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Extremism and Activism: What Motivates Right-Wing Extremist Group Activity?

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ABSTRACT

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 led to a fundamental and important shift in U.S. domestic politics. Far-right groups, whose ideologies had congruence with many of the controversial policies in Trump's agenda, began to emerge into the public eye and mainstream media. Some of these groups quickly demonstrated their capacity to resort to violence in the interest of furthering their causes, best exemplified in instances like the Charlottesville riots in the summer of 2017. As violence became more common, the need for research regarding the motivations of these extremist groups became increasingly apparent. Through a qualitative analysis, this thesis provides an in-depth case study into the right-wing extremist group The Proud Boys. I hypothesize that far-right extremist activity will increase in response to a fluctuation in factors including institutional influence, the normalization of far-right rhetoric, the presence of a far-right executive administration, the perception of minorities and immigrants as a threat, the frequency in left-wing protest activity, the presence of digital media platforms, governmental resistance and regulation of the group, and the entrance of new voters into the political system. Through a keyword search of 'Proud Boys' to gather data, my study evaluates each hypothesis using evidence from the New York Times archive, concluding that far-right extremist activity is contingent upon institutional influence, the normalization of far-right rhetoric, the presence of a far-right executive administration, the perception of minorities and immigrants as a threat, the frequency in left-wing protest activity, the presence of digital media platforms, and governmental resistance and regulation of the group . This carries implications outside of the academic realm. These conclusions can be implemented into effective policy that will combat right-wing extremist activism that devolves into political violence, violence that is often deadly.

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INTRODUCTION

July 4th, 1776. December 7th, 1941. September 11th, 2001. Certain dates carry with them historical associations, both good and bad, that every American citizen can identify. These events are few and far between, but nonetheless represent monumental moments in American history. January 6th, 2021, though recent, is a date that will likely join this short list. The breaching of the United States Capitol Building, something not seen in over 200 years, came as a shock to individuals watching on television sets and smartphones across the country. As time goes on and more incriminating evidence comes to light, January 6th seems to be cementing its reputation alongside 9/11 and July 4th as another date that sparks immediate recognition among the American public.

Whether thought of as a culmination of months of disinformation among the far-right or a spur-of-the-moment anomaly, the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th of 2021 was a shaping moment for many Americans, including myself. Growing up in the D.C. suburbs, visits from relatives and family friends would always be accompanied by a trip to the Washington Mall. Frequenting the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, White House, and the Capitol were integral in shaping my interests throughout my childhood, and certainly led to me pursuing an education in political science upon entering college. These iconic buildings have always stood in my mind as physical embodiments of American democracy and history.

That said, watching the chaotic violence unravel in the hallways of the Capitol that Wednesday served as a formative experience for me. I recall turning on the television to be faced with a striking reality: the United States Capitol being breached by extremists, militia members,

and even ordinary citizens all in the name of taking back the election they believed had been stolen from them and their revered candidate, Donald J. Trump.

Turning from this out-of-control instance to the more general phenomenon of political activism, it is no secret that civic engagement is a valuable resource for American citizens and an effective way for them to hold their elected officials accountable. Activism functions as a way for members of the electorate to voice their discontent with policies, advocate for their own interests, and pressure lawmakers to enact legislation favorable to those interests. Activism can also bring individuals who share similar worldviews together and create communities, which may have a cyclical effect and increase future activity.

For all of the positives that political activism can offer, January 6th is just one example of activism devolving into unproductive violence. Since activism is such a valuable yet dangerous method of expression, it is important to fully understand it as a tool for political gain. Advocacy tactics like activism and protest have been used by both Democrats and Republicans in the United States for decades, but they are not the only political groups who organize and execute demonstrations. Extremist groups and militias on both sides of the political spectrum recognize and capitalize on the benefits of voicing their views.

Due to the radical nature of their platforms, it is unsurprising that protests among extremist groups can result in unchecked violence. While protesting can be productive, rioting and looting often prove counterproductive to the efforts of an extremist group as they seek to gain legitimacy in the eyes of lawmakers. A simple glance back in time will show a host of extremist events that spiraled out of control and even posed a lethal threat to individuals outside of the protestors, most notably instances like the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 and Portland, Oregon in the summer of 2020. Because of the dangerous conditions these events often

bring about, it is important to understand what motivates these groups. The gradual permeation of far-right rhetoric into the mainstream political sphere has given a newfound focus to the heightened activity of far-right extremist groups like the western chauvinist all-male Proud Boys. A greater comprehension of the activity that groups like the Proud Boys engage in, and what prompts that activity, is needed. By attempting to understand the motivations that spur action and potential violence by groups like the Proud Boys, law enforcement and government can put better precautions into place to prevent the violence that all too often follows extremist activity.

In the next section, I include a review of the existing literature on both protest and right-wing extremism. I use this literature to form hypotheses about the factors that influence right-wing extremist activity. These hypotheses are detailed in the theory section of this thesis, though they are more so speculations than a cohesive theory. After explaining how I will gather evidence and my methodology for the case, I provide a brief summary of my results. I then use the aforementioned evidence to delve into commentary and discussion regarding my eight hypotheses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on the activity of right-wing extremist groups can most reasonably be fragmented into two topic areas – right-wing extremism and protest. While there is inherent overlap between the two subjects, them being studied and analyzed independent of each other speaks to the general, larger trend seen in the literature on the topic. Relevant articles and studies discussing the protest activity of far-right extremist groups are limited at best. Given this distinct split, it is necessary to understand the separate existing wisdoms on both protest and right-wing extremism in an effort to form educated conclusions about how the two topics might interact and in an attempt to address the gap in the existing literature.

The way in which people take action, protest, and demonstrate their beliefs is not a stagnant process. Rather, these forms of civic engagement go through continual transformations. New technologies emerge, new generations age into voting and political eligibility, and with that, activism and protest change as well. In the early 2020s, protest seems to be most heavily affected by the ever-growing impact of the internet. The conveniences the internet provides individuals lessens the amount of time and resources required to execute effective demonstrations. The amount of time it previously took to organize events has been reduced to a fraction of its former time, the amount of effort needed to disseminate a message and raise awareness has significantly lessened given the convenience of social media, and the amount of resources or capital an organization has to employ to organize an event has all but disappeared. Schiffrin (2017) notes

these undeniable and profound effects that the internet has brought about in regard to protest in their piece, where they also argue that the internet, although it contributed to the complete transformation of protest, has had a damaging effect on democracy since it provides a platform for the rampant spread of misinformation and disinformation (Schiffrin, 2017). The former of the two relationships, that between protest and the internet, is interesting as Schiffrin frames the internet as a vehicle by which protests are more efficiently arranged and conducted.

Political activism serves as a method for individuals to advance or communicate their interests to those who have a greater stake in the policy making process. Protestors are aware of the capacity their events have to influence policy formation, so it is little surprise that a direct relationship has been established between protest and forms of political change. McVeigh and Cunningham (2012) noted that social movement activism, or protest, has had a direct relation to the election of black people to public office in the South, thus effectively demonstrating that engaging in political activism can bring about effective and lasting change. Further, their study revealed that protest appeared to influence hate crime enforcement and reporting. Namely, this discovery by McVeigh and Cunningham is demonstrative of the potential political implications protest can have. If an administration acts in a way that is in contradiction with the views of certain individuals, those individuals can use protest as a method to bring about awareness, policy development, or another form of political change.

There is significant speculation and argument over what factors are most influential and telling in determining the frequency of protest. Heaney (2020) proposes three factors they believe contribute to the rising frequency of protest in American politics – institutional illegitimacy, political polarization, and the decentralization of communications media. Firstly, the importance of an electorate's faith in their electoral institutions cannot be overstated. If

Americans do not trust the government to provide a reliable way by which officials can be elected, the foundations of democracy will be at stake. Rising sentiments that electoral institutions (in the case of the United States, the electoral college) are inefficient, Heaney argues, will result in increased protests.

Political polarization is perhaps an exhausted term in today's political sphere. When parties begin to double down on their platform and minimize the window for compromise across the aisle, Heaney posits that increased protest will ensue as people blindly push their own mentalities. This relates to extremism as Rydgren (2007) notes the tendency of extremists of any affiliation to view any departure, no matter how slight, from their opinion as wholly illegitimate. Heaney also alludes to the media enabling "activists to communicate with one another more readily, and therefore, to organize protests quickly and with few financial resources." (Heaney, 2020, p. 195) Heaney concludes that the combination of the electorate's perception of institutional illegitimacy, political polarization, and the affordances of the media has a comprehensive effect in increasing protest across the United States.

Renstrom, Aspernas, and Bäck explain that as individuals slowly come to realize the value of social forms of political engagement, protest will increase while institutional forms of political engagement decline (Renstrom, Aspernas & Bäck, 2021). By noting specifically that due to their social ties, young people have a motivation to participate in protest, it is established in the study that participation in protest may not even be prompted from political engagement, but rather due to its social appeal. Protest is social in that it serves as a method for individuals to communicate their political or moral identities to others, and thereby allows observers to draw inferences in regard to the participant's political identities. The authors examine the social incentive that accompanies protesting and note multiple other studies that have established the tendency of

younger generations to engage in protest activity more than older generations (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014, SOU 2015, Wennerhag 2012).

Protest is often employed as an avenue for belief expression due to its non-exclusiveness. More specifically, protest is versatile. Any person or group can publicly demonstrate their beliefs about anything in (almost) any place, including people who identify with radical right-wing extremist ideologies.

I now turn from literature about protest to research about right-wing extremism in the United States. The rise of right-wing extremist groups and militias rose considerably in the 1990s in response to the Clinton Administration, the end of the Cold War, and ongoing talk in Washington about international cooperation. The momentum gained in the 1990's was briefly fractured when Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the perpetrators of the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995, were identified as loose affiliates of the growing right-wing extremist movement (Obert & Schultz, 2020). Just as the emergence of the internet changed the nature of protest, it also changed the nature of extremism. After extremist movements were publicly shamed for their apparent association with the Oklahoma City Bombing, the rise of the internet presented a way in which radicals could assemble in a more covert manner. The internet offers the potential for a virtual, collaborative community of like-minded individuals. Right-wing extremism has since taken up residence in these virtual communities, with some virtual platforms existing solely as radical right information hubs.

Graham (2016) expands on the spread of white extremism in the digital environment, noting, similarly to Obert and Schultz (2020), that an exponential rise in extremist websites likely contributed to the resurgence and growing influence of radical right-wing ideology after its momentum was briefly halted due to the bad press it received from the Oklahoma City Bombing.

However, Graham notes an additional, more recent change in extremist approaches to the internet. “Information laundering” is a phenomenon they identify in their piece, where extremist content becomes so pervasive that it is eventually intermingled on the internet with more mainstream content and on more mainstream websites. The comprehensive effect of ‘information laundering,’ Graham asserts, is the normalization of extremist rhetoric. People are less likely to consider something extreme if they are constantly seeing the radical sentiments of extremists mixed in with more routine content. Graham reasons that as extremist rhetoric is increasingly normalized, previously cloaked extremist websites may now exist more overtly and allow for more explicit organization.

It is common for changes of a large scale to be met with opposition or hesitancy. Recent social changes are thought to have “engendered a sense of collective status threat among national ethnocultural majorities,” (Bonikowski, 2017, p. S181). This quote, combined with Bonikowski’s observation that the media has lent legitimacy to radical campaigns, they argue, has allowed extremist platforms who perpetuate this idea to gain recognition nationally. Just as Heaney argues that mistrust in state institutions leads to protest, Bonikowski argues that this mistrust, coupled with dissatisfaction, has been a catalyst for the mobilization and protesting of dissatisfied citizens who feel their power is being threatened by minorities and immigrants.

When the Trump Administration came to power in 2017, the meaning and perception of extremism began to shift dramatically in the United States. Extremist ideas that had usually been discounted were now appearing with far greater frequency and being taken more seriously by individuals on both sides of the political spectrum. For example, Bloch and Myers (2018) attribute the normalization of extremist rhetoric to the Trump Administration and the way in which the administration incorporated race, gender, and class ideologies from nativist extremist

groups into their own rhetoric. Because these ideologies have a newfound prominent position in politics given the significant support from former president Trump, they constitute a greater threat to the status quo than in previous years, when there were few elected officials who so blatantly embraced radical sentiments. The lines between right-wing extremists and the Republican Party became a bit more blurred when a Republican nominee-turned-president identified with the same stances held by far-right groups. Radical discourse is more widely discussed than ever before because it is more prominent in politics than ever before. Media outlets that adopt this rhetoric into their mainstream political content, even though it may be unintentional, signal to extremist groups that the recent shift in the political atmosphere gives them space to adopt a more public platform for their operations and activities.

Rydgren (2007) attempts to pick apart the sociology behind individuals who align themselves with the extremist, radical right side of the political spectrum in the United States. Despite the more holistic implications of the term, Rydgren explains that those on the “radical right” or “far-right” usually are more staunch advocates for sociocultural right-wing goals as opposed to economic ones. The strong and usually controversial opinions they adamantly hold are more concerned with national identity, law and order, immigration policy, and abortion than economic growth and unemployment. Many, if not most modern radical right-wing groups are hostile to immigrants because they threaten a way of life that extremists have idealized, one in which competition rarely arose from immigrants. Rydgren notes a theory titled relative deprivation theory in their piece, which is defined as when people (in this case, right-wing extremists) focus on their frustrations that arise as a result of their feelings of deprivation from drawing disappointing comparisons with their own past, a past in which immigrants rarely posed a competitive threat. Clearly, immigrants easily mold into this hypothesis, as extremists may

attribute their frustrations regarding feelings of deprivation to the increasing presence of immigrants in the United States. As their presence increases, there is a perceived threat to the existing status quo in the eyes of extremists, as their positions of power are increasingly subject to economic and social vulnerability (see also Obert, 2020). Rydgren identifies this as a critical component of the profile of the radical right.

Extremism, by its very nature, carries a certain connotation of the individual's inflexibility to alter their beliefs. Individuals holding extremist opinions that are identified as intense usually have strong reasoning or passion behind them, meaning alternative opinions that are antithetical to an extremist's opinions are met with harsh opposition. This cognitive inflexibility is distinctive of extremism, in addition to beliefs of self-righteousness.

In this thesis, I expand on the two aforementioned schools of literature, protest and right-wing extremism, by examining how activism and right-wing extremism interact. How do right-wing extremist groups employ activist efforts to achieve their goals? Under what conditions are they most likely to use social means of political engagement like activism? The existing literature makes numerous facts apparent. Importantly, far-right groups are hostile to immigrants and minorities. They recognize the benefits that the internet and the media offer for recruitment, organization, and mobilization as well as the benefits of having elected officials as allies. How do these observations about far-right groups affect their engagement in political activism?

THEORY

Informed by literature from the above section, I propose eight hypotheses below.

Following each hypothesis is a brief justification and explanation of that speculation.

H1: When the institutional means to enact change are threatened, social means like protest are engaged instead.

It is almost certain that right-wing extremist groups will not receive any policy concessions in alignment with their goals when a left-wing administration is elected to office. The political system is most favorable to these groups when a right-leaning (even more promising, a far-right-leaning) administration is in control of the policy-making process. When this is the case, extremist groups possess more ways to enact policy favorable to their interests through institutional means, meaning they can rely on those in office, who lean towards the far-right, to pass legislation in line with their ideology. However, the election, or even potential election, of a left-wing administration places the institutional means in jeopardy. While it is not uncommon for presidents with more liberal policies to make some concessions to conservative actors for the sake of compromising and passing legislation, they are unlikely to make these concessions to extremist groups because their agendas are inherently radical and usually in strict opposition to those of liberal politicians. Thus, any threat, no matter how seemingly minute, to an incumbent far-right administration that would threaten transition would prompt significant action on the part of extremist groups like the Proud Boys according to H1.

So, when a liberal administration is elected to office, the institutional power available to extremist groups is taken away. As the threat to their institutional power gains ground, a right-wing extremist group will be left looking for alternative methods of pushing and advocating for their interests. Social methods of advocacy will prove more attractive and worthwhile for far-right groups when a liberal administration is threatening the status quo, as a liberal administration is unlikely to negotiate with them in any capacity. This transition period is critical. Therefore, when a democratic or left-leaning administration takes control or threatens control of the institutional means an right-wing extremist group possesses to enact change, they will turn to social methods of activism, like protest, to advance their priorities.

H2: The normalization of far-right rhetoric will lead to increased activity among right-wing extremist groups.

If politicians who represent certain aspects of extremist ideology are campaigning on the national stage, extremist rhetoric will become more mainstream and pervasive in the political sphere. As these politicians gain national attention, extremist ideology becomes less taboo since widely recognized political actors are reinforcing aspects of that ideology. Those who are elected from the campaign trail to political office will serve to further legitimize the identity of right-wing extremist groups. When these politicians normalize, legislate, advocate, and potentially pass policy that favors extremist actors, the extremist groups will recognize their momentum and capitalize upon it through social means like activism and protest.

Having individuals in governmental positions who represent portions of extremist ideology and aid the normalization of far-right rhetoric will allow these groups to build a base of support, as well as a more widespread and well-founded sense of recognition and legitimacy.

Having the overt or covert backing of important political actors will provide extremist groups with networking opportunities, particularly within the institutions of political power.

Institutions that wield a degree of influence over political actors are valuable to right-wing extremist groups. Maintaining and building relationships with certain institutions can prove beneficial to extremist groups like the Proud Boys. The legitimization they receive from the normalization of their ideology allows for this relationship-building, or networking with institutions that are advantageous to them. Many right-wing extremist groups maintain close relationships with institutional actors like the police and the military. These relationships with recognized institutions give extremists a sense of legitimacy, which in turn emboldens the activity they partake in. Having a vast network of resources empowers far-right groups to expand their influence and allows them to make their demonstrations more legitimate.

The media also aids in the normalization of far-right rhetoric. By spreading and advertising the message of more radical political candidates or extremist groups, media outlets standardize that message to the general public. Extremist groups then become less 'extreme' in the eyes of the public, since they are desensitized to their message after hearing similar sentiments or seeing the relationships that the groups hold with political candidates, the media, and other powerful institutional actors. When extremist groups lose their perceived extremity, they are more easily able to organize demonstrations without raising significant alarm.

H3: The introduction of a far-right administration will lead to an increase in extremist activity.

When an administration takes executive office whose policy is in considerable alignment with right-wing extremist ideology, extremists are given a higher stake in governmental and legislative processes. Since the elected official who has far-right-wing tendencies likely receives

backing and support from extremist groups and like-minded people, they have to keep that portion of their base satisfied by making, enacting, and advocating for policies that would be considered favorable among supporters of that ideology. When in office, a right-wing administration would push an agenda that would reflect well on them and keep their approval ratings and chances of being reelected high. That being said, a heavily right-wing administration taking control of the presidency would give far-right extremist groups more of a ‘place at the table.’ The possibility of having aspects of their political agenda implemented, when those aspects may have previously been considered radical by the mainstream, is an opportunity that extremist groups cannot waste. By exhibiting their support for a particular agenda or piece of legislation, extremists are using their voice and giving themselves more of a stake in the policy-making process. Capitalizing on the convenience of the situation, extremist groups would theoretically become more active in their demonstration efforts in order to pressure the administration or simply because they find it more comfortable to advocate their positions publicly due to the newfound power possessed far-right executive.

H4: The greater the perceived threat that minorities and immigrants pose, the more frequent far-right extremist activity will be.

It is well-known that individuals who identify with far-right ideologies believe in the collective, perceived threat of immigrants. Bonikowski (2017, p. S181) noted that a recent combination of social changes has “engendered a sense of collective status threat among national ethnocultural majorities.” This can easily be applied to the white right-wing population of the United States, who perceive the growing immigrant population and minorities as a threat to the current (yet shifting) status quo, where white power dominates U.S. society. Their perception of

this threat is evidenced by their anti-immigration platform and other policies which discriminate against minorities.

Rydgren highlights relative deprivation theory in his piece, a theory that focuses on the frustrations arising from feelings of deprivation when people draw disappointing comparisons with the past (Rydgren, 2007). To the radical right, they see the constant influx of immigrants as a continual source of deprivation. White people are 'deprived' of the opportunities that were available more exclusively to them in the past as immigrants, many of whom are minorities, continue to come to the United States. As the perceived threat of immigrants grows among the radical right, their need to eliminate that threat grows as well. By engaging in different forms of social advocacy, right-wing extremist groups are able to express their growing discontent and disdain with immigration policies and the corresponding influx of immigrants into the United States.

H5: Increases in protest activity on the opposite side of the political spectrum will prompt increases in far-right extremist activity.

Frimer established in his article that extremists on each side feel a significant threat from extremists on the opposite side of the political spectrum (Frimer, 2019). By this logic, right-wing extremists perceive left-wing extremists and those who support causes deemed 'leftist' to be a considerable hindrance to their own agenda and viewpoints. When there are protests by left-wing extremists or demonstrations that carry out a far-left agenda or ideology, this is an assertion of the type of extremism that right-wing extremists already feel puts their own interests in jeopardy.

Left-wing protests and demonstrations will be perceived as threatening by those on the right, particularly those who identify with far-right ideologies. The farther to the right that an individual identifies on the political spectrum, the more threatening they will perceive those on

the political left. This collective threat to the far-right ideology by the left will be mirrored by activity and protests on the far-right. Efforts by the left to gain support and legitimacy by social means such as demonstration will be met with identical, if not greater efforts on the right to push their competing agenda.

H6: The increase in digital media platforms will lead to an increase in far-right activity.

Technology and the internet have provided a new way for individuals to organize and network. An article by Graham noted an FBI estimate that since 2000, there has been an exponential increase in extremist websites (Graham, 2016). Digital media is becoming increasingly accessible to all individuals, including those who are in alignment with extremist ideologies. Far-right groups can disseminate their content and ideology throughout hundreds of thousands of websites, allowing for recruitment and radicalization of people who may have previously had little stake in politics. Through digital media, they are able to increase the size and reach of their group and its accompanying ideology.

In addition to allowing for expansion, digital media platforms give extremist groups the capacity to organize and mobilize in a more efficient fashion. Heaney's article asserted the striking speed at which protests can now be organized (Heaney, 2020). A protest that might have taken months (and many, many resources) to coordinate fifty years ago can now be done within the span of a few days. Digital media has provided a level of efficiency by which extremist groups can now operate. Recruitment, mobilization, and organization of activities have been made arguably effortless when compared to the lengths groups previously had to go to in order to enact and execute a forceful and impressive demonstration.

H7: Limited resistance or regulation from the government on extremist group activity will increase their activity.

Governments may often be hesitant to come down harshly on extremist group activity, especially in the context of the current political landscape when the media places administrative actions under a microscope. The far-right has recently aligned itself more closely with political conservatives as the United States political system becomes increasingly polarized. Actions taken to hinder right-wing extremist activity may no longer be immediately discounted as an effort to ensure safety, but instead criticized as an infringement of the civil right to protest and engage in activism. Extremist rhetoric is becoming increasingly common in the United States' political sphere, which in turn dulls the effect that seeing such rhetoric has on voters. The overwhelming frequency of political opinions that would normally be regarded as unnerving is now permitted as just another sign of the times. Given this shift in the tolerance of extremist language, governments are forced to think more critically about the actions they take to inhibit those of right-wing extremist groups. Many protests, demonstrations, and other displays of activism are thought to be protected under the widely cited rights to speech and assembly afforded in the Constitution. Therefore, actions taken by the government to infringe on those rights may not be well received by the groups, even posing the potential to escalate the situation by antagonizing the extremists.

For the above reasons, intervention in extremist group activity can be a complicated avenue for an administration to pursue. Every move must be carefully evaluated for every possible contingency. Right-wing extremists understand the delicate position that governments are in when it comes to taking preventative action towards them, given the host of repercussions they must consider. Upon recognizing this, right-wing extremist groups can use the hesitancy that governments display in curbing their actions to their advantage.

Every protest that is conducted without any type of administrative intervention is an indication to the extremist group that they can further push the limit of what can be done. Activism can become larger in its scale, bolder in its messaging, and higher in its intensity as each protest passes with little or no governmental interference. Every time an aspect of a demonstration intensifies in some capacity, and nothing is done, the government is indirectly giving a green light to extremist groups and the actions they are taking. The continuation of this pattern will result in a higher number of protests that are larger in size, message, and intensity.

H8: As a new generation of voters enters the political system, extremist group activity will increase.

Every year, it is estimated that around 4 million people turn 18 in the United States. This means that 4 million people age into voting eligibility each year. Of course, not every individual makes the decision to become politically engaged, but each year brings an influential set of young people who can have a discernable impact on the political system. Renstrom found that institutional forms of political engagement are declining as other forms become more favorable (Renstrom, 2021). Younger generations are more likely to turn towards social means of civic participation like activism and protest to advocate for their interests and communicate their identity to others.

Renstrom also makes note of the social appeal protests have. By protesting, individuals are able to express their political or social identity to others and form ties with those who are similar to them. Younger generations who protest may become acquainted with individuals who share their political sentiments, which may increase future activism. This will result in a steady increase in protest frequency over time as institutional forms of political engagement decline and protest becomes a more readily available mechanism to employ as a method of advocacy.

Given the division in the literature surrounding protest and right-wing extremism, the aforementioned eight hypotheses provide speculations as to when right-wing extremist activity may increase. This limitation in the literature provides limits on this qualitative study.

Additionally, it is important to differentiate between the terms activism and protest. While each hypothesis in the above theory section pertains specifically to right-wing extremist activity, protest is also encompassed in this term. The term protest is limiting in that it does not account for activity such as community outreach and recruitment efforts, which are all implicated in the broader term activism. While there is no overarching cohesion to the theory connecting each hypothesis, each individual hypothesis examines an important facet of the motivations of political behavior among right-wing extremists.

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative case study method, I have chosen the right-wing extremist group the Proud Boys to focus on for the remainder of this work. The all-male Proud Boys were founded in 2016 and adhere to common far-right extremist beliefs. The group adheres to anti-immigration, anti-fascist, Islamophobic, anti-feminism, and anti-Semitic ideals. They openly engage in political violence. Their presence has been noted at riots across the country since 2016, most notably at the insurrection at the Capitol and at the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally. Given their relatively high-profile status and prominence among the far-right political environment, the Proud Boys are the most fitting group to use in order to test my hypotheses effectively.

Using the New York Times archive, 360 articles were identified based on their usage of the term ‘Proud Boys,’ within the text of the article, the title, or the subtitle. The timeline of the articles for the purposes of this thesis was limited from January 1st, 2016, to December 31st, 2021. This timeframe encompasses two executive transitions of power (the Obama administration to the Trump administration, and the Trump administration to the Biden administration), which is the most effective way to test some of the hypotheses that have a more longitudinal component to them given certain timing constraints. Since the Proud Boys were not formed as a political group until 2016, it is clearly impossible to extend and go back further in the data. The selected articles were evaluated in light of the eight hypotheses incorporated into the earlier theory section. Evidence, quotes, and snippets from the articles in the archive were pulled out as they applied to the hypothesis. From there, the compiled evidence was integrated

into the discussion and commentary section of this thesis, where the overall support for each hypothesis was determined in a comprehensive manner.

Table 1 Support Level

Hypothesis	Level of Support	Hypothesis Description
H1	Strongly Supported	Institutional Influence ↓, Far-Right Extremist Activity ↑
H2	Strongly Supported	Normalization of Far-Right Rhetoric↑, Far-Right Extremist Activity↑
H3	Supported	Presence of Far-Right Admin., Far-Right Extremist Activity↑
H4	Strongly Supported	Perceived Threat of Immigrants/Minorities↑, Far-Right Extremist Activity↑
H5	Strongly Supported	Left-Wing Protest Activity↑, Far-Right Extremist Activity↑
H6	Strongly Supported	Digital Media Platforms↑, Far-Right Extremist Activity↑
H7	Strongly Supported	Govt Resistance/Regulation↓, Far-Right Extremist Activity↑
H8	Insufficient Evidence	New Voters↑, Far-Right Extremist Activity↑

The table above is a more simple representation of each hypothesis included within my theory. The results of my case study are noted in the ‘Level of Support’ column. I designated each hypothesis’ results using a continuum, ranging through ‘Strongly Supported,’ ‘Supported,’

‘Weakly Supported,’ ‘Not Supported,’ and lastly, ‘Insufficient Evidence.’ While these designations are ultimately determined subjectively, they are based on the results of my case study, where I took into consideration all relevant circumstances and pieces of evidence.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Below are the respective discussions for each hypothesis in light of the relevant evidence collected from the New York Times archive. Out of the 360 articles, 105 articles were used for evidence in this section of the thesis. Some articles were more pertinent to certain hypotheses, leaving those hypotheses with lengthier discussion sections. Because there were so many sources to pull from, not every piece of evidence could be incorporated into the commentary. Additional evidence for each hypothesis can be found in Appendix A.

H1: When the institutional means to enact change are threatened, social means like protest are engaged instead.

H1 would predict that when the institutional powers of the Proud Boys are put in jeopardy, there is an increase in their activity. As a political organization, they are inherently involved in politics. When they risk losing a degree of their institutional power, H1 hypothesizes that the extremist group will mobilize in an effort to preserve that power. Political campaigns, national elections, and inaugurations would theoretically pose the biggest threat to the institutional power of far-right extremist groups like the Proud Boys because they provide the perfect opportunity for them to legally lose the relative power they possess to enact their agenda or policies favorable to their agenda. This vulnerability is extremely unfavorable to them. If an administration that is antithetical to their values is campaigning, being elected, or being inaugurated, it would make sense that they would employ activism as a means of maintaining their potency as a political group.

The articles from the NYT Archive illustrate the persistent threats that the Proud Boys face throughout an election cycle, which they mark by displays of activism. What at first may appear as an insignificant example helps us to understand the larger trend in which Proud Boy activism

coincides with important periods of time in the election cycle. As the votes of the 2020 presidential election were counted, all eyes turned to ‘purple’ states like Arizona, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. As a battleground state, Michigan contained several divided counties. Kalamazoo County was an important victory for democratic and republican candidates alike. Due to the competitiveness of Kalamazoo, it was home to different protests throughout the campaign period of the 2020 election, including a rally held by the Proud Boys. Leading up to this competitive election, it became evident to extremist groups like the Proud Boys that the status quo was being put in jeopardy just by the nature of democratic elections. In an effort to counteract the threat of the Biden campaign, the Proud Boys held a rally in Kalamazoo as they began a campaign to protect the institutional power they held during the Trump Administration.

Of course, the election ended in Joe Biden being declared the projected winner a few days following the Tuesday in November. This declaration was made to the dismay of Trump supporters nationwide. Before the result of the election was even called, unfounded rumors began swirling about unlawful mail-in ballots and other forms of electoral fraud. Supporters of then-President Trump began using the phrase “Stop the Count!” after Trump himself used it in a tweet to advocate for stopping the counting of votes whilst he was ahead in order to ensure a Republican victory. An article in the NYT Archive described the Trump base as erupting in “cries of electoral corruption,” further asserting that nationwide, “supporters held “Stop the Steal” rallies outside state capitols.” (Barry, 2020). In Sacramento, the California state capitol, videos showed “confrontations that devolved into physical assaults” (Barry, 2020) of individuals who were later identified as wearing Proud Boys paraphernalia. Days after the election, activist efforts seemed to increase as the institutional threat to the Proud Boys became more legitimate

and pressing. A prominent figurehead in the Proud Boys hierarchy, Joseph Biggs, noted just two days after the presidential election that it was time for “war.” (Williamson, 2021).

In the months following the election but preceding the official certification of the results, tensions were brewing across the country as sentiments that the election had been ‘stolen’ only strengthened in far-right circles and the Trump base. The tension was apparent to everyone, including government agencies. An FBI report cited by a New York Times article noted that the political events of 2020 were “likely to embolden U.S. domestic violent extremists in 2021.” (Goldman, 2021b). Even the Department of Homeland Security warned that “extremists [of the far-right] continue to be galvanized over the presidential transition.” (Goldman, 2021b). It was clear to everyone that the impending, new status quo facing the Proud Boys was not one they seemed to be willing to accept without making use of every form of activism at their disposal, including political violence.

As the certification of the election fast approached, the window to protect the institutional power that the Proud Boys valued was growing smaller and smaller. Leading up to January 6th, the day Joe Biden would be officially certified as the president-elect, more questionable tactics began to be discussed openly in far-right circles. “Mr. Trump’s legal efforts [to overturn the election] failed,” leaving the Proud Boys to call “for him on social media to use his presidential powers to stay in office. Some urged him to declare martial law or take control by force.” (Frenkel, Feuer 2021). It was clear by this point in the election cycle that efforts to overturn the election should be viewed with alarm. As time went on, the lengths that extremist groups like the Proud Boys were willing to go in terms of their social activism grew, along with their concern for the defense of the institutional power they enjoyed under Trump. This concern came to a head both on the grounds and inside of the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

January 6th represented perhaps the most threatening day the Proud Boys had experienced since their founding in 2016. Since 2016, they had existed somewhat comfortably with the status quo – a right-wing administration that gave them subtle and covert nods from time to time and pursued a policy agenda that was decently favorable to that of the Proud Boys. Although soon-to-be President Biden had already been declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election, distrust in the vote counting process had been exploited by Trump and other members of his administration. This distrust could all be rectified, the Proud Boys reasoned, on the day Congress was set to certify the election – January 6th. The ultimate threat to the institutional means the Proud Boys had to enact change needed to be met with the ultimate use of the social means at their disposal to stop this threat. The New York Times archive notes the violence that “engulfed Congress and delayed the formalization of President Biden’s victory.” (Broadwater, Feuer 2021). Of course, the absolute goal was to stop the formalization altogether.

Trump was able to undermine the faith that many of his supporters previously had in the institution responsible for electing a new executive, the electoral college. After the electoral college went from an institution emblematic of American democracy to an apparent fraud, there were limited institutional, legal, or traditional methods that could be employed to stop the certification of the newly elected democratic president. Indeed, the events of January 6th are characterized as having “the intent of disrupting Congress and advancing Mr. Trump’s efforts to unlawfully maintain his grip on the presidency.” (Benner, Feuer, Goldman 2021). Capitol Police knew prior to the events that many of then-President Trump’s most ardent supporters viewed the day that the results were certified as “the last opportunity to overturn the results of the presidential election.” (Mazzetti, Goldman 2021). January 6th marked the ‘grand finale’ – the culminating event in months of ongoing threats to the Proud Boys and the power they had as a

political entity. It is no surprise, then, that some Proud Boys “advocated for violent action” (Goldman, Ismay, Fuchs 2021) to preserve this power, and later followed through with those calls for violent action.

Elections and the introduction of an administration antithetical to the values of the Proud Boys should prompt action by the Proud Boys, Hill says, given that the relative power to enact their agenda or policies favorable to their agenda is vulnerable. The executive director of the Bridging Divides Initiative, which tracks political violence in the United States, is Shannon Hiller. Hiller was quoted in the New York Times explaining the fluctuating activity levels of the Proud Boys, saying “the Proud Boys have shown consistently high levels of activity this year [2021], unlike last year when there was a spike only around the election.” (Frenkel 2021c). The Biden Administration took office in early 2021, which is the year that Hiller notes the start of consistent, high levels of activity. As a far-right extremist group, the values held by the Proud Boys are entirely incompatible with those held by the Biden Administration. The introduction of the Biden Administration, a democratic administration, presents a new obstacle for the Proud Boys to hurdle over to push their agenda and values forward. Their increase in consistent activity in 2021, as stated by Hiller, can be explained by the semi-permanent threat that the Biden Administration presents to the Proud Boys’ capacity to advocate institutionally.

Hiller further notes that a spike was seen in activity around the 2020 election. Joe Biden versus incumbent President Trump meant a democratic candidate challenging the existing republican administration. Clearly, the Proud Boys perceived the Biden campaign as an inherent threat to the status quo. Throughout the Trump Administration, the Proud Boys had enjoyed an increasing sense of legitimacy as they were often linked to Trump’s allies and were a frequent topic on conservative media outlets like Fox News. Conversely, Joe Biden had publicly

condemned the Proud Boys and their values. It was apparent to the Proud Boys that a Biden Administration would not provide a political climate conducive to the advancement of their agenda, especially when compared to the political position they held throughout the Trump era. Therefore, the Biden Administration was a threat to the mission of the Proud Boys and the institutional levers they had previously been able to influence during the Trump Administration. The threat of these institutional levers led to heightened activity among the group throughout the campaign and election period due to their hope that demonstrating socially could help them to maintain their institutional power.

The pattern of activity the Proud Boys engaged in as exemplified by evidence throughout the New York Times archive was in line with important points at which their political power was threatened during the events surrounding the 2020 presidential election. H1 is ‘Strongly Supported’ in the case of the Proud Boys. As the institutional threat to the group’s political power became more pressing, the instances in which they engaged in activism became both more frequent and more intense.

H2: The normalization of far-right rhetoric will lead to increased activity among right-wing extremist groups.

H2 predicts that as extremist rhetoric becomes increasingly pervasive in mainstream politics, far-right political groups like the Proud Boys will become emboldened by the attention and recognition. Ultimately, the legitimization that political figures who participate in mainstream political discourse offer to the Proud Boys will increase their activity.

Since the Proud Boys were founded in 2016, they have been described as having “maintained links with both overt white supremacists and more mainstream Republicans.” (Lukpat, 2021). The maintenance of these relationships is integral to the success of the Proud

Boys, particularly those who align themselves to the left of the Proud Boys. Support from more mainstream Republicans allows the Proud Boys to reach a wider audience. When they work to disseminate their messages, this wider audience also offers a wider range of people from which they can draw support from and expand to.

The normalization of extremist rhetoric is well-documented throughout the New York Times Archive, with one article bluntly summarizing the phenomenon: “The Proud Boys have been able to make inroads with mainstream conservatives.” (MacFarquhar, Feuer, Baker, Frenkel 2020a). Having allies who hold political power gives the Proud Boys a greater stake in the game that is American politics. With time, the network of people who had given a public nod or even publicly stood with the Proud Boys expanded and came to include members of Congress. Certain members of Congress are described as maintaining an “unapologetic association” (Edmondson, 2021) with right-wing extremist groups like the Proud Boys. The same New York Times article explains that this association has given way to a political climate that has a “growing acceptance of extremism, which has become apparent as more lawmakers espouse and amplify conspiracy theories and far-right ideologies.” (Edmondson, 2021). The endorsement of far-right discourse among congressional Republicans has introduced a new era of partisan politics in which these figures feel comfortable publicly associating themselves with groups like the Proud Boys, whose activities have been expressly described by government agencies as constituting domestic terrorism.

Given the extremist nature of their ideology, it would make sense that the most vocal allies of the Proud Boys in Congress are those who lie far to the right on the ideology spectrum. One congressman in particular, Paul Gosar, has aligned himself with a host of figures on the far-right, including the Proud Boys. Gosar, along with a “handful of other Republican members of

the House, had deeper ties to extremist groups who pushed violent ideas and conspiracy theories.” (Broadwater, Rosenberg 2021) Alignment with radical groups who promote and commit violence, while shocking, helped to bring extremism into conversations surrounding GOP politics. It was no longer considered taboo to associate these groups with the Republican party since elected officials had been documented as having ties to them or, in some cases, endorsed them. Gosar’s associations with extremism did not stop at the Proud Boys. A New York Times article noted that “Representative Paul Gosar’s association with the white nationalist Nick Fuentes is the most vivid example of the Republican party’s growing acceptance of extremism.” (Edmondson, 2021) It is important to note that links have been made between multiple fringe groups and members of congress. This more well-rounded association is significant as it discounts the potential for the alignment between congress and the far-right as being an exception to the norm.

It would be naïve to assume that the only institution or actor controlling the Republican party is Congress. The media, former presidential associates, and political groups nationwide also share the responsibility of creating and contributing to a larger Republican identity, which in recent years has been recognized as drifting further and further to the right. The line identifying the center of the Republican party was described as having “shifted in the era of President Trump [to the right],” (Rubinstein, Paybarah 2020) given that many of these institutions and actors (the media, former presidential associates, and political groups) seemed to be increasingly tolerant of allowing extremist discourse to permeate their respective platforms. The media made comparisons that drew similarities between the leader of the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrio, and then-President Trump. It was revealed in 2017 that Roger J. Stone Jr., a former Trump campaign official and “longtime associate of Mr. Trump’s, [had] taken the Proud Boy oath.” (Feuer, Peters

2017). Groups such as Women for America First and the Republican Club in Manhattan welcomed Proud Boys into their coalitions and venues, in the case of the latter even asking the Proud Boys leader at the time, Gavin McInnes, to speak to the club. A pro-Trump activist who held a leadership position in a state Republican women's group, Londa Gatt, "welcomed militias and Proud Boys at protests." (Kirkpatrick, McIntire 2021). The recognition from sitting members of Congress, the media, former presidential associates, and political groups all aided in bringing extremism into everyday political conversation.

The evidence seen throughout the New York Times archive makes establishing the normalization of extremist rhetoric that took place during the Trump Administration relatively easy. A Michigan Democrat in the House, Elissa Slotkin, stated that important leaders of the GOP endorsing extremist groups like the Proud Boys, who are no stranger to violence, "normalizes violence." (Kirkpatrick, McIntire 2021). The favorable signaling that the Proud Boys have received from these figures can likely explain why Proud Boy leader Ethan Nordean believes, and has publicly stated, that the group acts as the "soldiers of the right-wing." (Feuer, 2021a). As a perceived 'army' to the Republicans, the Proud Boys seem to hold a firm belief that the GOP stands behind them and endorses their activities, which include protests that often devolve into violence.

The confidence that conservatives have lent to the Proud Boys is best demonstrated through the heightened boldness of their activities. While the typical thought process is that politicians do not want extremist groups to be in attendance at their rallies given that their presence alone might alienate more centrist voters and independents, this does not seem to be the case for the rallies of former President Trump. Proud Boys are described as being "prominent at the rallies of Donald J. Trump." (Frenkel, 2021c). Rather than making an effort to differentiate

himself from the extremist group in the interest of remaining appealing to independent and undecided voters, Trump legitimized their presence. Indeed, one article argued that the Proud Boys “had not quite become a household name before President Trump was asked about [them in a debate].” (MacFarquhar, Feuer, Baker, Frenkel 2020b). This is referencing when, during the first presidential debate of the 2020 election, Trump famously refused to denounce the group, instead telling them to “stand back and stand by.” It is not difficult to understand why the Proud Boys took this type of behavior from Trump as him signaling his support for their opinions. Trump’s behavior towards them shaped their view of him as being “an ally [they had] in the White House.” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021). Mary McCord, a former official at the Department of Justice was quoted as saying that the ally the Proud Boys saw in Trump “allowed them to grow and recruit and try to mainstream their opinions, which is why I think you end up seeing what we saw [at the Capitol].” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021).

In addition to appearing at larger scale Republican rallies, the Proud Boys have also been seen making appearances at a more local level. Members “have increasingly appeared in recent months at town council gatherings, school board presentations and health department question-and-answer sessions across the country.” (Frenkel, 2021c). The escalation of their exposure in recent years at the hands of more standard political institutions has instilled them with a sense of legitimacy, leading to their appearance at smaller, more personal meetings where they attempt to influence policy. It seems they have also recognized the appeal that recruiting at a local level offers as they expand their organization. Their presence at these small-scale events, a New York Times article hypothesizes, is indicative of “a strategy shift by the militia [the Proud Boys]” that aims to “bring their brand of menacing politics to the local level.” (Frenkel, 2021c).

Another concerning trend seen throughout the archive was the effort by GOP leaders following the January 6th insurrection to make the political violence seem as though it was a reasonable measure to take. One article contended that “conservative lawmakers continue to minimize or deny the violence,” (Van Syckle, 2021) while another noted that Republican politicians are “still playing down the most brazen attack on a seat of power in modern American history.” (New York Times, 2021). While the vast majority of political actors condemn the violence that took place on January 6th, there are key figures that discount the violence and validate the insurrectionists as patriots, sometimes even asking for donations to support their plight – “Stephen K. Bannon, a former adviser to Mr. Trump, often asks listeners of his podcast to support the legal defense of these ‘political prisoners.’” (Barry, Feuer 2021). Fox News host Tucker Carlson produced a special following the insurrection which he called the “Patriot Purge,” where he alluded to his belief that the defendants [those on trial for their actions on January 6th] “were victims of a ‘false flag’ operation orchestrated by their own government.” (Barry, Feuer 2021). Fox News, of course, is the predominant and powerful right-wing media machine. Unsurprisingly, the airing of the Patriot Purge special came after the network “spent eight weeks advancing Mr. Trump’s baseless claims of voter fraud,” which allowed them to succeed in “warping their voters’ realities.” (Grynbaum, Alba, Epstein 2021). By promoting incendiary rhetoric and contributing to the widespread sentiment that the election was stolen, it is not far-fetched to conclude that the violence on January 6th can be accredited in part to the media machine of the GOP.

Hypothesis 2 is ‘Strongly Supported’ by the above evidence. It is clear that through the normalization of general extremist rhetoric, insurrection discourse, and allies the group was able to find throughout the GOP base that the sense of recognition the Proud Boys gained

emboldened them to appear at rallies, protests, riots, and even smaller, local events that are more intimate.

H3: The introduction of a far-right administration will lead to an increase in extremist activity.

While H2 focuses on how far-right rhetoric is normalized via various political actors, H3 provides a sole focus on the executive branch. H3 reasons that with the inauguration of an ideologically far-right administration, extremist activity will increase. This is for many reasons, the first being that the institutional power held by the executive is significant. The institutional power held by the executive theoretically multiplies when one considers the fact that they appoint the heads of federal agencies, who in turn implement a plethora of policy. Through appointment the executive is able to ensure, to a certain degree, that the enacted policy is favorable to their right-wing ideology. The executive position also gives the president a platform by which they can easily reach and appeal to extremist groups. By giving subtle (or, in some cases, not-so-subtle) acknowledgements or indifferent statements, they communicate a policy of leniency or even perceived support to extremist groups like the Proud Boys. The status and platform offered to the president allows them to exert a level of control over political actors, including extremist groups. It is important to note that since the Proud Boys were founded in 2016, they have existed under two democratic administrations and one republican administration. As this hypothesis relies on the presence of a far-right administration to be evaluated, this section of discussion will be exclusively centered around the Trump Administration.

Throughout the Trump Administration, Donald Trump frequently expressed his pressing concerns about left-wing extremist groups like Antifa, a loosely organized group of individuals who are both anti-fascist and anti-racist. He regularly employed rhetoric communicating the

alleged threat that Antifa and the left would inevitably pose to American stability and democracy. One New York Times article noted that “Mr. Trump spent the summer [of 2020] blaming rioting and violence on Democratic governors and mayors and warning about a “left-wing cultural revolution.”” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021). However, Trump’s unyielding fear of left-wing domestic terrorists was not exemplified solely through his rhetoric. He was able to use the powers of his position to spread this sentiment throughout his administration, where it eventually developed into harmful policy. Government agencies were instructed to pursue the overstated threat of left-wing extremism even though “the F.B.I., in particular, had increasingly expressed concern about the threat from white supremacists, long the top domestic terrorism threat, and well-organized far-right extremist groups that had allied themselves with the president.” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021). Ignoring right-wing extremist groups like the Proud Boys as a legitimate threat allowed them to expand their organization, network, and resources. Functioning with little opposition also gives far-right groups the perception that they can engage in activism without facing the consequences that they would face if a more orthodox administration was in power, which is further discussed in H7. The relatively free rein given to the Proud Boys throughout the Trump Administration as a result of the dramatized Antifa threat culminated in a large-scale failure by law enforcement to recognize the full capabilities of groups like the Proud Boys until it was too late. Perhaps best stated by Kirkpatrick and Feuer, “the failure to recognize the threat of the Proud Boys was a blind spot in the culture of law enforcement that transcended the Trump administration.” (Kirkpatrick, Feuer 2021).

The rise of right-wing extremism, while not pursued in a manner proportional to that of far-left movements, was well-documented throughout the Trump presidency. F.B.I. Director

Christopher Wray noted that since 2017, “the number of domestic terrorism investigations by the F.B.I. had risen to 2,000,” and that “the Capitol riot was part of a broader threat that had grown significantly in recent years.” (Goldman, 2021). By engaging in consistent dialogue about the ‘overwhelming’ threat of Antifa, the administration was perpetuating the idea that Antifa posed a greater risk in terms of domestic terrorism than groups like the Proud Boys, despite evidence and F.B.I. reports which demonstrated the opposite. This message was “quickly embraced and amplified by [Trump’s] attorney general and his top homeland security officials, who translated it into a shift in criminal justice and national security priorities even as Mr. Trump was beginning to openly stoke the outrage that months later would culminate in the storming of the Capitol by right-wing extremists.” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021). By using the executive position to influence national security policies and approaches, the ideologically far-right Trump Administration diverted resources to the disorganized left-wing extremist movement Antifa, allowing the Proud Boys to evolve into a more well-developed and lethal group.

More explicit connections can be made between the Proud Boys and the single far-right administration they have existed under, the Trump Administration. One of the most notable instances of Trump directly communicating with the Proud Boys took place during a presidential debate with Joe Biden in 2020. When asked if he would condemn the Proud Boys, Trump “seemed to signal his support by telling its members to “stand back and stand by.”” (Lukpat, 2021). After receiving considerable criticism over his comment from GOP lawmakers, President Trump eventually did agree to condemn the group, but the damage proved to have already been done. Following Trump’s eventual condemnation, members of his administration appeared unwilling to reinforce the condemnation, as demonstrated when White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany would not explicitly denounce the group, simply referring back to Trump’s

eventual condemnation. This inflammatory rhetoric was perceived by some as an indication of Trump's sympathy for the group, and by others as a more definitive endorsement of the group. "The group's [Proud Boys] supporters adopted the president's remarks as a rallying cry," (Roose, 2020) one New York Times article said of the statement by Trump. The Proud Boys' reaction to the statement was an unmistakable testimony to the influence Trump had on the group. The instance also provided the Proud Boys with a higher degree of publicity and visibility than they had previously enjoyed, bringing them into mainstream political conversation. Following Trump's comment, "searches for the group soared, as did posts about them on Twitter and Facebook." (Frenkel, 2020). One member noted that following the debate, "the group was already seeing a spike in "new recruits." (Frenkel, Karni 2020). The successful functioning and operation of any political group is contingent upon their ability to grow and expand. The support that Trump had expressed through his "stand back and stand by" comment acted not only as a gesture of encouragement to the Proud Boys, but also allowed them to extend the reach they previously held through increased exposure.

Trump's candid comments and behavior towards right-wing extremist groups throughout his presidency did not go unnoticed by important public figures, who were not hesitant to denounce the supposed relationship Trump was maintaining with groups like the Proud Boys. Former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo spoke out regarding Trump's role in the rise of extremist activity, aptly stating "once you unleash hate and division you demonize differences, you lose control of it... it's like lighting a match in a field of grass. The wind takes it and it just takes off." (Southall, Pager 2018). The former Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, expanded on this notion, saying Trump's erratic behavior was evident "in the rise of

these right-wing militia groups,” and that “it’s almost as if he’s implicitly giving them permission to take whatever action they want.” (Gabriel, Kanno-Youngs, Benner 2020).

Whether through policy or the sheer publicity of his position, Trump constantly engaged in behavior that served the interests of the Proud Boys by redirecting the focus of the threat they posed towards Antifa, communicating with them directly, or coordinating with them to advance common interests. Ultimately, the connections that can be drawn between the Trump Administration and the motivations of extremist groups like the Proud Boys cannot go ignored, as extremism experts as early as 2017 acknowledged that “the president, who egged on violent supporters during his campaign, has played a role in emboldening the groups.” (Feuer, Peters 2017).

Despite this damaging evidence, H3 is not strongly supported. Rather, H3 is ‘Supported.’ In the larger context of American politics, Donald Trump is an interesting figure. Many of his actions were considered unprecedented, his engagement with extremists included. H3 posits that the introduction of a far-right administration will increase extremist activity. While that was the case in the Trump Administration, it would be naïve to assume this means H3 conclusively applies to all right-wing administrations. Though Hypothesis 3 fits the single case of the Trump Administration well, it is not sufficient to conclude that the hypothesis as a whole is strongly supported. H3 remains ‘Supported’ in Table 1.1.

H4: The greater the perceived threat that minorities and immigrants pose, the more frequent far-right extremist activity will be.

White nationalism is central to the ideology of far-right extremist groups like the Proud Boys. Gavin McInnes, the founder of the Proud Boys, openly spoke about the need to protect ‘white culture,’ asserting that he does not “want [white] culture diluted. We need to close the

borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-speaking way of life.”

(MacFarquhar, Feuer, Baker, Frenkel 2020a). Minorities and immigrants pose a blatant threat to the advancement of this vision McInnes ingrained into the Proud Boy ideology, an ideology he and his followers argue as needing fierce protection. H4 posits that when the threat posed by minorities and immigrants is thought to be greater by far-right groups, those groups will engage in heightened levels of activity as a way of combatting the obstacle that minorities and immigrants pose to their agenda.

The Proud Boys are hugely vocal about their nationalist and xenophobic views, as members frequently espouse “misogynistic, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant views while making allies with white supremacists.” (Dias, 2021). These views are common among white nationalist groups due to their unwavering belief that immigrants and minorities are responsible for taking jobs and opportunities that rightly belong to white Americans. A New York Times article explains that individuals who align themselves with the ideology of white nationalism and are adherents of extremist groups are mainly white men, who are largely “undereducated or poorly educated, underemployed, [and] unsuccessful in whatever they were trying to do work-wise.” (MacFarquhar, 2021b). These shortcomings leave them “looking for somebody readily identifiable to blame.” Minority groups and immigrants are easy targets for them to assign the blame towards for perceived shortcomings. Once the blame is pointed towards a group of people, that blame is then addressed by extremist groups like the Proud Boys through specific actions that will correct the perceived injustices minorities and immigrants have imposed upon them. Today, “white nationalist rhetoric is framed in terms of preserving a white cultural identity,” (Harmon, 2018) which is certainly the approach that the Proud Boys use to navigate

white nationalism. A main goal of extremist groups like the Proud Boys is to prevent their targets, minorities and immigrants, from further infringing upon the rights they enjoy.

Just as the need to protect white nationalist ideals is entrenched into the identity of the Proud Boys, “violence is built into the [Proud Boy] ideology.” (Moynihan, 2019a). Since two central components of the Proud Boy ideology focus around bigotry and violence, it seems intuitive that they would use activism and violence to defend against those who are victims of their bigotry – individuals who they recognize as a threat to their ideology and status quo. After an increase in hate-related incidents in New York City, intelligence analyst Katherine Sizemore explained, “who do [far-right extremist groups] see as being the threat to the society they want to create – this white ethnostate? A city like New York City, where you have all of these races and ethnicities and religions all in one place. That’s the threat.” (Watkins, 2019). It would make sense that activism efforts by the Proud Boys would revolve around minority and immigrant-heavy areas, which tend to be cities. In cities, the threat is most obviously demonstrated and evident to those who conform to the white nationalist ideology, like the Proud Boys.

White nationalists have long demonstrated a fear of immigrants and minorities, specifically focusing on the potential these demographics have to jeopardize the white culture that white nationalists seek to preserve. Still, former-President Trump, whose platform and rhetoric are both reflective of the pressing fear felt by white nationalists at the supposed hands of minorities and immigrants, appeared to accelerate these sentiments among the far-right by serving as a rallying figure for people with these fears, thus making them more fearful of immigrants and minorities. Throughout his campaign and administration, Trump “echoed their [far-right nationalists] demonization of immigrants and fears of gun seizures and pushed white grievance into the American mainstream.” (MacFarquhar, Healy, Baker, Kovalski 2021).

Through this frequent use of xenophobic and anti-immigrant discourse, Trump was able to create an echo chamber amongst his base and supporters that rapidly amplified the immigrant and minority threat that had already been alarming to these individuals. The former president was able to escalate the notion that minorities and immigrants were infringing upon white culture by regularly speaking on the topic throughout his campaign, with one NYT article noting that “since taking office, he has frequently stoked racial tensions, elevating the voices of white nationalists when he appeared to defend their actions.” (Karni, 2020). Thus, by maintaining a consistently critical position regarding the societal standing held by minority groups and immigrants, Trump reinforced and built that opinion in the minds of his supporters, which included the Proud Boys. Perhaps most importantly, he provided instances in which these grievances could be addressed. Most notably, leading up to the 2020 election, Trump “sowed among his supporters seeds of distrust about voters in largely Black cities such as Detroit and Atlanta.” (McClain, 2020). By providing a definitive instance by which the ‘threatening’ minorities were attempting to infringe on the white nationalist ideology, Trump provided a clear-cut situation where action could be taken to prevent the alleged electoral fraud.

As the threat posed by minorities and immigrants became more pressing and legitimate to white nationalists like the Proud Boys partly due to the platform and community created by former-President Trump, their action against these groups, as well as their action in general, seemed to increase. New York City in particular saw reported hate crimes rise by “about 5 percent in 2018, with sharper increases in crimes targeting black people, up 33 percent, and Jews, up 22 percent.” (Paybarah, 2019). While this sharp increase cannot be entirely attributed to a surge of white nationalism in recent years, one New York City councilman, Rory Lancman, noted that the rise in New York City hate crimes seemed to coincide with the Proud Boys’ more

outspoken nature in the city, saying that the city “is unprepared to deal with the rise of white-nationalist violence” in a specific reference to the Proud Boys.

As the national divide and resentment towards minorities and immigrants grew stronger throughout the 2020 presidential campaign and beyond, the Proud Boys began to engage in discriminatory and aggressive activism more consistently. Following the election in November of 2020, the Proud Boys proved to be more vocal about their grievances against minorities when they “ripped multiple Black Lives Matter signs off of a building before trampling on them.” (Verma, Kanno-Youngs, Tavernise, Montague, Waller, Haberman 2020). The success of the Biden Administration in the 2020 presidential election only further legitimized the concerns that far-right nationalists had about minorities and immigrants infringing on opportunities that used to be more exclusively available to white people. As their fears began to materialize rapidly, their motivation to engage in activism to further their agenda also materialized. A specific New York Times article described that at the insurrection on January 6th, which is the biggest display of activism that the Proud Boys have engaged in, “most of the people who took part in the assault came from places... that were awash in fears that the rights of minorities and immigrants were crowding out the right of white people in American politics and culture.” (Feuer, 2021c). This makes clear that January 6th attack was motivated in part by the extensive and documented fear white nationalists display of minorities and immigrants overtaking their economic opportunities, a fear that was catastrophized when the Biden Administration was being certified as the winner of the 2020 election.

One study cited in the New York Times linked the insurrection at the Capitol to the Great Replacement Theory, which “holds that minorities and immigrants are seeking to take over the country.” (Feuer, 2021c). The theory was also integral to the white nationalist rallies in

Charlottesville, Virginia, in the summer of 2017, “where crowds of white men marched with torches chanting “Jews will not replace us!”” (Feuer, 2021c). Though the assaults in Charlottesville in 2017 and Washington D.C. on January 6th were certainly driven by a variety of factors, the ever-present apprehension that white nationalists like the Proud Boys feel towards minorities and immigrants seems to display a level of correlation with their activity.

H4 is well substantiated throughout the data from the New York Times archive. When Donald Trump came to political prominence, he was able to use incendiary rhetoric to catastrophize the societal position that minorities and immigrants take on. This, coupled with already-strong feelings of white nationalism among the Proud Boys and historic movements taking place in the name of minority rights culminated in significant activism efforts by the extremist group, making H4 a ‘Strongly Supported’ hypothesis.

H5: Increases in protest activity on the opposite side of the political spectrum will prompt increases in far-right extremist activity.

H5 posits that as protest increases on the left side of the political spectrum, activism by far-right extremist groups will increase as a response. The Proud Boys initially gained widespread attention in 2016 due to their infamous street brawls with leftist protestors. They are most frequently documented engaging in violence against Antifa, the loose collection of left-wing anti-fascists. The violence does not seem to be limited in location, with one New York Times article describing that “in cities across America these two groups have repeatedly engaged in violence against one another.” (Moynihan, 2019). Clearly, the Proud Boys have been at odds with groups like Antifa since their own formation, even being noted in the New York Times as having “a history of bloody street fights with left-wing antifascist activists since shortly after their founding in 2016.” (Feuer, 2021b). In the case of the Proud Boys, their perception of an

increase in protest activity by groups like Antifa that align themselves with more liberal or left-leaning causes will prompt them to take action in an effort to combat these groups by promoting their own values, which are inherently at odds with the values of leftist political groups.

The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin sparked a summer of intense protests across the United States by both left and right-wing protestors. The Black Lives Matter movement gained immediate momentum among the political left following the murder of Floyd and was marked most clearly by large protests in cities across America. This historical protest movement on the opposite side of the political spectrum was met with significant activity from right-wing extremists like the Proud Boys, as H5 predicts. F.B.I. Director Christopher Wray explained that while the statistics were not broken down on an ideological divide, his agents had “opened more than 400 domestic terrorism investigations last year [2020] as violence flared during racial justice protests.” (Goldman, 2021). This quote substantiates the idea that violence often follows protest or displays of activism as conflict between protestors and counter-protestors exacerbates tensions, especially when individuals are protesting for a cause that they identify passionately with, like racial justice. The racial justice protests in the summer of 2020 received a remarkable degree of publicity from news outlets and the internet, undoubtedly drawing out counter-protestors aligned with the political right, like the Proud Boys. Goldman, Benner, and Kanno-Youngs write that “armed far-right militia groups started appearing at racial justice protests,” (2021), while Baker, Bogel-Burroughs, Gillespie describe that specifically in Portland, Oregon, the Proud Boys mobilized in response to BLM and explicitly attributed “their gathering in Portland as an opportunity to counter the city’s long-running racial justice protests.” The protests in the summer of 2020, which largely centered

around the Black Lives Matter movement and also involved far-left groups, seem to have been perceived by right-wing extremist groups like the Proud Boys as an opportunity to take action.

Left-wing demonstrators were frequently met by Proud Boys during their protests. The interactions between the two groups regularly devolved into more than mere counter-protesting. Rather, violence seemed to be the inevitable result of two opposite-minded groups meeting. One member of the Proud Boys was reported as taking initiative and leading a “small group of like-minded people and [engaging] in multiple acts of violence during demonstrations stemming from the murder of George Floyd,” (Levenson, 2021) and another instance recorded an event from the summer of 2020 in which “a group of right-wing demonstrators – including several wearing Proud Boys apparel – chased a smaller group of counterdemonstrators, hitting them and firing paintballs.” (Olmos, Baker, Feuer 2021). When protests that can be aligned with the political left do increase, it seems that rather than simply protesting those causes, the Proud Boys employ a much more direct and aggressive approach. The type of activity that they ascribe to when left-wing protests come to prominence is reactionary and violent as opposed to the expressive and more disciplined form of activism often seen in counter-demonstrating.

Portland, Oregon, is a recurring hotspot for reactionary activity from the Proud Boys and other right-wing extremist groups. As left and right-wing protests ran rampant across America leading up to the 2020 presidential election and following the murder of George Floyd, one article explained that confrontations between the Proud Boys and left-wing demonstrators had “escalated on recent weekends” and that the groups frequently “engaged in the streets.” (Baker, Bogel-Burroughs, Gillespie, 2020). Left-wing protests became so prominent in Portland that the Proud Boys organized a rally which was self-described as aiming to “end domestic terrorism,” a clear reference to their perception of the left-wing activists as domestic terrorists. The Proud

Boys' organization in response to heightened leftist activity in Portland serves as further evidence to H5's speculation that their activity will increase as left-wing protest does.

Litigation stemming from the fallout of January 6th has led to lawyers for the Proud Boys asserting that the group had "not planned to assault the Capitol, but had merely prepared to defend themselves against the leftist protesters with whom they had sparred at previous rallies in the city in November and December." (Feuer, 2021d). These statements by legal representatives for members of the Proud Boys suggests that the group organized on January 6th solely in response to and based on their belief that they needed to counteract and defend themselves against apparent leftist protest activity. One of the most astute examples of activism from the Proud Boys, the insurrection at the Capitol, was a day that the Proud Boys contend was only initially organized as a way to defend against protestors from the left who they had previous brawled with. While it remains unclear what the underlying motives were for organizing at the Capitol that day, it is apparent that the group considers the potential presence of leftist activists as an adequate catalyst for their own activity.

As indicated by the violent activity following the Black Lives Matter movement and protests in Portland in 2020, it appears that the Proud Boys see left-wing protest activity as a sufficient pretext for engaging in violent counter-protesting. H5 is noted in Table 1.1 as 'Strongly Supported.' Not only do political engagement activism efforts increase in response to efforts from across the aisle, but the engagement efforts are often violent in nature.

H6: The increase in digital media platforms will lead to an increase in far-right activity.

The internet has transformed the way that the world functions over the last few decades. Political engagement has become something that an individual can partake in from the comfort of their own home, given the affordances of the internet. Hypothesis 6 argues that as more digital

media platforms become available generally, right-wing extremist activity will increase. Digital media platforms allow for collaboration between like-minded individuals. If those who align with right-wing extremist group ideals join similar platforms, they can build online communities that serve as continual reinforcement for their belief system and encourage activity to substantiate that belief system.

The articles in the New York Times archive specifically mentioning the Proud Boys, also frequently mentioned many online platforms. Twitter, Facebook, Parler, Youtube, Telegram, Twitch, Stormfront, and Gab were only a few of the online platforms referenced that are allegedly used by the Proud Boys. While these networks provide extremists with a means of conspiring amongst one another, the notorious lack of censorship on online platforms can also lead to the rampant spread of both misinformation and disinformation at the hands of extremists. This spread is problematic as conflicting information, or false information, has the ability to destabilize the electorate and create a volatile political environment.

The extremists who perpetrated the insurrection at the Capitol Building on January 6th, 2021, planned the riot online, which conveniently provided federal prosecutors with “hundreds of thousands of pieces of digital evidence to identify and support charges against more than 700 defendants,” (Benner, Broadwater 2021) many of which belonged to the Proud Boys. By capitalizing on the organizing potential certain digital media sites had, extremists on the right were able to coordinate their actions on January 6th before the date with relative ease. Media platforms serve as vehicles by which individuals can incite violence and organize activity, with the insurrection being no exception, as “just before the assault, one Proud Boys leader wrote on a group chat on Telegram that he was hoping his men could incite the “normies” to “burn that city to ash today” and “smash some pigs to dust.”” (New York Times, 2021). Group chats, while not

immediately available to the public eye, can be sent to hundreds of people and disseminated on other platforms, making this call for violence have the potential to be just as damaging as a public social media post. As evidence from digital media platforms continues to provide a case against the Proud Boys for their actions on January 6th, prosecutors have conclusively revealed that “groups involved in the riot, including the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, coordinated some of their actions on social media.” (McCabe, Kang 2021).

The presence of digital media and its consequential role in the January 6th attack have not gone unnoticed by the public. Indeed, powerful executives at media institutions like Facebook and Twitter have appeared before the January 6th committee to discuss the role that their companies played in enabling extremists to organize and carry out the infamous threat to American democracy. When Jack Dorsey, a co-founder and former CEO of Twitter, was asked by lawmakers whether his platform bears some responsibility for the misinformation that contributed to the riot, he answered with an apt “yes.” (McCabe, Kang 2021). Other professionals who study extremism have noted this worrisome reality. One article noted that “Renee DiResta, a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory who studies online movements, said the violence Wednesday [January 6] was the result of online movement operating in closed social media networks where people believed the claims of voter fraud and of the election being stolen from Mr. Trump.” (Frenkel, 2021a). In addition to more public channels, digital media also provides encrypted channels, which extremists have increasingly moved towards as censorship efforts progress through larger platforms.

While the January 6th rioters are said to have done “much of their planning in the open on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Parler,” (Frenkel, 2021b) this is not the only instance of extremist activity by the Proud Boys that was seemingly enabled by the affordances of digital

media. One article cited an example in New Orleans, stating that the Proud Boys “mobilized on social media to fight in New Orleans over the removal of Confederate monuments.” (Feuer, Peters 2017). It is evident that far-right extremists recognize the potential that online platforms offer for effective execution of their agenda. They can mobilize much more freely and efficiently through the use of the internet, with little to no resource costs.

Communication over the platforms has led to mobilization in many more instances, some of which were not accompanied by violence. As their online presence grows, the Proud Boys have developed channels for specific chapters of their organization in cities like Seattle and Philadelphia. (Olmos, Baker, Feuer 2021). These independent channels allow for connection and growth at the local level. Within these channels, “members often share news articles and video reports,” and “some make plans to appear at protests to act as “muscle,” with the goal of intimidating the other side and attracting new members with a show of force.” (Frenkel, 2021c). In this case, the platform in use is Telegram, an encrypted messaging app. The features and capabilities of a page like Telegram provide extremist groups like the Proud Boys with direct methods that they can use to mobilize and engage in activity.

New functions on digital media have led to the creation of echo chambers. In 2018, Facebook changed their platform to “emphasize what it called Meaningful Social Interactions, or MSI, which prioritized posts from users’ friends and family and de-emphasized posts from publishers and brands.” (Isaac, 2021). Facebook is not the only site that has adopted this algorithm. When a user interacts with a certain type of content, they are given posts, ads, and groups that are associated with the content that they frequently interact with. This new update coupled with the promotion of private groups “encouraged like-minded people to cluster together.” (Roose, 2018). Specifically, Roose explains that “some users were seeing more posts

from people whose opinions and interests they already shared, and it may have created echo chambers where polarizing behavior could flourish.” (2018). The creation of algorithms and the resulting echo chambers is said to have “increased [extremists] radical tendencies.” (Frenkel, 2021c). Since the shift towards algorithm-oriented media, the Proud Boys have been able to strengthen their internal connections and plan activity more easily. Digital media has also made recruitment easier than ever before – an individual can become radicalized merely by liking a post that has a tangential relation to far-right ideology. Given the new algorithms on digital platforms, they will continue to be given related content as long as they interact with the content.

For all of the affordances digital media provides, it does have drawbacks. Namely, the documented use of digital media to organize and carry out the January 6th attacks has helped federal investigators to build their case against groups like the Proud Boys. It is not uncommon to find blatant disregard for the law in digital media posts from January 6th. One Proud Boy posted a Facebook selfie inside the Capitol building with the caption “I just wanted to incriminate myself a little lol.” (Williamson, 2021).

It is established among investigators and media executives that the Proud Boys frequently use these platforms as a vehicle to carry out their plans. This realization coupled with far-right protest activity that has been directly linked to digital media has led to the strengthening of censorship and limitation efforts across the internet. As the Proud Boys are continually banned from prominent platforms like Facebook and Twitter, they have begun to shift to a more private form of communication – encrypted channels.

Summarized best by Chen and Roose, “there’s been a kind of frantic mass migration from big platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as those platforms crack down on misinformation and hate speech. A lot of the biggest figures in that world – including groups like

the Proud Boys and QAnon conspiracy theorists – have moved onto more private platforms, where there’s less danger of getting deplatformed.” (2021). The shift has also been characterized by the creation of digital media sites for the sole purpose of providing a platform to those who have been deplatformed from more traditional sites. Sites like ‘the Trump March’ were promoted as existing for “banned extremists and conspiracy theorists like... the “Western chauvinist” Proud Boys,” (Rutenberg, Becker, Lipton, Haberman, Martin, Rosenberg, Schmidt 2021). The Proud Boys are apparently privy to the advantages offered by encrypted channels given the lack of oversight and governance. Their content on these channels is not regulated for accuracy and truthfulness, and they are openly able to incite violence with virtually no ramifications. Following their ban from mainstream platforms, the Proud Boys directed individuals toward the encrypted channels on Telegram where they saw “significant spikes in membership.” (Rutenberg, Becker, Lipton, Haberman, Martin, Rosenberg, Schmidt 2021).

It seems that the presence of digital media in any capacity will aid the efforts of the Proud Boys. MacFarquhar, Healy, Baker, and Kovalski explain that “purging extremist groups from mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter may have succeeded in disrupting their organizing, experts say, but such effort have pushed them into tougher-to-track forms of communication including encrypted apps that will make it harder to trace extremist activities.” (2021). While being deplatformed was an action made in an effort to hinder the functioning of the Proud Boys, the group has since “continued to expand its numbers on other social media platforms, and has become more visible at protests.” (Frenkel, Karni 2020).

Through encrypted channels, private groups, and public social media posts, the Proud Boys are able to organize, mobilize, recruit, and more. Though it is apparent that digital media platforms easily make possible and facilitate extremist activity, it seems that the relationship is

much more complex than that. The shift from mainstream platforms to more covert platforms is an interesting phenomenon that is likely much more intricate than H6 hypothesizes. Nonetheless, H6 is ‘Strongly Supported’ by the New York Times evidence.

H7: Limited resistance or regulation from the government on extremist group activity will increase their activity.

Whenever a government takes limited action towards violent extremist groups following their displays of activism, they are communicating a broader message to those groups whether it is intentional or not. No resistance from a higher authority like the government communicates to extremists that they can continue to push the limits of their activity. They can adopt a more bold or controversial message, they can increase the level of violence they employ in their efforts, or they can organize a movement larger in size. H7 hypothesizes that limited resistance or regulation from a government of extremist group activity will embolden the group and increase their activity. They will interpret the inaction from the government as a green light to further their own actions. This indirect form of signaling will result in the group continuing to test the threshold of the government. So, as each display of right-wing extremist activism occurs and is met with no response from the government, their activity will increase accordingly in boldness, intensity, and size.

While similar, H7 differs from H2 and H3 in important ways. H2 and H3 provide a focus on explicit actions that have been taken either by a far-right administration or by other actors that normalizes far-right rhetoric and leads to an inevitable increase in extremist activity on the political right. H7, rather, focuses on specific instances of inaction by important political actors and how that plays into far-right radical activity.

Right-wing extremism initially became a heightened concern over a decade ago, when “in April 2009, the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis issued a report warning of a rise in “right-wing extremism.”” (Reitman, 2018). Despite this warning, the government appeared to take little action to counter what seemed to be a more pressing concern than in previous years. When considering this in light of the Proud Boys, the New York Times archive asserts that the group “engaged in violent confrontations with their ideological enemies – a lengthy list including African-Americans, Jews, Muslims, nonwhite immigrants, members of the L.G.B.T. community and the progressive left – and generally escaped punishment.” (Reitman, 2018).

H1 stresses the merits of extremist groups having institutional ties to groups like law enforcement, individuals in Congress, or the executive administration. The Proud Boys have all enjoyed a sense of security from law enforcement, lawmakers, and former president Trump. While there have been instances of explicit support from these actors, H7 focuses solely on implied support – namely, when these actors failed to engage in repressive action against the actions of the group, thus allowing them to justify and develop their activity.

Law enforcement is no stranger to criticism regarding their actions. In 2018, the Proud Boys engaged in a brawl which went entirely uninvestigated by the police. “For days, the Police Department faced criticism for failing to arrest any Proud Boys members.” (Feuer, Winston 2018). This reflects a larger pattern among individuals in law enforcement, who do not “seem to view white supremacist groups as a law-enforcement problem.” (Reitman, 2018). Law enforcement is an important institution to receive this type of signaling from, since they are an actor that could place great limits on the activity of the Proud Boys if they so desired. When they act as an ally, or even as an indifferent bystander, they give the Proud Boys the green light to go

ahead with their activities. Brian Levin, former New York City Police Officer, was quoted in the New York Times citing specific instances of deliberate police ignorance, stating that “there was an unending stream of violent themed chatter and an almost choreographed exchange of web threats between antagonists across wide geographic expanses that earned barely a nod from law enforcement.” (Reitman, 2018).

Lawmakers are also documented as having little repercussions for blatant associations with the Proud Boys. Indeed, Matt Gaetz and Majorie Taylor Greene have maintained overt links to the group, and their statements and actions “have not resulted in any punishment from House Republican leaders, who have largely declined to publicly reprimand those in their conference who espouse fringe beliefs or peddle misinformation.” (Edmondson, 2021). This expresses to the Proud Boys that pursuing allies in government will not be met with resistance. By continuing to forge alliances within Congress and other political institutions, they are effectively strengthening the legitimacy and potency of their organization.

Former President Trump also failed to formulate decisive responses regarding the Proud Boys’ actions. Sullivan writes that Trump has refused to “condemn them publicly and forcefully at multiple points throughout his presidency.” (2021). A broader example can be found after the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017, after which “the Proud Boys and various paramilitary organizations grew larger and went on to participate in the Jan. 6 riot.” (MacFarquhar, 2021a). The Proud Boys received minimal damaging pushback from prominent institutional allies like law enforcement, lawmakers, and even the president. This gave them the go-ahead to embolden their activity.

It is important to note that Trump’s inaction towards the Proud Boys came as a result of his displacement of counterterrorism efforts to the political left, specifically Antifa. Goldman,

Benner, and Kanno-Youngs write that “as racial justice protests erupted nationwide last year, President Donald J. Trump, struggling to find a winning campaign theme, hit on a message he stressed over and over: The real domestic threat to the United States emanated from the radical left, even though law enforcement authorities had long since concluded it came from the far right.” (2021). He remained committed to his message, substantiating it through action. For example, when referencing the political violence in Portland throughout 2020, Trump was recorded as “calling out the anti-fascist group known as Antifa on Twitter and suggesting support for designating it as a terrorist organization. He did not mention any of the right-wing groups, although both they and Antifa have a history of using violence against their opponents.” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021). This active redirection of federal resources to pursue an overstated Antifa threat may have made the prosecution of groups like the Proud Boys much more difficult.

A few articles in the New York Times archive appeared to float the possibility that the Proud Boys were discounted as a legitimate threat because they were not taken seriously. The F.B.I allegedly viewed the Proud Boys as “mere street bawlers who lacked the organization or ambition of typical bureau targets like neo-Nazis, international terrorists and Mexican drug cartels.” (Kirkpatrick, Feuer 2021). This view was apparently not only held by the F.B.I., as both local and federal law enforcement agencies “passed up several opportunities to take action against [the Proud Boys] long before they breached the Capitol.” (Kirkpatrick, Feuer 2021). The limited resistance could potentially be explained by the permeation of this viewpoint. Hong explains that “law enforcement agencies have long struggled to decipher whether online statements could lead to real danger, wary of bringing cases hinged largely on speech that could be protected by the First Amendment.” (2021). As demonstrated by the discussion of H6, online

statements carry significant implications for the organization of extremist activity. These quotes suggest that the inaction and hesitancy by the government and law enforcement might be able to be chalked up to simple misjudgment of the threat or fear of infringing on civil rights.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact governmental perception of the threat of the Proud Boys prior to events like January 6th, especially after the fact. Though the above instances represent that some incorrectly discounted the legitimate threat behind the Proud Boys, certain examples illustrate a different picture. Mazzetti, Cooper, Steinhauer, Kanno-Youngs, and Broadwater contend that there was ample evidence to constitute the demonstrated threat that the Proud Boys would eventually pose, stating that “despite the ominous social media posts, officials leading intelligence-sharing centers throughout the United States received no warnings from the federal government about the potential threat to the Capitol.” (2021). It seems that the threat was well-documented to high-ranking government officials, but perhaps did not seem extreme enough to them to elicit a harsh response. This inaction was not well-received by certain intelligence experts, who “denounced the inability – or refusal – of government analysts to provide proper warning about impending violence.” (Mazzetti, Cooper, Steinhauer, Kanno-Youngs, Broadwater 2021). Acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda D. Pittman noted that her department was aware there was a “strong potential for violence” on January 6th but still failed to take action to prevent what she characterized as a “terrorist attack.” (Broadwater, Cochrane, Goldman 2021).

Since H7 posits that limited governmental regulation of activity will lead to increased activity, it should then also be true that if there is significant governmental backlash or regulation in a given instance, that extremist activity will decrease. This is best exemplified by the attack on the Capitol. Leonhardt contends that “law enforcement agencies dismissed violence linked to the Proud Boys as street brawling without a strategy – until the attack on the Capitol.” (2021).

January 6th was met with nationwide outrage and disgust towards the insurrectionists on both side of the political aisle. Investigations were immediately launched alongside comments from almost every sitting member of Congress condemning the violence. Top Democrats in the House of Representatives expressed that January 6th made it “clear that more must be done to pre-empt, penetrate and prevent deadly and seditious assaults by domestic violent extremists in the days ahead,” and that the insurrection should not be mischaracterized as a protest, but instead an “attempted coup to derail our constitutional process.” (Shear, Goldman, Benner 2021).

The collective intensity of the response to January 6th was marked by significant pull back from the Proud boys in terms of their activism efforts. The far-right event that followed January 6th, the Justice for J6 rally, was reported to have attracted “fewer than 100 right-wing demonstrators.” (Kirkpatrick, Feuer 2021). The limited turnout for this rally fits nicely into the speculations of H7, since H7 would predict that the significant response to January 6th would lead to a decrease in activity. The Proud Boys expressed their interest in avoiding the Justice for J6 rally, specifically reported as having “warned people away” from attendance. (Kirkpatrick, Feuer 2021).

H7 is designated in Table 1.1 as ‘Strongly Supported.’ Between indirect nods from law enforcement, policymakers, and executives, the Proud Boys have enjoyed relatively no interference to their activity, which is marked by their gradual growth and permeation into mainstream politics. H7 is further substantiated when examining the case of January 6th. When there was a greater effort to hold groups like the Proud Boys accountable, it appeared that they scaled back their activities, as H7 posits.

H8: As a new generation of voters enters the political system, extremist group activity will increase.

Little evidence was found in the New York Times archive to substantiate H8, which posited that as a new generation of voters age into voting eligibility, extremist group activity will increase. This hypothesis was based on previous research by Renstrom which established protesting and engaging in activism as a practice that had significant social appeal to young voters. Renstrom also found that the way in which individuals engage politically was gradually shifting, from a heavy preference for institutional forms like communicating with congressional allies to more social forms, like activism. This lends itself to the argument that as new generations age into voting eligibility and are able to participate in the political system, they will increasingly favor social means of advocating as opposed to more formal means like voting due to the social appeal. The Proud Boys are a political organization that heavily favor social means of political involvement, making their appeal to younger generations heighten according to Renstrom's findings. Thus, new voters and individuals who ideologically align with the far-right and want to engage in civic participation will favor extremist groups like the Proud Boys.

There were few quotes found throughout the New York Times archive which corroborated the logic behind H8. One article written in 2019 described police officials within the New York City Police Department as having "seen groups like the Proud Boys and Patriot Front, a white supremacist group, put posters at college campuses in the city." (Watkins, 2019). Though this is demonstrative of the initiative taken by both the Proud Boys and the Patriot Front to recruit a younger subset of new members to expand their organization, it does little to prove that the new recruited members are increasing their activity. In theory, if recruitment efforts are successful, the growth in the organization would then enable the Proud Boys to participate in more activities relevant to their agenda.

The second quote located in the NYT Archive that had relevance to H8, though limited, was also concerning recruitment efforts by the extremist group. The article detailed a series of Christmas cards that a boy had received from individuals who were, at the time of the letters, serving time in local D.C. prisoners for the role they played in the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th. The article describes that many of the Proud Boys “took the time to add small notes reflecting the sentiments of the season,” saying “Merry Christmas #45 Won,” or echoing the popular right-wing rallying chant “Let’s Go Brandon!” (Barry & Feuer, 2021).

While both instances suggest that the Proud Boys recognize the potential that younger generations have for recruitment, there were no instances found that link these recruitment efforts among younger individuals to increased extremist activity. It is important to note that recruitment efforts may have no discernible effect on activity for a long period of time. Significant time and resources are usually spent indoctrinating new members and training them to fit the mold of a particular extremist group, meaning the aforementioned recruitment methods employed by the Proud Boys may not reap reward for years. Thus, H8 remains designated in Table 1.1 as ‘Insufficient Evidence.’

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I hypothesized as to which factors drive right-wing extremist activity as observed by right-wing extremist group the Proud Boys. Using evidence for the qualitative case study from the New York Times archive, support for some hypotheses was more apparent than others.

While the findings of my study remain interesting, certain clarifications are necessary to make. Namely, this study focused on one far-right group, the Proud Boys. Though the Proud Boys are one of the most prominent far-right groups today, they have only been in existence since 2016 and hardly embody right-wing extremism entirely. Right-wing extremism has many facets that the Proud Boys might not represent, meaning that the findings of this study should be generalized with caution.

Predicting what motivates right-wing extremism examines hypotheses that are inherently longitudinal. The recent rise in right-wing extremism across the country makes conclusively examining longitudinal hypotheses difficult. This study used a limited time frame, from 2016 to 2021. Throughout five years and two transitions of executive power, substantial evidence was accumulated. Future research may benefit from using a wider time frame that will incorporate more evidence, thus further cementing the validity of certain speculations.

Lastly, it is important to consider that the Trump Administration may be an aberration of typical executive administrations. Certainly, it is unusual for a sitting president to be impeached twice, with one for a count of inciting his base to partake in an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Future right-wing administrations might be more representative of executives pre-Trump, and thus, the executive-oriented hypotheses in this study may not be as well substantiated.

Far-right extremism, when examined through the lens of the western-chauvinist Proud Boys, seems to fluctuate in response to a host of factors. Institutional levers that political groups can influence seem to play a role in activity. The gradual permeation of far-right rhetoric in mainstream politics, having an ally in the executive (or even just a neutral party) also appear to have an impact on how right-wing extremists behave. Expectantly, groups like the Proud Boys often engage in reactionary activity when they feel threatened, like when there are increases in leftist protest or minorities and immigrants are perceived to pose a greater threat. Perhaps most relevantly, right-wing extremist activity seems to be undergoing an interesting transformation as it interacts with digital media platforms.

This study holds promising results for the regulation of far-right extremist groups. Future research, if expanded, could further substantiate the outcomes of this thesis and turn those outcomes into corresponding policy. Using literature and research to monitor groups like the Proud Boys is important. By regulating right-wing extremism from a well-researched and informed position, fatal events like January 6th or the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville can be rendered as mere moments in history rather than the beginning of larger movements.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE

In an effort to avoid repetition in the discussion and analysis section, certain quotes that were initially collected to be used as evidence were left out of the commentary. These quotes can be found in bullet form below, organized by hypothesis. If a hypothesis is not listed in the appendix, all quotes collected for that hypothesis were used in the discussion and analysis section.

H1: When the institutional means to enact change are threatened, social means like protest are engaged instead.

- “Its followers have tried to expand membership by taking on local causes. That way, they said, the group can amass more supporters in time to influence next year’s midterm elections.” (Frenkel, 2021c).
- “A significant portion of the energy behind the recall is coming from the fringes. Early rallies to promote it were heavily populated by Proud Boys and anti-vaccination activists.” (Hubler, 2021).
- “Groups supporting the president are already on their way to Washington with plans to stage protests outside the Capitol when Congress takes up the Electoral College vote tomorrow. The organizations planning to march include the Proud Boys, a far-right group whose members frequently espouse white-supremacist views.” (Russonello, 2021).
- “Over the summer, there were both Black Lives Matter protests and a Proud Boys rally, and the ensuing violence led to the Kalamazoo police chief resigning.” (Steinhauer, 2020).

- “But the event [Mucarsel-Powell’s campaign event], featuring Representative Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader, still drew furious protesters – including the local Republican Party chairman, a onetime Curbelo aide and two members of the Proud Boys, a far-right organization the Southern Poverty Law Center considers a hate group.” (Mazzei, 2018).

H2: The normalization of far-right rhetoric will lead to increased activity among right-wing extremist groups.

- ‘Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida appeared at an event last year where security was handled by the Proud Boys, a far-right militia with more than a dozen members who have been charged in the Capitol riot.’ (Edmondson, 2021).
- “The group [Women for America First] helped build an acutely Trumpian coalition that included sitting and incoming members of Congress, rank-and-file voter and the “de-platformed” extremists and conspiracy theorists promoted on its home page – including the white nationalist Jared Taylor, prominent QAnon proponents and the Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío.” (Rutenberg, Becker, Lipton, Haberman, Martin, Rosenberg, Schmidt 2021).
- “Republican lawmakers distanced themselves from Trump’s refusal during the debate to condemn white supremacists or the Proud Boys, a violent far-right group. Senator Lindsey Graham said the president should “make it clear Proud Boys is a racist organization antithetical to American ideals.”” (Leonhardt, 2020).
- “Alluding to Mr. Trump’s remarks about the Proud Boys, Mr. Racicot said the president offered comfort to racists that betrayed the moral leadership responsibilities of his office.” (Burns, Martin, Haberman 2020).

- “During his visit, Mr. Trump left no doubt which side he was on, dismissing suggestions of “systemic racism” and scolding reporters who asked about it, saying they should concentrate instead on the violent response.” (Eligon, Bosman, Baker 2020).
- “He [Joe Rogan] has also drawn criticism for discussing conspiracy theories, making jokes that belittle transgender people and sharing his platform with far-right figures, such as Gavin McInnes, the founder of the Proud Boys...” (Cramer, 2020).
- “The club [Manhattan Republican club] gained notoriety last year after Gavin McInnes, the founder of the right-wing nationalist group the Proud Boys, spoke there and his followers brawled on nearby streets with protesters.” (Paybarah, 2019a).
- “The fight mirrors broader tensions within the Republican Party around the country, pitting far-right conservatives energized by President Trump against a Republican establishment that was once a bastion of New York moderates like John V. Lindsay and Nelson A. Rockefeller.” (Neuman, 2019).
- “On television and on frequent speaking tours, Mr. McInnes, who is 48, can often sound like a younger and more foul-mouthed President Trump, bashing feminists, mocking Black Lives Matter and deriding deep-state plotters. And like the president, he tends to publicly disavow all violence while winkingly insisting that he – and the Proud Boys – will never back down during a scrape.” (Feuer, 2018).

H3: The introduction of a far-right administration will lead to an increase in extremist activity.

- “The Proud Boys, who have emerged in recent years as some of former President Donald J. Trump’s most vocal and violent supporters, have long described themselves

- as “western chauvinists” and have a history of bloody street fights with left-wing antifascist activists since shortly after their founding in 2016.” (Feuer, 2021b).
- “Armed far-right militia groups started appearing at racial justice protests and demonstrations about the outcome of the election. Extremist groups like the Proud Boys marched in Washington in December, clashing with anti-Trump protesters in altercations that included stabbings.” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021).
 - “Sunday’s incidents came a day after a group of Trump supporters in Texas, driving trucks and waving Trump flags, surrounded and slowed a Biden-Harris campaign bus as it drove on Interstate 35, leading to the cancellation of two planned rallies. The F.B.I. confirmed on Sunday that it was investigating the incident. On Saturday, President Trump tweeted a video of the incident with a message, “I Love Texas!” After the F.B.I. announced it was investigating, he tweeted again, saying, “In my opinion, these patriots did nothing wrong,” and instead “the FBI & Justice should be investigating the terrorists, anarchists, and agitators of ANTIFA.” (Rojas, Steinhauer, Fitzsimmons 2020).
 - “But she [Kayleigh McEnany] would not explicitly condemn white supremacy from the briefing room lectern or specifically denounce the Proud Boys, a far-right group that Mr. Trump said should “stand back and stand by” during Tuesday’s presidential debate with Joseph R. Biden Jr.” (Shear, 2020).
 - “Its members have clashed several times with leftist protesters at political events and have shown up at far-right rallies also attended by white nationalists and other extremists.” (Moynihan, Winston 2018).

- “Sometime accompanied by skinheads, neo-Nazis, modern-day Confederates and outfits like the Oath Keepers, an association of law-enforcement officers and military veterans, the Proud Boys have scuffled with the left at May Day rallies, so-called free speech protests and at marches in support of President Trump.” (Feuer, 2018).

H4: The greater the perceived threat that minorities and immigrants pose, the more frequent far-right extremist activity will be.

- “As a white man, Mr. Biden attracts less of this racial backlash [than Obama].” “The Tea Party was driven more by anxiety and resentment over a demographically changing country that had just elected its first Black president, most political scientists agree, than by fiscal conservatism.” (Philbrick, 2021).

H5: Increases in protest activity on the opposite side of the political spectrum will prompt increases in far-right extremist activity.

- “A self-professed member of the Proud Boys from Texas who traveled to Portland, Ore., to confront protesters there last year was sentenced on Friday to 10 years in prison for shooting a man in the eye with a paintball gun, spraying people in the face with bear mace and aiming a loaded handgun at a crowd, prosecutors said.” (Levenson, 2021).
- “Lauren Witzke, a dabbler in QAnon, a self-proclaimed “flat earther” and the Republican Party’s nominee in Delaware for the Senate, was exhorting her supporters last month to “Go get ‘em – America First,” as they squared off against a handful of Black Lives Matter protesters.” (Williamson, 2020).

- “The Proud Boys joined a group of right-wing demonstrators who rushed across a street and began attacking people who had set up a leftist counterprotest.”
(MacFarquhar, Feuer, Baker, Frenkel 2020b).
- “To Gavin McInnes, the founder and former chairman of the Proud Boys, the president’s request was a call to action against antifa, the loose collective of antifascist activists who have mounted raucous street demonstrations against police violence, corporate dominance and inequality in cities across America this summer.”
(MacFarquhar, Feuer, Baker, Frenkel 2020b).
- “In Portland, where the president has sought to label the city’s antifascist activists as domestic terrorists, the Proud Boys have described their event on Saturday as a rally to “end domestic terrorism.”” (Baker, Bogel-Burroughs 2019).
- “The calm was broken when woman in a pro-Trump hat and a man who said he was a member of the Proud Boys, a far-right group known for inciting violence at protests, showed up at the park that has been a hub for rallies since Mr. Blake’s shooting. As the police scrambled to separate the two from about 100 protesters shouting at them, an officer sprayed a chemical agent in the eyes of a documentary filmmaker.”
(Eligon, Bosman, Baker 2020).
- “In recent weeks, right- and left-wing groups have clashed. On Aug. 22, a demonstration outside the U.S. courthouse in Portland turned violent as right-wing demonstrators, including Proud Boys members, clashed with Black Lives Matter Protestors.” (Pietsch, 2020).
- “Right-wing and left-wing groups clashed in front of the U.S. courthouse in Portland, Ore., on Saturday, weeks after federal agents pulled back from the site of protests that

have gripped part of the city’s downtown for months. A group of about 200 protesters, including members of the Proud Boys and families supporting the police, gathered along the courthouse sidewalk beginning at 11 a.m. Many of them were holding American flags, while others carried assault rifles and wore tactical military gear. Almost immediately, a similar number of Black Lives Matter protesters gathered across the street, many dressed in all black and carrying shields or paintball guns.” (Wright, 2020).

- “The significance of one video was immediately clear. It showed a Proud Boy, Maxwell Hare, initiating the conflict by charging at the protesters, including one who then hurled a plastic bottle that flew wide. Within moments, a crowd of Proud Boys could be seen streaming down the street to join the fray.” (Moynihan, 2019c).
- “In Washington, separated by a barricaded buffer zone (not to mention a desert of ideological difference), members of the far-right Proud Boys gathered in Freedom Plaza, while a mix of several hundred counter-protesters – black-clad antifascists wearing bandannas over their faces, local residents blasting go-go music and others carrying signs denouncing hate – met in Pershing Park, directly across the street.” (Bogel-Burroughs, Cochrane 2019).

H6: The increase in digital media platforms will lead to an increase in far-right activity.

- “In social media posts, he made threats against ‘the left’ and ‘antifa,’ prosecutors said, and he tried to recruit people to form a militia to fight in what he believed was a civil war.” (Levenson, 2021).

- “Before joining the Proud Boys, Mr. Biggs was, among other things, a correspondent for Infowars, the conspiracy-minded media company run by Alex Jones.” (Feuer, 2021f).
- “The whistleblower... was set to say that Facebook had turned off some of its safety measures around the election – such as limits on live video – too soon after Election Day, the memo said. That allowed for misinformation to flood the platform and for groups to congregate online and plan the Jan. 6 storming of the Capitol building.” (Isaac, 2021).
- ““Several comments promote confronting members of Congress and carrying firearms during the protest,” a Capitol Police intelligence analyst wrote in a threat report on Dec. 21, which included a map of the Capitol complex that had been posted on the pro-Trump blog thedonald.win.” (Broadwater, Cochrane, Goldman 2021).
- “In some ways they [far-right groups] are broader and more loosely affiliated, given the use of the internet, and mainstream politics has opened the door to some of their ideas.” (MarFarquhar, Feuer, Baker, Frenkel 2020a).
- “This month, Twitch announced a policy that would allow it to suspend the accounts of people who committed crimes or severe offenses in real life or on other social media platforms, including violent extremism or membership in a known hate group.” (Browning, 2021).
- “Despite this, a Twitch channel belonging to Enrique Tarrío, the leader of the Proud Boys, a white nationalist organization, remained online until the middle of this month after the New York Times inquired about it.” (Browning, 2021).

- “The new indictment lays out a conspiracy that began within days of the election in November when, prosecutors say, Mr. Biggs posted on social media calling for “war” over what he described as stolen votes. That same month, prosecutors say, Mr. Nordean echoed the cry for action, writing on social media: “Good luck to all you traitors of this country we so deeply love... you’re going to need it.”” (Feuer, 2021b).
- “At the same time, extremist ideology has spread farther and much more rapidly on social media, and foreign governments like Russia have worked actively to disseminate such thoughts to sow divisions within the United States.” (MacFarquhar, 2021a).
- “Social media has allowed for terrorist networks to communicate and expand rapidly.” (Leibovich, 2021).
- “The shift to private messaging has renewed a debate over whether encryption is a double-edged sword. While the technology prevents people from being spied on, it might also make it easier for criminals and misinformation spreaders to do harm without getting caught.” (Chen, Roose 2021).
- “On Gab, a social media network, fliers were posted about a rally in Washington, D.C. Attendees were advised to “come armed at your personal discretion.”” (Frenkel, 2021b).
- “In the days since rioters stormed Capitol Hill, fringe groups like armed militias, QAnon conspiracy theorists and far-right supporters of President Trump have vowed to continue their fight in hundreds of conversations on a range of internet platforms.” (Frenkel, 2021b).

- “The urge for more civil unrest is being discussed in the usual squalid corners of the internet. Private chat groups on Gab and Parler are peppered with talk of a possible “Million Militia March” On Jan. 20 that would disrupt the presidential inauguration of Mr. Biden.” (Barry, McIntire, Rosenberg 2021).
- “Bolstered by Mr. Trump, who has courted fringe movements like QAnon and the Proud Boys, groups have openly organized on social media networks and recruited others to their cause.” (Frenkel, 2021a).
- “As Facebook and Twitter began to crack down groups like QAnon and the Proud Boys over the summer, they slowly migrated to other sites that allowed them to openly call for violence.” (Frenkel, 2021a).
- “Of particular concern are militia groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, whose members have lurked on internet chat boards like 4Chan.” (Rojas, Steinhauer, Fitzsimmons 2020).
- “Under repeated questioning by reporters from CBS, Fox News, CNN and other organizations, Ms. McEnany lashed out, blaming journalism organizations for publicizing the Proud Boys in their stories.” (Shear, 2020).
- “Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have at times cracked down on the Proud Boys. Members have migrated to other organizing tools, such as their own website and the instant messaging platform Telegram. Less than 24 hours after Mr. Trump made his comments, two of the largest Proud Boy groups on Telegram added hundreds of new members.” (MacFarquhar, Feuer, Baker, Frenkel 2020a).
- “At the rally, speakers including the far-right activists Laura Loomer, Milo Yiannopoulos and Gavin McInnes, the founder of the Proud Boys, railed against what

- they said were deliberate efforts by social media giants like Twitter and Facebook to silence their messages online.” (Bogel-Burroughs, Cochrane 2019).
- “Philip Anderson, a 24-year-old college student who came to the rally from Texas, complained that his social media accounts had been limited because of his conservative views.” (Bogel-Burroughs, Cochrane 2019).
 - “Other threats and racist posts flooded the internet, where Johnson’s team noticed a sharp increase in membership on Stormfront, the first major white-nationalist website. The site added 32,000 new users within the first three months after Obama’s inauguration, nearly double the number it added in 2008.” (Reitman, 2018).
 - “Twitter had removed Mr. McInnes and accounts associated with the Proud Boys in August, before a rally in Washington that was cast as a sequel to the 2017 gathering of white nationalists in Charlottesville, Va., that had violent.” (Goldmacher, 2018).
 - “Regional chapters of the Proud Boys, a right-wing nationalist group that Twitter suspended last month for its “violent extremist” nature, maintain private Facebook groups, which they use to vet new members.”
 - 9.3.2018 Facebook’s Private Groups Offer Refuge to Fringe Figures
 - “They’ve [Facebook] essentially empowered very large groups that can operate secretly without much governance and oversight.” (Roose, 2018).
 - “But his [Kyle Chapman, Alt-Knight founder which started as paramilitary wing of the proud boys] Facebook account, which has about 33,000 followers, remains a source of Islamophobic posts and calls for others to join him at events where clashes are likely.” (Feuer, Peters 2017).

H7: Limited resistance or regulation from the government on extremist group activity will increase their activity.

- “But since federal authorities have cracked down on the group for the Jan 6 attack, including arresting more than a dozen of its members, the organization has been more muted.” (Frenkel, 2021c).
- “Local police officers have appeared at times to side with the Proud Boys, especially when they have squared off against leftists openly critical of law enforcement.” (Kirkpatrick, Feuer 2021).
- “Career officials in federal enforcement have complained that the Trump administration sought to divert investigative resources toward poorly defined threats from the left, such as the movement of violence-prone activists known as antifa.” (Kirkpatrick, Feuer 2021).
- “Extremist organizations tend to experience internal upheaval after any cataclysmic event, as seen in the case of the 2017 rally in Charlottesville, Va., that left one woman dead, or the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, which killed 168 people, including 19 children.” (MacFarquhar, 2021a).
- “Many [intelligence analysts] viewed their performance reviews as tied to whether they produced reports that aligned with the Trump administration’s priorities, including Mexican cartel organizations, foreign terrorism and antifa, rather than reports on militias and white supremacists.” (Goldman, Benner, Kanno-Youngs 2021).
- “President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., who spent 36 years in the Senate, criticized the stark contrast between the militarized and sometimes violent phalanxes deployed

- against protesters of racial injustice over the summer and the outnumbered officers who cringed and retreated from – or posed for a selfie with – the mostly white pro-Trump mob.” (Dewan, MacFarquhar, Kanno-Youngs, Watkins, Triebert, Willis, Cooper, Engelbrecht, Hill, Ray 2021).
- “Though pro-Trump extremists chattered openly online about seizing the Capitol, and posted photos of their weapons, the federal government did not issue bulletins outlining that threat to “fusion centers” that were created to keep state and local law enforcement informed, said Mike Sena, the president of the National Fusion Center Association.” (Dewan, MacFarquhar, Kanno-Youngs, Watkins, Triebert, Willis, Cooper, Engelbrecht, Hill, Ray 2021).
 - “President Trump weighed in on the tense situation in Portland on Saturday morning, calling out the anti-fascist group known as Antifa on Twitter and suggesting support for designating it as a terror organization. He did not mention any of the right-wing groups, although both they and Antifa have a history of using violence against their opponents.” (Baker, Bogel-Burroughs 2019).
 - “Still, he [James P. O’Neill, police commissioner] defended officers who were criticized by public officials and on social media for failing to arrest member of the Proud Boys group who were filmed hitting protesters.” (Southall, 2018).

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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA Graduation: May 2022
College of Liberal Arts
Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Bachelor of Arts in Criminology
Schreyer Honors College, Paterno Fellow, Dean's List (7/8)

WORK EXPERIENCE

Legal Writing Contractor (Part-time) **Washington, D.C.**
Wolters Kluwer Legal & Regulatory U.S. *Incoming April 2022*

Digital Media Intern/Contractor (Seasonal/Part-time) **Washington, D.C.**
Law Street Media *May 2021-Present*

- Synthesize legal documents and press releases to make more digestible content for the intended audience
- Author articles regarding relevant litigation and policy news (250+ articles)
- Research competitor's social media activity and develop corresponding strategies for company output

Research Assistant (Part-time) **University Park, PA**
Department of Political Science at Penn State *October 2020-May 2021*

- Conducted research and coded data on the human rights records of index countries advantageous to the variables specified in the dissertation of PhD candidate
- Evaluated databases including Amnesty International, State Department Archives, and United Nations archives to locate information relevant to state repression strategies
- Extrapolated data from coded documents and applied data to six state repression variables

Future Agents in Training Program (Temporary) **Washington, D.C.**
Federal Bureau of Investigation *August 2017*

- Received a comprehensive training, looking at fields such as terrorism, cybercrime, public corruption, evidence response, and SWAT through the Washington Field Office

VOLUNTEER WORK

Student Mentor **University Park, PA**
LifeLink Penn State *September 2019-December 2021*

- Worked closely and facilitated supportive relationships with students with disabilities as they continued to pursue their collegiate education past high school
- Built confidence and trust with student to develop their swimming abilities

Philanthropic Work **University Park, PA**
Alpha Xi Delta Beta Lambda at Penn State *January 2019-March 2021*

- Raising money for Autism awareness, understanding, and acceptance while conducting related philanthropic events such as Baked Xiti and Xi Man