation.com
bb4sp.com
bearingarms.com
becauseipcc.thesuccession.ca
becauseipcc.thesuccession.cashineglobal.org
beforeitsnews.com
beholdisrael.org
beliefnet.com
biggovernment.news
bigleaguepolitics.com
billionbibles.org

biodefense.com
bizpacreview.com
blabber.buzz
blackgenocide.org
blackpigeonspeaks.com
blingnews.com
blog.acton.org
blog.friendsofscience.org
blog.heartland.org
bloodandsoil.org
bluelivesmatter.blue
bluntforcetruth.com
boundingintocomics.com
brandnewtube.com
breakingfirst.com
breakingnewshouse.com
breakingwide.com
breitbart.com
brexitcentral.com
brighteon.com
buffalochronicle.com
bugout.news
buzzsawpolitics.com
c2cjournal.ca
CAGW.org
calgarysun.com
campaignlifecoalition.com
campusinsanity.com
campusreform.org
cancer.news
capitalresearch.org
ca-political.com
capoliticalreview.com
carm.org
catholic.org
catholicphilly.com
cbn.com
cc.org
cei.org
Cernovich.com
cfact.org

cfra-am.fire.iheart.com
channel933.iheart.com
charismanews.com
checkpointasia.net
chicksonright.com
chicksontheright.com
ChlorellaFactor.com
christianaction.org
christianheadlines.com
christiannewsalerts.com
christianpost.com
christiansfortruth.com
christiantoday.com
chroniclesmagazine.org
churchmilitant.com
citizenfreepress.com
citizensunited.org
city-journal.org
claremont.org
clarionproject.org
clashdaily.com
climate.news
climatechangedispatch.com
climatedepot.com
climatism.blog
cms.frontpagemag.com
cnsnews.com
colddeadhands.us
Collapse.News
collective-evolution.com
commdiginews.com
commentarymagazine.com
community.hannity.com
concernedwomen.org
conservativeammo.com
conservativebase.com
conservativebuzz.com
conservativedailynews.com
conservativefighters.com
conservativefiringline.com
conservativefreepress.com

conservativehome.com
conservativehq.com
conservativeinstitute.org
conservativeopinion.com
conservativepapers.com
conservativepost.com
conservativereview.com
conservativesus.party
conservativetoday.com
conservativeus.com
conspiracydailyupdate.com
consumerwellness.org
content.jwplatform.com
corbettreport.com
counterthink.com
cowgernation.com
crimeresearch.org
crisismagazine.com
dailycaller.com
dailycitizen.focusonthefamily.com
dailypoliticalnewswire.com
dailyreckoning.com
dailysignal.com
dailystormer.name
dailytorch.com
dailywire.com
datechguyblog.com
dbdailyupdate.com
dcalert.com
dc-chronicle.com
dcclothesline.com
dcdirtylaundry.com
dcourier.com
dcstatesman.com
dcwhispers.com
de.rt.com
debka.com
decaturtimes.com
defconnews.com
defenddemocracy.org
defendevropa.org

defiantamerica.com
deplorablekel.com
deseret.com
digifaction.com
discoverthenetworks.org
discovery.org
disobedientmedia.com
disrn.com
distributednews.com
djhjmedia.com
dmlnews.com
dnj.com
donaldjtrump.com
donsurber.blogspot.com
drrichswier.com
dw-site-dev.dailywire.com
eagleactionreport.com
eastarizonanews.com
ecalabamanews.com
ecology.news
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