

# Moms for Liberty:

## Cultural Facilitators of Exclusion and Extremism

By Dr. Amy Cooter, Robin O'Luanaigh, Divyanshi Raturi, Brooke Allison, Toby Graf,  
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Middlebury Institute of  
International Studies at Monterey

CTEC

The Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counter Terrorism

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# Moms For Liberty

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## Cultural Facilitators of Exclusion and Extremism

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# Abstract

Moms for Liberty (M4L) is a so-called parent's rights organization that has achieved incredible momentum and political gains since its inception in 2021 by latching onto and amplifying some of the most contentious cultural flashpoints of the time. Despite suffering numerous public controversies, M4L's rhetoric and activism have dramatically impacted schools, school boards, and both local and national politics while inspiring similar organizations to take root. This paper qualitatively examines core themes and ideas that M4L has used to accomplish these outcomes via content analysis of M4L's national website materials and their Town Hall at the 2024 Republican National Convention. We find that M4L messaging weaves together interrelated narratives rather than presenting distinct, issue-focused materials, and that these narratives center on themes of Conspiratorial Thinking, Political Engagement, Gender Roles, Parents' Rights, and Identity-Based Narratives. While less of an overt presence in the dataset, Nationalism and Christianity are also important for contextualizing these narrative themes.

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# 1. Introduction: M4L Origins & Activism

Moms for Liberty (M4L) started in Florida under the guidance of two former school board members—both mothers—who opposed mask mandates in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> First incorporating in December 2020<sup>2</sup> just before Covid deaths peaked in the United States,<sup>3</sup> chapters quickly spread nationally in 2021 until almost half of all states had at least one registered chapter just eight months later.<sup>4</sup> These activists, like many others around the country, expressed concerns that preventative masking was harmful to children’s health, happiness, and growth, particularly to their language and social development.<sup>5</sup> New research<sup>6</sup> now shows that such concerns are unfounded, even for preschool age children, and even before these new data existed, physicians’ early skepticism<sup>7</sup> of these worries may have been one factor behind M4L’s expanding branding beyond masking alone.

Rather than purely focusing on health-based narratives, M4L activists framed child and family wellbeing more broadly, as a matter of “liberty,” just as the organizational name suggests. Notions of liberty, freedom, and parental choice position the organization as fundamentally American and even as standing up toward a government that is slipping into tyranny—notions also intimately tied to mythical stories of the country’s founding and identity.<sup>8</sup> These ideas were presented with varying degrees of explicitness and intensity by M4L members, nationally, who argued that decisions about children wearing masks should be exclusively up to parents, not the government.<sup>9</sup>

M4L can be considered a newer voice in the larger “parents’ rights” movement in which schools in particular have served as battlegrounds for changing social and cultural values. Despite this seemingly neutral label, this movement has, historically, often sought to halt what many others consider to be social progress toward a more inclusive and equitable society, by propping up

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<sup>1</sup> Weisfeldt 2021

<sup>2</sup> Cassels 2021

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad, Cisewski, and Anderson 2022

<sup>4</sup> Cassels 2021

<sup>5</sup> Moms for Liberty 2021b

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton 2022; Bourke et al. 2023; Mitsven et al. 2022

<sup>7</sup> “How One Doctor Addresses Doubts from Anti-Maskers” 2020

<sup>8</sup> Cooter 2024

<sup>9</sup> Gallion 2021a

cultural boogeymen rather than pursuing expanded rights for all parents.<sup>10</sup> We do not have reliable demographic information about the members of M4L, but their public actions are visually dominated by women who appear to be white, in their 30s or 40s, and dress in clothing consistent with a middle-class identity. These women (and, interestingly enough, a few “mad men”<sup>11</sup>) have the time and social capital to attend school board meetings and other events to advocate for their beliefs. Mothers—at least middle-class, white ones—tend to be perceived as a sympathetic group, and there is a long history of activists using the motherhood identity to garner support and advocate in the name of their children or in the best interest of the family unit.<sup>12</sup> Messaging from mothers’ groups may receive the general public’s benefit of the doubt as being well-intentioned, feminized, and therefore harmless, especially if the group’s goals are perceived as being constrained to the realm of children and schooling.

## **1.1. Critical Race Theory**

M4L’s broader, family- and liberty-based framework allowed them to rapidly balloon their narratives of concern while remaining consistent with their initial branding. A guest on conservative commentator Glenn Beck’s show<sup>13</sup> told listeners she had been inspired to found what soon became one of the most active chapters in the country to fight “critical race theory” (CRT) in Williamson County, Tennessee, in April 2021, after hearing about M4L a month earlier while listening to his show. Opposition to what M4L and other reactionaries falsely termed CRT<sup>14</sup> has played a direct role in limiting or outright eliminating discussions of historical and contemporary racism in public school classrooms across the country.<sup>15</sup> A M4L chapter in New Hampshire even offered a \$500 bounty for the first person reporting a teacher violating a state law that vaguely prohibits “discrimination” as connected to

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<sup>10</sup> Stiverson 2023

<sup>11</sup> Stiverson 2023; Moms for Liberty 2021a

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert 2023c; McCammon, Hewitt, and Smith 2004

<sup>13</sup> Moms for Liberty 2021a

<sup>14</sup> Critical race theory is a social-legal theory that closely examines how racism impacts individuals and social institutions. The term has been fallaciously applied, however, to encompass almost any thorough, accurate discussion of racism, historical or contemporaneous; Sprunt 2021 and Gross 2022.

<sup>15</sup> CRT Forward Tracking Project 2023



teaching CRT.<sup>16</sup> Anti-CRT arguments and resultant legislation in 44 states<sup>17</sup> have been presented as interventions to prevent harm to children—especially white children who are purportedly made to feel guilty about racist actions in which they had no role, though the race of the supposed victims in this dynamic is not always explicitly referenced.<sup>18</sup> In what may be a conscious attempt to rebut criticisms that so-called anti-CRT activism indicates that M4L is guided by racism, the national organization seems careful to include many non-white people (especially children) on various pages of its website.

## **1.2. Transgender Opposition**

M4L’s focus on excising LGBTQ+ representations in the classroom and beyond has been even more impactful. As early as March 2021, while M4L activists were still obstreperously opposing mask mandates, they were also already engaging in anti-LGBTQ+ hostilities.<sup>19</sup> Their initial efforts included opposing one Florida county’s guidelines for helping LGBTQ+ students feel safe and included in schools.<sup>20</sup> Activism soon expanded beyond M4L chapter rosters as members and non-members alike articulated purported dangers girls and women would face in restrooms if “biological men” were allowed into these spaces without repercussions;<sup>21</sup> notably, such arguments have long included a focus on cisgender men who pretend to be trans for nefarious purposes, rather than trans women themselves.<sup>22</sup> As of December 2024, fourteen states have laws that prohibit transgender people’s use of at least some public bathrooms that match their gender identity,<sup>23</sup> and the majority of these laws include or exclusively focus on transgender individuals’ use of school bathrooms specifically.<sup>24</sup>

But M4L’s reach on this issue goes far beyond this legislation alone. The organization has also been highly visible in efforts to pass laws restricting or prohibiting gender affirming medical treatment for transgender people, laws

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<sup>16</sup> Greene 2022

<sup>17</sup> Schwartz 2021

<sup>18</sup> Borter 2021; McCormick 2022

<sup>19</sup> Gallion 2021b

<sup>20</sup> Gallion 2021b

<sup>21</sup> Crouson 2024

<sup>22</sup> Brydum 2016

<sup>23</sup> “Bans on Transgender People Using Bathrooms” 2024

<sup>24</sup> Czopek 2024

that disproportionately focus on children’s access to these services.<sup>25</sup> For example, Williamson County’s chapter was closely involved in what was perhaps the most visible, early public dispute on this topic. After conservative commentator and nearby Nashville resident Matt Walsh<sup>26</sup> released a Twitter thread and inflammatory dialogue elsewhere about Vanderbilt Medical Center’s transgender care clinic in September 2022, the chapter helped signal boost this message across their network into a national news story. Members of that chapter are believed to have had a strong presence at various local rallies and protests related to the clinic’s operation, and members celebrated on social media and elsewhere when Vanderbilt quickly caved to the pressure their activism created. Just nineteen days after Walsh’s initial posts, Vanderbilt announced the clinic would halt all affirming surgeries for minors despite representatives asserting that the clinic had never conducted any genital surgeries for minors—the procedure that was at the heart of opponents’ dramatized critiques.<sup>27</sup>

As of August 2024, twenty-six states had passed laws prohibiting at least some gender affirming care for transgender people, with most of the legislation focusing on children’s access to this care.<sup>28</sup> The crux of Walsh’s and other similar critiques are that affirming treatments are coercive and permanent, and that children and well-meaning parents are being misled by corrupt liberal forces rather than receiving necessary care.<sup>29</sup> These arguments allow M4L and others to at least attempt to avoid accusations that they are undermining the very parents’ rights cause that they claim to represent by insisting or at least implying that some parents would be making different decisions if they had accurate, instead of intentionally misleading, information.

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that some legislation already includes limitations on adult access to such care, and there are legitimate concerns that upcoming Supreme Court decisions may also further facilitate states’ abilities to limit adult access; Quinn 2024 and Goldman 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Walsh had been aware of and sharing positive information about M4L for at least a year before this thread, and their mutually beneficial relationship seemed only to expand afterwards, with Walsh giving a talk titled “What is a Woman?” at the Williamson County chapter two months after the Vanderbilt incident; Walsh 2021 and MFL WC 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Farmer 2022

<sup>28</sup> HRC Foundation 2024

<sup>29</sup> “False: Vanderbilt University Medical Center.” 2022

M4L and other proponents of restrictive legislation continue to present their actions as being in the best interest of protecting *all* children, including children seeking gender affirming care. M4L and other anti-transgender activists in part rejuvenate and repackage anti-gay rhetoric from the 1990s that falsely alleged homosexuality is practically synonymous with pedophilia. This rhetoric variously insists or implies that there is some nefarious “gay agenda” to “recruit” unwitting, innocent children to this lifestyle. In this specious argument’s slightly more updated form, such activists insist that there is no such thing as a transgender child, but rather, that there are victimized children who have been “brainwashed” or manipulated into believing they are transgender. They insist that “transgenderism” is a “mental health disorder” or, worse, a “cult” to “indoctrinate” children into some largely unspecified but negative moral and cultural framework.<sup>30</sup> Under this worldview, activists insist (and may often genuinely believe) that they are saving children from a lifetime of regret and “mutilation” that they cannot understand and to which they cannot consent.<sup>31</sup>

*These arguments allow M4L and others to at least attempt to avoid accusations that they are undermining the very parents’ rights cause that they claim to represent...*

### **1.3. Book Bans and Censorship**

Various M4L chapters have engaged in similar protection-based arguments when targeting both school and public library books for censorship and removal. Activists have targeted books that discuss LGBTQ+ topics, sexuality more broadly, and topics related to race and racism. Steinbeck’s classic *Of Mice and Men*, various titles about the Black Lives Matter movement and its aims, and, in Tennessee, a book about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that objectors believed traumatized children and made them “hate their country, each other and/or themselves” have been among those targeted for removal.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “There Is No Such Thing as a Transgender Child” 2023

<sup>31</sup> Tensley 2022

<sup>32</sup> Derysh 2021

In Florida, some districts retained certain children’s books containing cartoon nudity (including the backside of a goblin who is unsuccessfully hosing unicorn glitter from his smock) after M4L objections, but only after drawing or gluing clothing over the characters in question.<sup>33</sup> Many of these efforts were met with mockery from various commentators, but these bans have, at times, come with effective threats of library closures, individual fines, and even incarceration for librarians who do not comply.<sup>34</sup> These pressures have resulted in an estimated 16,000 new book bans since 2021 and, in 2023, bans “reaching the highest levels ever documented by the American Library Association.”<sup>35</sup>

## **1.4. Women’s Sports**

M4L’s activism continued to have traction when the summer 2024 Olympics renewed discussions about the alleged threats that transgender women pose to women athletes after Algeria’s Imane Khelif was falsely assumed to be a male competing in women’s boxing. M4L’s arguments around this topic were less about supposed physical threats in the locker room as had been discussed in school contexts and instead amplified assertions that “real” women were being denied opportunities to win, receive scholarships, or safely compete in their sports when “biological men” were allowed to compete directly with them.<sup>36</sup> At least 23 states have implemented some kind of legislation to restrict transgender participation in youth sports since 2020, and some activists continue debates about how restrictions may be enforced on adult competitions, particularly international ones like the Olympics.

M4L was later to highlight this particular anti-trans debate than some other actors but nonetheless was an important organization in amplifying the narrative by co-sponsoring a lawsuit challenging a Biden administration effort to expand Title IX protections to include gender identity.<sup>37</sup> One of the organization’s founders also seems to take credit for bringing the issue to President Trump’s awareness when discussing it with him at the organization’s 2024 annual meeting and eliciting a promise that he would ban transgender participation in women’s sports during his second

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<sup>33</sup> Legum and Zekeria 2024

<sup>34</sup> Alfonseca 2024; Bollinger 2024

<sup>35</sup> Price 2024; Founds, n.d.

<sup>36</sup> Houchin 2024

<sup>37</sup> Walker 2024

administration.<sup>38</sup> Arguments about banning transgender sports participation are, similar to the above ideas about protecting children, presented as being in the best interest of the majority of athletes, especially women athletes. These arguments implicitly or explicitly rely on assumptions that trans athletes are cheaters participating in spaces where they do not belong and are taking advantage of opportunities that are not and should not be theirs.

## **2. Political Involvement**

It is unsurprising that M4L has encouraged members to influence the political process including by running for office themselves given the organization's direct involvement in key cultural debates and advocacy behind various legislative efforts to dictate the outcome of those debates. Half of the candidates that M4L endorsed in 2022 won their races, and most of those competitions were for elected school board positions.<sup>39</sup> The organization's candidates experienced less success in 2023 and 2024, and critics sometimes mock how M4L leaders continue to tout hundreds of wins at school boards across the country given that there are nearly 100,000 school board members nationally.<sup>40</sup> Such derision misses, however, the way that M4L has amplified and mainstreamed anti-trans, anti-CRT, and other cultural debates such that their core messages are echoed by many who are not formally part of or endorsed by their organization. M4L ideological stances and policy goals are, in many cases, now perfectly aligned with mainstream, Maga Republican Party talking points. Perhaps most strikingly, 18% of Democrats surveyed by Pew in 2022 said they would support legislation making discussions of gender identity in elementary schools illegal, a further reflection of the far-ranging appeal of M4L stances.<sup>41</sup>

While backlash to progressive cultural changes is likely the cause for both M4L and Maga talking points rather than M4L necessarily being a strong, independent driver of Republican Party focuses, it is also true that M4L and the contingent of conservative women it represents have become a force that the party cannot ignore. All five of the realistic contenders for the 2024 Republican nomination (Donald Trump, Nikki Haley, Ron DeSantis, Asa Hutchinson, and Vivek Ramaswamy) addressed M4L members at least once

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<sup>38</sup> "Trump Questions" 2024; PBS 2024; Meier 2024

<sup>39</sup> Jacobson 2024

<sup>40</sup> Woodward 2023; Bauld 2023

<sup>41</sup> Parker, Horowitz, and Brown 2022

during the primary season; independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had also agreed to speak to the organization, but pulled out shortly after the event's announcement, citing schedule changes.<sup>42</sup>

It seems clear that the Republican candidates themselves believe they cannot be successful without engaging with the concerns and perhaps, more specifically, the women that M4L claims to represent.<sup>43</sup> Relative to debate platforms and other more traditional campaign stages, M4L's recorded and streamed venue allows candidates to come across as more personal and more genuinely aligned with concerned parents in the viewing audience. Packaging policy proposals and cultural ideals as mechanisms that will protect children and families, rather than as exclusionary, regressive, or harmful interventions, provides justifications for these policies that are both positive and gender-norm compliant; this may be a particularly powerful route for male candidates attempting to appeal to traditionally-minded mothers because it allows these men to remain in positions of ultimate, policy-making authority while deputizing these mothers to then make family decisions within these desired, overarching constraints.<sup>44</sup>

### **3. Scandals**

M4L survived a major moment of crisis revolving around their support for traditional gender norms in October 2023 when one of the organization's co-founders, Bridget Ziegler, was embroiled in a sex scandal. The scandal occurred when another woman alleged that she had been engaged in a sexual relationship with Ziegler and her husband—the chairman of Florida's GOP—and that she had been raped by Mr. Ziegler when Mrs. Ziegler was unable to participate in a planned encounter.<sup>45</sup> Both Zieglers faced career repercussions, and Mrs. Ziegler in particular faced strong allegations of hypocrisy for weaponizing homophobia and anti-trans rhetoric in the name of promoting “traditional family values” while simultaneously engaging in relationships that defy many conservatives' understanding of what those values mean. Put simply, Ziegler helped establish an organization whose purpose is to fight

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<sup>42</sup> Hanna 2023; Stracqualursi 2020; Pappano 2023

<sup>43</sup> Burnett 2023

<sup>44</sup> For more about how women are often seen as managers of home and family while still remaining subservient to their husbands, especially in evangelical cultures, see Taylor 2024 and Gallagher 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Klas 2023

against supposedly prurient interests that corrupt children while herself engaging in what many may consider to be sexual and moral deviance.

Mrs. Ziegler had left M4L very shortly after its founding in 2021, two years before the scandal, but continued to advocate for the same ideas on a Florida school board where she received frequent national attention for her efforts. Her name and identity continued to be associated with M4L as a result, especially when she publicly defended the organization in summer 2023 after the SPLC designated it an extremist group.<sup>46</sup> M4L defended her, in turn, tweeting (though apparently later deleting) a message including Ziegler among M4L activists and other “strong women” “fighting for kids & America” and against those “that seek to destroy our country.”



Image 1: A November 2023 from the official Moms for Liberty Twitter account defending Ziegler.

Some commentators believed that M4L’s ability to have a meaningful national spotlight was at an end after the Ziegler incident highlighted the organization’s apparent hypocrisy. Few of them discussed how critiques of deviants are gendered: women are often judged more harshly than men committing the same actions, especially when those actions are moralized and, even more specifically, when those actions involve sex.<sup>47</sup> Liberal writers and

<sup>46</sup> Walker 2023

<sup>47</sup> Montgomery and Cowen 2020; Kennedy, McDonnell, and Stephens 2016; Milhausen and Herold 1999; Hutter and Williams 1981

commentators also play on sexualized double standards and too frequently refer to female Trump supporters—whether M4L members or not—as “Trump’s harem.”<sup>48</sup> Such language reflects how women are not only professionally undermined but also underestimated. They may have to work harder to receive respect, but they are also able to play into traditional, feminized roles to have proximity to and influence on powerful social systems while avoiding scrutiny because of their seeming innocuousness. Observers who trivialized M4L’s interests and activities contributed to underestimating their social impact. What’s more, endorsing infantilizing frameworks serves to undermine all women, regardless of political outlook, by reinforcing pernicious stereotypes about their abilities and intentions.

Commentators pontificating about M4L’s demise had a point, however, because this scandal came in the midst of several other unflattering stories about the organization. Around the same time of the Zeigler incident, one Florida mom alleged that her minor daughter had been instructed to check out a specific book from her school library so that M4L members could report the book to authorities.<sup>49</sup> Four months before the Ziegler allegations, *Vice* reported that they had discovered links between various M4L chapters and several different extremist organizations.<sup>50</sup> Days after this report, an Indiana chapter made headlines for quoting Adolf Hitler as saying “He alone, who OWNS the youth, GAINS the future” on the front page of their newsletter. The quote was first presented without any context, which led many to reasonably assume that the quote was cited aspirationally. After criticism, the newsletter was updated with context indicating “the government” cannot be allowed to control children today so that they cannot control “our country’s future”—an edit that some observers found lacking.<sup>51</sup> Additional Proud Boys connections were made public shortly after the Ziegler scandal, with M4L Kentucky chapter leaders being removed from their positions due to their public association with Proud Boys following this enhanced public scrutiny and backlash.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Beaty 2024; Zakaria 2020

<sup>49</sup> Kearney 2023

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert 2023b

<sup>51</sup> Swenson 2023a

<sup>52</sup> Wiggins 2022



M4L did seem to have less of a presence in late 2023 and early 2024 as it navigated these incidents. But commentators who described their reemergence at the 2024 RNC as “a sad comeback... [of an] already fading movement”<sup>53</sup> again missed the point. Social movements do have life cycles, but one process that makes them fade away is institutionalization, which happens when a movement has succeeded in influencing the political system to the extent that it no longer has to work outside that system. M4L has, instead of fading from failures or scandals, become a meaningful part of the mainstream political system. M4L’s impact extends beyond a relatively small percentage of school board election wins when legislation to enforce the organization’s core aims has already been implemented in more than half the country and when leaders have long-term direct access to Presidential candidates, the President, and likely cabinet members. Trump has promised to completely revamp the Department of Education in his second term in accordance with M4L’s restrictive vision, and effectively eliminated federal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts during the first week of his second administration while also rescinding a decades-old rule enforcing nondiscriminatory hiring.<sup>54</sup> These executive orders will likely face various legal challenges, but establish very real roadblocks for individuals and organizations who challenge M4L’s view of an ideal US society.

## **4. Connections to Extremism**

In summer 2023, a few months before the Ziegler incident, the SPLC designated M4L an anti-government extremist group. The SPLC cited the organization’s claims that the government was behind the “indoctrination and sexualization of children through gender identity” and other topics while also referencing M4L’s disdain for the Department of Education.<sup>55</sup> This anti-government label often belies other entities’ complex, rather than uniformly negative, relationship with the government, and M4L is no exception. These entities, like M4L, may dislike, reject, or even seek to dismantle certain aspects of the government (i.e., the Department of Education) while embracing others (i.e., the overall electoral and legislative processes or specific politicians) and still maintain an anti-government label because the elements they oppose

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<sup>53</sup> Lehmann 2024

<sup>54</sup> Pomeroy 2025; Picchi and Cerullo 2025

<sup>55</sup> Yousef 2023

constitute such a larger portion of their action or identity than the segments they embrace.<sup>56</sup>

The extremist label merits more in-depth attention given the widespread appeal of M4L ideas, including among some Democrats. Brunching with other entities like the Proud Boys is an indication that some members might, at the very least, be comfortable with certain versions of extremism. While national leadership distanced themselves from such connections, they have nonetheless main-staged other controversial figures at their summits and other events. Katharine Gorka, for example, was featured at an M4L summit; Gorka served briefly at both DHS and Border Patrol under Trump's first administration, is described by various outlets as "an anti-Muslim activist"<sup>57</sup> who "has a history of promoting anti-Muslim conspiracy theories."<sup>58</sup> M4L also publicized a guest lecture from North Carolina Lieutenant Governor Mark Robinson, whose antisemitic, racist, and homophobic views have been criticized.<sup>59</sup> Other people like James Lindsay, Matt Walsh, Seth Dillon, and Jordan Peterson who have been described as anti-trans activists, conspiracy theorists, alt-right influencers, or just plain misogynists,<sup>60</sup> have been speakers at M4L events or had their talks featured on the organizational website.<sup>61</sup> Moms for Liberty may not explicitly endorse all the ideas espoused by these entities, but the creating physical and virtual spaces where their shared ideas are discussed creates an environment where extremist views can be amplified and normalized. A convergence of different extremist elements is presented to a mass audience in the guise of civil discourse.

Extremism typically encompasses more than hateful and exclusionary talk, and definitions of the concept have traditionally encapsulated intense and rare beliefs or actions, typically violence targeting people of certain identities or their advocates. Some M4L members have met this definition after having been accused of committing or at least inspiring violence or threats of violence. One such event in fall 2021 included enraged Tennessee parents yelling and chasing a medical doctor, banging on his car, and blocking his

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<sup>56</sup> Cooter 2022

<sup>57</sup> Altschuler 2023

<sup>58</sup> Bridge Initiative Team 2017

<sup>59</sup> Michaelson 2024; M4L 2024

<sup>60</sup> Carmon 2018; James 2023; ADL 2023; Cesca 2013; "New Human Rights Campaign Foundation" 2022

<sup>61</sup> M4L, n.d.

egress from a school board meeting as law enforcement watched without intervening. This doctor was targeted solely because he had affirmed the efficacy of masking in schools to protect children from Covid.<sup>62</sup> Violence at school board meetings continued sporadically through much of 2023 as M4L was linked to various “organized harassment campaigns” and threats across the country.<sup>63</sup> However, most M4L actions, while often disruptive, have not been violent and have instead worked within the parameters of usual political processes, meaning that the organization’s typical actions are not extreme by the traditional definition.

Another understanding of extremism does not equate it to a rare or outlier stance but rather defines it as the “belief that an in-group’s success is dependent on hostile action against an out-group.”<sup>64</sup> M4L’s rhetoric and actions often align with this definition when they categorize transgender people, certain librarians, teachers, teachers’ unions, or school boards as “groomers,” “terrorists” or vaguer enemies that pose existential threats to children and the nation. M4L’s pursuit of book bans, criminal sanctions for librarians and teachers, and what physicians and transgender individuals identify as harmful prohibitions on medical care can be understood as hostile actions to supposedly maintain the success and wellbeing of the “traditional,” conservative in-group. M4L attempts to further cultivate their image as fighting nefarious forces rather than seeking to harm an outgroup by sometimes partnering with the group Gays Against Groomers. The attempted messaging here is that M4L is partnering with members of the LGBTQ+ community so it cannot possibly be trying to hurt that community, yet the SPLC has also designated Gays against Groomers as an extremist group because of their self-hating anti-LGBTQ+ messaging that sometimes also includes racist and anti-Muslim elements.<sup>65</sup>

M4L’s engagement with extremism can be best understood as *lawful* extremism: “extremism that emerges when extremists control a society’s cultural and legal levers of power.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, M4L is using legal and political processes to enact extremism at the expense of the outgroup while

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<sup>62</sup> Sutton 2021

<sup>63</sup> Gilbert 2023c; Little 2023; SPLC 2023b; Altschuler 2023; Gilbert 2023a

<sup>64</sup> Berger 2018

<sup>65</sup> SPLC 2023a

<sup>66</sup> Daviess and Berger 2024

preserving the perceived superiority and power of the ingroup. M4L actions targeting medical care particularly illustrate this point when, for example, cisgender youth in Tennessee and many other states where transgender care is limited maintain legal access to similar hormonal and other treatments for what is, in actuality, gender affirming treatment that is aligned with traditional gender norms and presentations.<sup>67</sup> These exceptions, which were explicitly debated during Supreme Court hearings about Tennessee's law in December 2024, open these laws and organizations that support them to critiques that such legislation is not truly about protecting people from supposedly harmful or abusive medical treatment but is rather about hostile action toward transgender people as an outgroup. These critiques are particularly difficult to deflect when the legislation in question limits or prohibits adults'—rather than children's—ability to consent to this treatment. It is worth emphasizing here that the point of considering lawful extremism is not to equate legislative efforts with direct, physical violence against outgroups, but rather to demonstrate the various forms that extremism can take and the range of extremist actions that can harm, oppress, and control members of an ingroup.

M4L thus exhibits elements of extremism, whether using the traditional definition or the outgroup-based model, and has been successful in institutionalizing its ideology through legislative and electoral successes. M4L's comparatively approachable and feminized presentation masks an extremist core and has the effect of normalizing ensuing conflicts, including violence, that may occur as a result of their rhetoric. This means that even violent outcomes can then be framed as a moral and patriotic good among M4L members and their network of supporters.<sup>68</sup>

M4L's actions have not only highlighted, but also actively fostered cultural debates around issues including parents' rights, the government's role in schooling and parenting, women's role in the family structure, and the acceptability of political violence for resolving political disagreements. Yet, following a broader pattern of under-studying women activists and extremists in the academic literature, remarkably little scholarly work has so far been done on this group or their role in generating and amplifying cultural conflict

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<sup>67</sup> Schall and Moses 2023; Gaffney and Owerhohle 2024

<sup>68</sup> Williams 2022

by normalizing extremism. This analysis provides an example of how women can utilize and even weaponize ideas of patriotism, even though that is a tactic we much more typically associate with men and masculine actions such as joining the military or a militia. While M4L has engaged in overt extremist dialogue and legislation toward transgender people and other groups, dialogue that has driven most of the organization's media coverage, the group's more subtle efforts have largely escaped more nuanced scrutiny.

## **5. Methods**

This study seeks to help address that gap by analyzing the key themes that were present on the M4L national website as of June 2024 and in their nearly three-hour spot at the July 2024 Republican National Convention. A total of 128 separate items were coded from the website, where items include articles, blog posts, press releases, videos, and other informational or persuasive content. The RNC event was treated as an additional item since, despite its length, it was presented as a coherent, packaged message for its intended audience. At least two project researchers independently coded each item, and discrepancies in coding were resolved in conference with team coders and the PI.

Coders began with a general knowledge of M4L's talking points and areas of concern as covered in media reporting. We were particularly attentive to themes and concepts related to those areas (i.e., parents' rights, racism, and gender as broad categories) and used those as overarching, primary codes. Secondary codes were identified under each primary code area as revealed through close analysis of relevant materials. Coding and analysis also monitored for additional primary areas of focus that were outside of those initially identified in media reporting. Below, we discuss the most commonly deployed primary codes and highlight secondary codes of interest where relevant for better understanding the narrative scheme.

## **6. Findings**

One of the most striking findings from the analysis was how the vast majority of coded items connect to multiple areas of M4L's focus. While it is perhaps unsurprising that concepts of concern are interlinked (i.e., that concerns about supposed transgender agendas would be connected to calls to run for office or

support politicians in order to fight this agenda), the near lack of single-issue items to function as basic explainers of core concerns indicates how strongly M4L content creators believe in the obvious nature of their messages and the pre-existing ideological alignment of their audiences. This analysis shows one way that organizations can successfully weave narratives together for political victories while coming across as invested parents and citizens rather than well-funded activists. In this context, it must be emphasized that the most frequently mentioned codes, detailed below, reflect less a focus on stand-alone issues, and more a framework or a narrative structure through which these interrelated concepts are conveyed.

## **6.1. Conspiratorial Thinking**

Almost all items, 127 (99%) include some degree of conspiratorial thinking, most often referencing some sort of “agenda” to undermine parental rights or corrupt children. For example, a video titled “FL Gov Ron DeSantis Stands up for Parental Rights!” includes DeSantis commenting:

“...they had these videos that were leaked with these Disney people saying you know it's their agenda to eject [sic] sexuality in programming for these very young kids. Look, I have a five, a four, and a two-year-old, so maybe I'm a little bit more sensitive about this, but I think parents in this country should be able to have their kids go to school, watch cartoons, just be kids without having an agenda shoved down their throat every minute.”

The video in question does in fact have Disney executives insisting they want to ensure LGBTQ+ representation in various Disney programming despite Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law, of which both Desantis and Bridget Ziegler were vocal proponents, but Disney’s statements are a far cry from anything resembling forced indoctrination or sexualizing content.<sup>69</sup>

Covid conspiracy theories are present in only 17 items (13%) despite the pandemic’s central role in M4L’s founding. Covid conspiracism often overlaps with familiar claims that the disease’s risks were exaggerated or that the vaccine had escaped usual oversights and posed harms to young children.

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<sup>69</sup> Miller 2022

Most Covid claims also intersect with general conspiracism about elite control, insisting that the government wants to use various efforts to mitigate the disease's spread to more broadly erode individual liberties. Dr. Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, for example, speaks, using a preacher-like cadence to a rapt M4L audience saying:

“At the end of the Constitutional Convention as delegates emerged from their secret deliberations a Philadelphia woman, one Mrs. Powell, asked Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Franklin what kind of government the convention had given them. Franklin answered her, as you know, “a republic, if you can keep it.” Dr. Franklin's challenge feels so bracing still two centuries later not simply because we're gathered here in his hometown but because today the nation born here just a few blocks away is increasingly misgoverned, misled, and outright attacked by a ruling elite that doesn't want us to keep our Republic. In fact, they want to take it from us. Look no further than how our elected and unelected officials acted during the Covid pandemic.”

Roberts does not further elaborate in this particular speech about how officials' actions during Covid constitute proof of their desire to undermine the country, but other versions of this theory insist things like getting people to mask is a way to make them compliant and amenable to following a variety of increasingly tyrannical orders. Other versions claim that rules keeping most visitors out of schools during Covid were designed to create more permanent situations where parents were banned from school buildings, thus intentionally lowering their visibility into the ostensibly nefarious lessons their children were absorbing.<sup>70</sup>

More overt conspiracism is largely relegated to linked materials on other websites that are listed under headings like “Resources for Parents.” One outlink, for example, includes a video titled “The Global Pagan Theocracy of the United Nations.” Among other things, this video insists that the United Nations's (UN) involvement invariably leads to “dependency, entitlement, collapse, and failure,” and that the UN “hates the wealth of nations”—all

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<sup>70</sup> Cooter, Taylor, and Hansen 2025

claims that, were they true, would be vicious attacks on fundamental American ideals.

Conspiracism about the UN undermining the United States and operating as part of some nefarious global cabal is not new. These theories echo traditional “New World Order” (NWO) conspiracy theories<sup>71</sup> that insist “elites” are working against the best interest of the average person. These theories have, at their core, remained fairly constant since at least the 1990s despite their slight and periodic repackaging, such as QAnon claims during the first Trump administration about the Democratic Party and other elites being connected in some global pedophile network.<sup>72</sup> One video from Williamson County’s chair directly connects to this traditional (and often overtly antisemitic) NWO conspiracism in a video discussing “gender ideology.” Referencing advocacy from Gay-Straight Alliance organizations nationally, she rhetorically asks, “Is this about the well-being of children? No, it's about social change: they want to burn it down and rebuild it in a Marxist New World Order.”<sup>73</sup>

Image 2 is a still from that video that also seems to have been distributed in other chapter materials and can be found as a stand-alone PDF online. The graphic shows how NWO conspiracists viscerally feel that numerous systems and forces are combining efforts to target and attack them on some dimension. In this portrayal, M4L’s illustration is not so much the pipeline it is titled, which would imply that someone is pushed along a fairly linear pathway by various, sequential sources, but rather a simultaneous bombardment from a whole host of coordinated forces while the target remains static and faces seemingly impossible odds of successful defense. In this image, “your [the viewer’s children’s] school” is portrayed as under intense and unified attack from local, national, and international organizations. It is worth noting that the school is the entity under attack here, not any viewer’s individual student. Having the school as the entity to defend appeals to parents including those who may not feel their own children are at risk to “gender ideology” messaging but who could be inspired to advocate on behalf of others in their ingroup. This approach facilitates mass action and provides sufficient allyship and coordination to stand against the vast conspiratorial forces.

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<sup>71</sup> Flores 2022

<sup>72</sup> Marc-André 2023; CSIS 2021

<sup>73</sup> MFL WC 2023



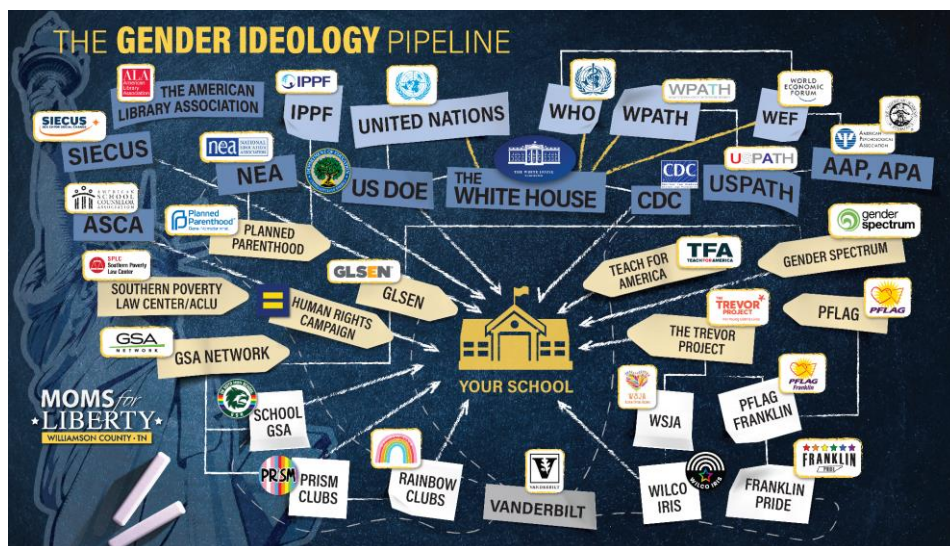


Image 2: M4L’s “Gender Pipeline” that shows NWO-style bombardment of connected forces on the viewer’s school.

Most M4L-produced content does not overtly reference traditional conspiracism, yet comments about ubiquitous liberals, Democrats, activists, or others who are presented as coherently aligned against M4L causes can be read into this kind of NWO network for audience members for whom this framework already resonates. M4L can thus propagate conspiracism that mobilizes a range of extremist activity against out-groups without necessarily engaging in or endorsing such action. On the other hand, viewers who are not yet steeped in traditional NWO conspiracism can have a soft entry point to it through M4L messaging about coordinated, harmful, elite forces, potentially contributing to a pipeline of radicalization<sup>74</sup> much more real than the one illustrated in the above graphic.

## 6.2. Political Engagement

Political engagement is the next most prevalent code, present in 97 items (76%). This analysis includes references to the Constitution and other legal documents under the political engagement category because references to these documents are used as appeals to how politics shapes culture and vice versa. Forty-one items (32% of all coded items and 44% of political engagement items) reference the Constitution as a way to justify M4L’s appeals to freedom and other American ideals.

<sup>74</sup> Munn 2019

For example, during a summit gathering, one M4L speaker exemplifies how the group uses appeals to the Constitution to criticize social justice efforts that M4L calls the “woke agenda:

“...we need to focus on equality and move away from equity. You know, what we wanted during the Civil Rights Movement—the true Civil Rights Movement—was equal access under the law, you know, and equal rights, equal rights that came from our Constitution. That's what we desired. We were not seeking now to have equitable treatment and—you know, ‘we have to take from another person to give to somebody else in order to level the playing field.’ There's a graph (*sic*) that's oftentimes used of a family that's looking at a game outside of the arena from the back side of the fence, and oftentimes they use that to talk about equality and equity. And so really what they're saying is they need to find ways to prop people up so they can look over the fence and support them. They call that equity, but at the end of the day if they would pay for a ticket to the game they wouldn't need to sit outside of the baseball match to watch the game.”

This speaker is a Black, male pastor whose websites says he has been the guest of various conservative talk shows (including Tucker Carlson who was ignominiously dismissed from Fox News<sup>75</sup>) and links to a program sponsored by Turning Point USA that promotes a "Black Exit from the victimhood mentality."<sup>76</sup> Having this anti-equity message being delivered by a Black man certainly helps give M4L defenses against allegations of racism, and the pastor's likening equity to theft directly appeals to listeners who believe efforts to mitigate the lingering impacts of racism violate precepts of the American Dream.

Some references to the Constitution are, somewhat more subtly, also a way to evoke patriotic appeals intended to encourage the audience into voting and other political participation to maintain a desired cultural framework. Fourteen of these also connected to one or more of the Founding Fathers with the goal of linking to ideas of the nation's founding and further inspiring direct

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<sup>75</sup> Peters, Schmidt, and Rutenberg 2023

<sup>76</sup> “BLEXIT,” n.d.; “Pastor John Amanchukwu,” n.d.

political participation. For example, one guest on a podcast episode titled “Politics Need Regular Americans” praises M4L for inspiring people to run for office by saying:

“Certainly it is a testament to the movement that you're leading and that I'm just grateful to be a part of that. More and more citizens are rising up and going, ‘You know what? I can do that too. I can help. I can do my part. I can serve a term or two. But then I'm going to go back to my regular life.’ And I think that's what our Founding Fathers intended, and so I commend you guys for equipping so many parents across the country to do this great work.”<sup>77</sup>

Twenty-seven total items encourage people to run for local office, especially school board positions. An almost equal number of items (28) endorse specific politicians while another twenty-four discuss some encounter with specific politicians or include dialogue with a politician as part of the content.

### **6.3. Gender Roles**

Discussion of gender roles is the next most common theme, found in 87 items (68%). Gender roles here means that men, women, and, in some cases, both parents, are described as having specific duties to fulfill in either the family or society more broadly. Some of these references do comport with traditional, conservative notions of gender roles: women as empathetic and nurturing because they bear children or men as needing to return to stereotypically masculine roles. The stereotypical portrayal is most common in items that focus on men’s roles, describing their ideal traits as being in short supply in modern society. Several items state, for example, that “fatherlessness” is one of the major problems facing the country or complain that men have been “neutered” and unable to fulfill ideal masculine roles.<sup>78</sup>

However, as explored briefly above, most references to gender roles are more complex than this traditional dichotomy given M4L’s understanding of women’s perceived authority and expertise over all issues that influence children. In items where both men and women were referenced, the general

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<sup>77</sup> Moms for Liberty 2023a

<sup>78</sup> Moms for Liberty 2023b

message is one that parents need to be united in protecting children in a variety of ways and that they need to be concerned about what their children are exposed to via schooling, specifically, even if mothers are encouraged to take a lead or otherwise special role in acting on these concerns. Fourteen items (11% of all items or 16% of items discussing gender roles) explicitly reference the idea of women’s special insights or abilities to pursue children’s interests and needs. One male podcast guest, for example, refers to his wife, not by name and, for most of the discussion, not as his wife, but instead by her role as his children’s mother while praising her interest in and skill with children. He notes that the educational labor was, seemingly, exclusively his wife’s responsibility for their own children who are now adults, even while saying it was something important to him as well:

“...their mother, she stopped teaching so she could raise them and the joke used to be she was the assistant principal at the school because she was always up there involved and she was always involved in their education so that was something that was really important to us.”

## **6.4. Parents’ Rights**

Parents' rights is the next most common code, present in 84 items (66%). Consistent with M4L’s overall public messaging, parents’ rights are typically framed as perceived rights to control all aspects of schooling, rather than exclusively zeroing in on LGBTQ+ content or even masking policies. For example, DeSantis praises M4L efforts to pursue a Parents’ Bill of Rights nationally and remarked to wild applause,

“We [Florida] were one of the first states in 2021 to do a Bill of Rights for parents which is very very important and actually was the predicate for us to make sure the school districts couldn't force mask the kids for eight hours a day, and we were able to win that battle. We also have enacted this year curriculum transparency legislation for parents. You have a right to know what curriculum is being used in your children's classrooms. And why someone would want to lock parents out of that—why they would not want parents to be involved in that is really beyond me.”

The lock out reference likely originates in how parents across the country had restricted physical access to school buildings during Covid. Some M4L content alleges that those restrictions were never lifted—at least not until their activism reversed those policies. Other items rely on the “locked out” language to refer to parents allegedly being excluded from educational content or even fundamental child rearing. Tiffany Justice, for example, notes on a podcast with political commentator Dave Rubin:

“It was really interesting to talk about this issue and talk about parental rights because a lot of this is happening in the school day, but they're keeping it from the parents, they're locking the parent out, and they're saying you know we know your kids better than you know your kids.”

Allegations of parents being locked out of schools assert or at least imply that school officials or other vague and conspiratorial sources can only have nefarious goals for limiting parental visibility into day-to-day schooling and thus cannot be trusted to make almost any decision on behalf of children.

## **6.5. Identity-Based Narratives**

References to race and racism are present in 71 items (55%), and overt LGBTQ+ references are similarly prevalent in 68 items (53%), indicating a near equal focus on these identity issues that, by frequency, are still less important to M4L content than the other narrative categories above. Most references to race and racism as we would typically think of those topics are found in externally linked resources. These resources generally define the concepts of race and racism, sometimes correctly, but just as often assert that anti-white racism is the only true racial discrimination happening in modern US society. Items for which M4L claims authorship tend to focus more specifically on anti-CRT rhetoric and related ideas rather than the broader concepts or definitions. A post from one leader criticizes Black Lives Matter and encompasses both the anti-CRT and anti-white racism allegations by saying, “This movement is ravenous and cannibalistic, and after it devours our Judeo-Christian values and our children, it often also eats its own.” This post goes on to compare oppression created by racism to medical conditions that

individuals need to overcome in a way that oversimplifies structural racism and the exemplar medical issues alike.<sup>79</sup>

More commonly, M4L's direct references to race and racism include videos of people speaking at school board meetings, often misappropriating a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. before saying things like:

“We are not opposed to teaching truthful history. We are opposed to labeling people as oppressors and victims solely based on the color of their skin. Parents beware of terms like social justice, diversity, equity, inclusion—those inherently good things are being used to disguise a biased political agenda.”<sup>80</sup>

This purportedly political agenda is typically extended to focus on LGBTQ+ issues, which are perhaps less interwoven into M4L material than would be expected based on media coverage of the organization. This apparent underrepresentation could be due to media focus or could be due to how quickly M4L expanded their discussions to encompass desired parental control over all aspects of schooling. Items that specify LGBTQ+ issues tend to dissect various layers of concern that M4L members have, attempting to present those concerns as rational and as challenging known science, rather than as outgroup hostility. For example, and linking once more to her anti-UN conspiracism, Williamson County chair notes in another item:

“[The UN] have appointed a human rights office independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity. And the current office holder of that, the current mandate holder, is this guy, Victor uh, Magical (*sic*), whatever. You can see that in their website, they have all the buzzwords. When you start seeing ‘gender identity,’ ‘spectrum,’ ‘intersex,’ you know, ‘there's not male and female,’ ‘non-bin—’ that it's just it's absolutely ideological and not based in science so the UN is absolutely compromised.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Steenman 2022

<sup>80</sup> Moms for Liberty 2021c

<sup>81</sup> MFL WC 2023

This speaker's failure to pronounce Victor Madrigal-Borloz's name and clear disinterest in trying to do so accurately further undercuts his credentials and the legitimacy of his actions. It also undermines M4L's attempts to distance themselves from perceptions that at least part of their motivation is racism and outgroup hostilities.

## **6.6. Other Areas of Note: Religion & Nationalism**

Nationalism and religion are the next most common primary codes, with noticeably lower prevalences than the above codes, yet still worth examining. Their conceptual merit is due to their connection to other M4L narratives and their heavy presence in their 2024 RNC event—the capstone event in this analysis—which perhaps suggests an increased focus on these themes during the second Trump administration.

Forty-eight items invoke nationalism, which, as defined by social scientists, extends beyond warm and positive feelings of patriotism to include negative or threat-based framing of outsiders. Notions of US liberty and freedom are infused across most material, but the nationalism code in this analysis requires a stronger expression of threat perception beyond merely positive ingroup descriptions. Framing about the nation being in moral danger or of losing the rights conservatives often believe to be unique to the United States are common topics here. These items also frequently connect to the bugbears of Communism and Socialism, which are often used as stand-ins for broader objections to liberals or the Democratic Party.<sup>82</sup> For example, in a podcast episode titled “Is America Falling To Communist?” (*sic*), political commentator and senior director for counterterrorism under Trump's administration Sebastian Gorka praises Trump's efforts to limit immigration in his first term. With no overt connection to Communism but heavy with allusions to xenophobia and cultural degradation, he continues:

“We are having the dismantling of our nation, and here's the big take home for all of you lovely ladies out there. And the guys who are standing behind those lovely ladies. If you're not prepared to fight, it's [the country is] done, it's gone.”

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<sup>82</sup> Swenson 2023b

The pastor who spoke about the harms of equity more directly observes that, when considering equity, inclusion, or anything resembling M4L’s definition of CRT:

“You have to go back and [...] think about critical theory. Which came from the Frankfurt School of Germany. A gentleman by the name of Karl Marx espoused to (*sic*) this belief of the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat. That was the power dynamic, you know, the role was to destroy capitalism and push socialism.”

Asserting that Marx, himself a figure that looms larger than his biographical footprint in a US understanding of Communism, is a direct forebearer of modern efforts toward equity underscores M4L claims that diversity efforts must be un-American.

Some items bridge both concepts of nationalism and religion. For example, at the RNC meeting, Tina Descovich, an M4L cofounder, somberly asserts,

“There's something going on in our country right now. And you can't see it with your eyes. But we all know what it is. It's the battle between good and evil. It's a battle for the soul of our country. It's a battle for the souls of men and women in our country. And bigger and more focused, it's a battle for the soul of our children. [...] Our mission is to save America by unifying, educating, and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government.”

This example, like many other narratives in this dataset around nationalism, parents’ rights, and LGBTQ+ issues, focuses on cultural and national identities as being under threat. But it does so while referencing imagery of spiritual warfare that would doubly appeal to certain audience members, especially those with certain evangelical training. For them, this language evokes an understanding that what is at stake is not merely a schooling environment that could impact their child’s life, but something that is part of a larger and urgent cosmic battle whose outcome could impact children’s eternal future. A self-described “mama bear” and guest speaker at the M4L 2023 Summit explicitly invokes this by saying of M4L’s efforts, “This is not a political war, it is a spiritual war!”



Other religious references include 16 items (13% of all items or 37% of items referencing religion) that include one or more Bible verses or passages. Several specifically reference the Ten Commandments, another references Colossians 2:8, which instruct Christians to not be taken “captive” by “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” In another item, an M4L founder talks about how they must “cleave to the truth,” a phrase present in several Bible verses, depending on the translation. The most notable, specific Biblical reference is to Esther 4:14, which receives a lengthy denouement from a speaker who is a female Christian podcaster. She slightly misquotes the verse and says,

“And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this. You guys probably know, Esther, who was Jewish, had won favor of the king, was being used to thwart a plan to kill the Jewish people. Her uncle, Uncle Mordecai encouraged her to advocate on behalf of her people to the king so that she could be a tool of their deliverance, and by God's grace that's what she was. While we are not in the exact situation that Esther was, there are some principles that we read in the book of Esther that of course can apply to us today. [...] It's easy to get nostalgic and think that what we're working toward is simply to go backwards, to go back to how it was in the 80s or 90s or whenever we think that America was better— in many ways it was better, of course, and it was simpler, but the reality is is that there is no going back, there's not any going back, there is only forward. We are tiny specs on the span of eternity. And our job during our fleeting and fragile lives is to cultivate and advocate for what God says is good and right and true and that takes God-given courage.”<sup>83</sup>

However, as with the undertones of conspiracism throughout most of M4L's material, most of the religious (and, specifically, Christian) messaging is largely left as a shared subscript rather than being such an overt sermon. One of M4L's linked external resources is Heritage Action, which is an advocacy arm of the Heritage Foundation. The Heritage Foundation is one of M4L's key sponsors and also the primary force behind *Project 2025*, for which, rather incestuously, M4L is on the advisory board.<sup>84</sup> Heritage has gained increased

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<sup>83</sup> Moms for Liberty 2022

<sup>84</sup> Cheeseman 2024; Swenson, Balingit, and Alexander 2024

public recognition in recent years, largely due to the aspirational conservative theocracy for which *Project 2025* serves as a blueprint. However, it has been working toward this end for much longer—since the early 1970s—and was a major force behind much of what we retrospectively call the Religious Right of the 80s.<sup>85</sup> Given *Project 2025*'s appeal to a second Trump administration, it also seems likely that M4L will continue to have a strong influence on educational policy and other cultural contests for the foreseeable future, perhaps while engaging with more overt white Christian nationalist messaging since that, like their educational policies, is seemingly being institutionalized as well.

## 7. Conclusion

M4L, alongside other organizations with shared or similar ideology, has strongly impacted the cultural landscape of the United States in a relatively short, four-year time span. While their full scope remains to be seen, the organization has successfully weathered scandals to become a household name and influence cultural debates and legal policies nationwide. M4L and its leaders have seemingly become a fixture of RNC events and part of a network of informal advisors to the President himself, all while successfully maintaining the image of child-protecting mothers rather than savvy political activists.

At the same time, M4L has facilitated extremist interests. Under the traditional definition, M4L has facilitated extremism by fostering, even if not endorsing, violent and threatening actions in pursuit of their agenda. Under Berger's definition, the organization has facilitated extremism by promoting and enacting hostile actions toward outgroups.

This analysis shows that several interrelated narratives are crucial to understanding how M4L communicates these hostile measures to their audience. The way these narratives weave together and implicate each other is reminiscent of how conspiratorial narratives function by linking key concepts in a web of complex and occasionally contradictory framing. The complexity and conceptual variety allow different individuals to have a choose-your-own-adventure approach to assessing which narratives best fit their own outlook

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<sup>85</sup> Balmer 2014; Diamond 1995

and allow them to work alongside others who may have chosen a different narrative pathway to the same endpoint of exclusionary activism.

It is no coincidence then that conspiratorial undertones are so prevalent across M4L produced and linked materials, finding a natural resonance where the same internal logics of convoluted and outgroup-oriented thinking are fundamental to organizational identity. While most of M4L's conspiracism is in the form of light-handed allusions to powerful entities working against children's best interests, it is precisely this idea that some elite "other" necessitates M4L action that makes their framework extreme via Berger's definition. The extremist elements become even clearer when the conspiracism is overt and attributes "evil" or "groomer" intentions to Democrats, liberals, entities like the UN, members of the transgender community, people who talk about equity as a social good, or even teachers and librarians.

Parental rights narratives, as well as narratives about how moms, dads, or parents together should fight for them are also constructed against a perceived enemy that is obstructing those rights. Rights, in this framework, need defending against what present school leaders and politicians are purportedly doing against the interest of children and families. These rights can only be won when ostensibly good, ethical ingroup members combine efforts to identify and fight these adversaries.

Nationalism is likewise exclusionary by definition. M4L narratives that focus on the supposed purity or uniqueness of US culture necessarily imply and sometimes outright assert that the country's special culture requires defense against a constant and perhaps organized threat. These threats may be external actors, internal actors, or both in concert, and require the same response in any case: unwavering commitment to traditionalism to protect this valuable, yet fragile, state of existence. Narratives around Christianity are similarly framed as being under threat from forces that want to undermine the very moral fabric of the nation and of righteous families. The language of spiritual warfare and references to specific Bible verses invoke a higher mandate that also includes a not-so-implicit message of success: if God is on your side, you cannot lose and your actions must be justified, even (and perhaps especially) if some outgroup members are harmed along the way.

Woven together, M4L’s narratives all create a tapestry of perceived attack from outgroups that must be countered for the wellbeing and perhaps very souls of their children.

It is unclear if these narratives may shift during the second Trump administration given that M4L and its allies have achieved much of the legislative and political success they sought. They may have less of a need to focus on outgroups and perceptions of threat in this context, but it seems more likely that the organization’s specific goals and targeted outgroups may simply evolve. For example, further argumentation around threats to children could easily encompass administration narratives about “criminal migrants”<sup>86</sup> and other alleged threats that immigration poses to US culture. Narratives surrounding gender roles and children’s best interest could also shift to ways to encourage more women to be stay-at-home mothers, including by making it more difficult for women to fully participate in the workforce. Such barriers could be enacted through eliminating anti-discrimination policies or removing federal aid that supports childcare—actions that already happened in the first ten days of the administration and outcomes consistent with goals of *Project 2025*.<sup>87</sup> Even if the specific targets do change, M4L’s underlying tactics of exploiting social anxieties to enact harms against outgroups will almost certainly be a continued tactic of the organization and its allies over the next four years.

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<sup>86</sup> Editorial Board 2019

<sup>87</sup> Picchi and Cerullo 2025; Democracy Forward 2024; Collins, Treene, and Waldenberg 2025

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