Republicans are fueling extremism and terror like the Buffalo shooting

There is no easy fix to dealing with far-right terror. But we should stop assuming Republicans can help, when they are part of the problem

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Cas Mudde
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On Saturday a white teenager traveled almost 200 miles to a Black neighborhood in Buffalo, New York, where he brutally killed 10 people and injured three others in a grocery store. Like other far-right terrorists in the past years, he livestreamed his terrorist attack and left a "manifesto." And, as after other terrorist attacks, experts and journalists are happily amplifying his message and blaming social media and the government for this tragedy.

The problem is, we can talk endlessly about better regulating social media or calling for even more funding and powers for public and private "counterterrorism" organizations, but none of that will make us safer as long as the broader conservative movement embraces and propagates far-right propaganda. This is a point worth repeating, even if I and others have made it many times before.

The so-called "manifesto" of the terrorist included a lot of the standard tropes of the far right, including the so-called Great Replacement Theory. Often linked to antisemitism, this conspiracy theory holds that "the Left" is supporting "open borders" to replace the "original people" with "immigrants", who are inferior and

therefore easier to control. Variants of this theory go back to at least the original Populists of the mid-19th century, but in its current iteration it has been around since the start of the 1980s postwar far right in Europe.

When I started to study the far right in the early 1990s, similar theories were pushed by radical right parties like the Dutch Center Party or the French National Front. At that time, these parties polled in the single digits and were kept out of political coalitions and the media by a so-called *cordon sanitaire*. Today, these actors and ideas have become part of the political mainstream.

In few countries has this process of mainstreaming has been as successful and visible as in the United States, where the main representatives of the mainstream right-wing, like Donald Trump and Tucker Carlson, are propagating the Great Replacement Theory with great success. Just a few days before the terrorist attack, a poll showed that nearly half of Republicans believe the conspiracy theory.

Since the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, I have had various informal conversations with people who work in Congress or in other state agencies about the far-right. They tell me that they want to talk about the threat it poses, but then rapidly narrow the focus to "online radicalization" and violent groups with scary names like Atomwaffen Division or Feuerkrieg Division. This is not just because these groups get disproportionate attention in the media and the counter-terrorism industry, but because they are politically safe. These groups are so extreme that they are out of bounds for almost all political elites, even on the right. But they are also small and marginal.

This is not the case for most other more mainstream actors and ideas of the far right. In fact, their power is now so great in Washington, that it is almost impossible to come up with a term that is acceptable to both sides of the political spectrum. Republicans are skeptical about terms like "far right" and "racism," fearing this would include groups and ideas they sympathize with. This is not without reason. The Grand Old Party has become a far-right party that advances racist arguments in both implicit and explicit form. And many organizations within the broader "conservative" movement have followed suit, from Fox News to Turning Point USA.

I am not arguing that Tucker Carlson is responsible for the terrorist attack in Buffalo. But that terrorist did not develop his racist ideas by himself. There are few if any real "lone wolves." Far-right terrorists are part of a larger subculture, online and offline, which is connected to the broader conservative movement. We can ban a few more individuals from Twitter, but as long as similar conspiracy theories and ideas are propagated in Congress or on Fox News, these bans will not help much.

Similarly, most preventative and repressive policies will have little positive effect, and possibly even have a negative effect. I am a big fan of the work of my colleague Cynthia Miller-Idriss and her team at Peril, one of the few prominent voices that argues against further securitization of the far right. Inspired by efforts in Germany, she calls for a non-repressive measure to counter the far right, including some type of "civil education." The problem is, while that might make sense in California or New York, it would be impossible, even illegal, in states like Florida and Georgia, where recent "anti-CRT laws" have criminalized real anti-racism.

Obviously, I am not arguing that we should not do anything about this threat. The Democratic party and President Joe Biden should do more. In his inaugural speech, Biden said that "we must confront and we will defeat" the rise of political extremism, white supremacy, and domestic terrorism. One and a half year later, the Republican Party has declared the storming of the Capitol to be "legitimate political discourse" and is attacking both human rights and the democratic system across the country.

The sad reality is that fighting the far right has become a highly partisan affair in the United States. Any attempt to make this a bipartisan effort means watering down of measures and limiting them to the most extremist fringes. If Biden and the Democrats really want to fight white supremacy, including institutional racism, they must do it without the Republican party. Not only is the current Republican party not part of the solution, it is a big part of the problem.

- *Cas Mudde is a Guardian US columnist and the Stanley Wade Shelton UGAF professor in the school of public and international affairs at the University of Georgia*