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Social media was once a neutral battleground. Now, both Republicans and Democrats have demonized them to drive political agendas.

Katie Canales

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Tech companies haven't had an easy time lately, with lawsuits and critique lobbed at them.

But the platforms have also been dragged into a new war in recent years: lawmakers using them and the decisions they make as punching bags to drive their political agendas.

Experts told Insider it's the product of the post-2016 election realization that online platforms were not all benign, a Trump-era political marketing test, internet platforms' shift from their historical hands-off approach to content moderation, and mounting polarization in a country where a political tug-of-war was growing ever nastier.

"We've always seen polarization in the US," Ari Lightman, professor of digital media at Carnegie Mellon and social media expert, told Insider. "Social media companies just escalate that."

One of the first major instances of Trump accusing a tech company of anti-conservative bias was in August 2018, when he said Google was promoting former President Barack Obama's speeches ahead of his own in search results.

"Politicians are always looking for successful marketing, and he was testing the idea," John Samples — a vice president of the CATO Institute and a member of Facebook's Oversight Board — told Insider.

It worked, and from that point on, every decision that companies made around what to flag, remove, or keep up on their sites became another data or talking point to support a cause.

For conservatives, that cause was the belief that internet platforms are hellbent on silencing them. And for progressives, the argument that tech platforms don't do enough to crack down on false facts and hate speech dates back to Obama-era scholars, Samples said.

Once the 2016 US presidential election came around, it didn't just spawn the "techlash" — it produced a president whose favorite messengers were the very internet platforms he would end up crusading against, and "antipathy toward social media elites became a core Republican tenet," Samples said.

The divisive tone on social media became even more pronounced by the 2020 election cycle. Republicans repeated Trump's unfounded claims that the election was stolen, riling up a base that was already heated after a year of pandemic-driven safety protocols. Democrats had to use their platforms to repeat that it was the most secure election in history. Both sides were shouting into a void of followers who already believed what they were saying.

And through it all, members of Congress began pouncing on opportunities to grill tech CEOs, which often devolved into political theater, even though some of tech's biggest critics in Washington happily use the platforms to their advantage to win elections.

After Zuckerberg reportedly said he'd "go to the mat and fight" threats to break up the company, Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted that his comments signaled he was against keeping corporate power and monopolies in check.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren tweeted last month that "no company should be too big to be held accountable for spreading misinformation" after the Wall Street Journal reported an algorithm change favored divisive false content.

Republican Reps. Madison Cawthorn and Marjorie Taylor-Greene and Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz are some of the loudest voices posting about alleged censorship.

Cruz in January tweeted that "Big Tech's PURGE, censorship & abuse of power is absurd & profoundly dangerous," after platforms began suspending Trump following the January 6 Capitol insurrection.

"Some of that is just politics, some of that is a general reaction," Paul Barrett, a deputy director at NYU's Stern Center, told Insider. Barrett was among the NYU researchers who published a report that disproved conservatives' claims of anti-right discrimination online.

Social media companies and the rules they enforce are now inextricably subject to vicious political judgment.

Zuckerberg "went from being angelic to being Satan, and it happened in three or four years," Samples said. "But it's really tied up in the politics of the country."