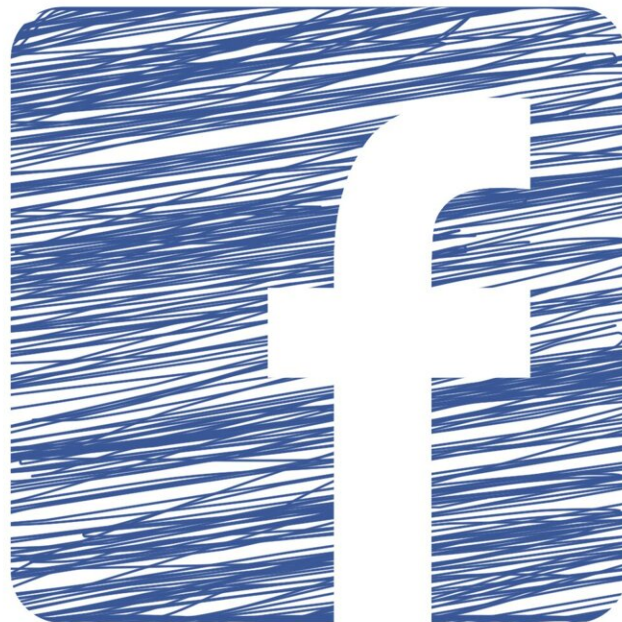


1 in 5 state GOP lawmakers in far-right Facebook groups, study says

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Nearly 22% of Republican legislators in the country have joined at least one far-right Facebook group, with Missouri ranking among the top five, a watchdog organization found in a study released this month.

In a year-long review of the 7,383 seats in state legislatures in the 2021-2022 session, the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR) found that 4,011 seats were held by Republicans. Of those GOP lawmakers, 872—21.74%—had joined far-right Facebook groups, according to the report, "Breaching the Mainstream."

"The numbers are staggering," said Devin Burghart, executive director of IREHR, which has monitored [extremist groups](#) for decades. "The findings show how deeply the far-right has penetrated state politics."

Legislators who are involved in these Facebook groups, Burghart said, are getting hit with a barrage of misinformation and [conspiracy theories](#).

"And in that echo chamber that exists on Facebook, it distorts their view of their constituents," he said. "It distorts their view of the world, and it has real negative policy impacts."

Burghart said not every legislator identified in the report can be characterized as expressing far-right ideology.

"However, all of them have become members of far-right Facebook groups," he said.

And that membership, he said, provides the groups a legislative stamp of approval.

"It normalizes these groups, and it gives them that legitimacy they so crave."

The Facebook groups deal with issues including COVID-19 denial, immigration and critical race theory. Some promote the "Stop the Steal" movement, whose aim was to overturn the 2020 presidential election. And other groups, Burghart said, are influenced by ideas associated with the far-right paramilitary, sovereign citizens and the Posse Comitatus, a violent, racist and anti-Semitic movement.

According to the report, Missouri has 36 state lawmakers who have joined far-right Facebook groups—18% of the [state legislature](#)—ranking fourth overall behind New Hampshire, with 62; Pennsylvania, with 40; and Minnesota, with 39.

Kansas has 20 state legislators—12% of that legislative body—who have joined such groups, the report said.

Democrats held 3,277 total seats in state legislatures, the report said, and three of those lawmakers—0.09%—had joined far-right Facebook groups. No Libertarian or independent legislators were found to have joined such groups, it said.

Left unchecked, the report said, the expanding networks pose a threat to democracy and [human rights](#).

"Thanks to these networks, far-right bills and the conspiracies that propel them spread far and wide," it said. "And like farm clubs in sports, state legislatures often act as a stepping stone to higher office. Today's state representative could become tomorrow's U.S. senator."

The impact of the "far-right stampede into the halls of state legislatures" has already been felt, the report said. State legislators who flocked to

Facebook's far-right groups have collectively sponsored 963 bills in their 2021 and 2022 legislative sessions—measures dealing with abortion, the discussion of racism, immigration, LGBTQIA issues, COVID-19 denial and voter suppression.

Of those, the report said, 100 have become law.

Legislators named in the report disputed that the Facebook groups they belonged to were "far-right."

"I think it's pretty crazy that those are considered far right-wing type pages when it's just parents who haven't even been involved in politics trying to figure out what to do about the crazy leftist stuff that's going on in their schools," said Missouri Sen. Rick Brattin, a Harrisonville Republican and member of the Conservative Caucus—a band of hard-right senators who clash frequently with leadership.

The IREHR report said Brattin belonged to 10 far-right Facebook groups, including Take Back Missouri Schools/Education; Reopen Missouri; WE THE PEOPLE...of Jackson County, MO; Stop CRT & National Civics Standards in K-12 Schools; and Americans for Prosperity.

"The groups that you described, I have been a part of and I have been invited to be a part of, and have seen the content," Brattin told The Star. "Parents of the school districts that are nonresponsive to their wants, needs, desires for their education, they're frustrated. And these are groups that they utilize to express that frustration and to see how they get these school districts to try to respond to their frustration."

As a state senator, the IREHR report said, Brattin sponsored legislation barring both public and private entities that received [public funds](#) from requiring vaccines for entry and a measure prohibiting school districts

from teaching "critical race theory or any successor theory or concept."

He also sponsored a fetal heartbeat bill "enforced through private civil action" and a nullification law allowing the General Assembly to refrain from enforcing any federal laws it deems unconstitutional.

Last week, Brattin—a 4th District Congressional candidate—successfully tacked on an amendment to a bill related to professional licensing that would prevent state medical licensing boards from punishing or taking away the medical licenses of doctors who "lawfully" prescribe the controversial off-label drugs ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine for patients. The bill passed both chambers and awaits the governor's signature.

In Kansas, Rep. Pat Proctor, R-Fort Leavenworth, belongs to six far-right Facebook groups, including Open up Kansas and Lock Down the Governor!; Convention of States Kansas—A Patriot Renaissance; and Americans for Prosperity, according to the report.

"I question how they determine what is quote-unquote far right," Proctor told The Star. "Americans for Prosperity is engaged in far-right conspiracies like kids getting a good education and lowering the tax burden on families. The Convention of States is engaged in the far-right conspiracy of term limits and balanced budget amendments."

Several of the sites identified as far-right, such as the Open Kansas groups, Proctor said, "are people who were expressing their legitimate grievances with their government about what they saw as overreach in response to COVID."

"And they had to resort to social media because they were not being listened to by the (Gov. Laura) Kelly administration," he said.

Proctor said elected leaders should be encouraged to engage in the public debate, and citizens should be encouraged to communicate with their elected leaders through as many means as possible.

"This attempt to intimidate legislators into not communicating on sites that this group deems as not acceptable political discourse is unhelpful to democracy," he said. "But the bigger thing I would ask is who's examining far-left websites? I've seen some pretty outrageous things on some of the Black Lives Matter websites...I don't see anybody out there pointing at Democrat legislators who are part of those groups."

According to the IREHR report, examples of legislators' growing activism began to emerge after the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot.

Several state lawmakers participated in efforts to undermine the 2020 presidential election results, it said. An Arizona state senator spoke to a group of white nationalists at its annual conference in February. And an investigation by ProPublica found that 48 state and local officials—10 of them sitting state legislators—were members of the Oath Keepers, a far-right paramilitary group, some of whose leaders are accused of playing key roles in the insurrection.

Burghart said the actual number of state legislators who have joined far-right Facebook groups is likely higher than the report determined.

"We didn't, for instance, have a QAnon dataset to search, so that's part of what's missing from it," he said. "And we were very specific about what we included, because we didn't want to run into criticism about this just being about conservative politics."

For that reason, he said, the study didn't include NRA groups, mainstream conservative groups or those focused on former President Donald Trump and his "Make America Great Again" theme.

"So given that some legislators probably don't use Facebook in this way, and given that some of them have probably been kicked off of Facebook and are using other platforms, this is clearly an undercount of the overall problem," he said. "But it is at least a snapshot in time about what it looks like on one specific platform."

Burghart said some legislators also use other [social media](#) platforms to interact with far-right groups. Those platforms, he said, include Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Gab, Parler, MeWe, Wimkin, GETTR and Truth Social.

"This relationship on those platforms deserves additional scrutiny," he said. "However, Facebook remains the dominant platform for state legislator interaction with far-right groups."

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