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**FUELING THE FIRE: AN EXAMINATION OF
RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN THE UNITED STATES
OVER THE LAST DECADE**

by

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THE UNITED STATES OVER THE LAST DECADE**

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, American society has witnessed increased violence from a threat it has suffered in the past: right-wing extremism. The question that arises then is why, or more precisely, why now? This thesis explores the factors that led to the resurgence of right-wing extremism in the United States over the past decade. It argues that the resurgence of right-wing violence in America after 2008 is due to a dynamic interplay of contextual factors, including the existence of a subculture of xenophobia and the near-unfettered access to firearms, along with concrete grievances, such as economic anxiety and resentment toward the government. These contextual factors enabled an environment where extremist violence was more likely to occur, and the concrete grievances provided the motivation. The third set of factors that fueled the 2008 right-wing resurgence were the occurrence of several catalytic events including the election of the first African-American president and the shift in societal behavior afforded by social media. These events provided salience to the context and grievances, thereby intensifying the violent reactions by right-wing extremists.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADL	Anti-Defamation League
ANP	American Nazi Party
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
ETA	Euskadi ta Askatasuna
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
GTI	Global Terrorism Index
IEP	Institute for Economics and Peace
IRA	Irish Republican Army
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
NAACP	The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center

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A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.

–Jackie Robinson

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I. FUELING THE FIRE: AN INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, American society has witnessed increased violence from a threat it has suffered in the past, right-wing extremism.¹ The question that arises is: why, or more precisely, why now? Specifically, this thesis asks, what are the factors that have led to the resurgence of right-wing extremism in the United States over the last decade?

This thesis argues that the resurgence of right-wing violence in America after 2008 is due to the interplay of 1) contextual factors such as the existence of a subculture of xenophobia or the near-unfettered availability of firearms; and 2) concrete grievances, such as economic hardship and anti-government sentiments. Contextual factors have facilitated a socio-political environment where outbursts of extremist violence were more likely, and concrete grievances have helped fuel right-wing violence for decades. The third factor that explains the 2008 resurgence is the occurrence of catalytic events, such as the election of the first black president and the change in social behavior afforded by the growing influence of social media.

A. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

While right-wing extremism is a phenomenon that has plagued the United States since the mid-19th century, following September 11, 2001—and until recently—it has received significantly less attention than other forms of extremism and terrorism from American society.² Watchdog organizations and federal law enforcement agencies have noted an upward trend in the number of hate groups in the United States over the past

¹ A study conducted by START through the University of Maryland, found that right-wing extremism attacks increased from 6% to 35% during the last decade. Of note these percentages do not include attacks committed by individuals or groups for which a religious affiliation could be associated. The study cited here analyzed data from 1970–2016, the follow up article cited below confirmed the trend continued during 2017. “Ideological Motivations of Terrorism in the United States, 1970 – 2016,” The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2017, https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_IdeologicalMotivationsOfTerrorismInUS_Nov2017.pdf Also see Luis Romero, “US Terror Attacks Are Increasingly Motivated by Right-Wing Views,” *Quartz*, October 24, 2018, <https://qz.com/1435885/data-shows-more-us-terror-attacks-by-right-wing-and-religious-extremists>.

² Andrew Silke, “Contemporary Terrorism Studies: Issues in Research” in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, ed. Richard Jackson, Smyth, M., and Gunning, J. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 48.

decade. Right-wing hate groups, often broadly categorized as white supremacists or white nationalists, are associated with a significant majority of this rising trend.³ In 2017, the FBI released a report stating that the majority of domestic extremism is attributed to white supremacists.⁴ The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) released its “Intelligence Report” in spring 2019, where it demonstrated that the number of hate groups in America reached an all-time high of 1,020.⁵ In addition, right-wing lone actor extremists have been closely associated with the growing phenomenon of mass shootings that have gripped the American public.⁶

The significance of this research is two-fold. First, hate groups and hate-related violence associated with the extreme right-wing is increasing; an example of such violence occurred in August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, at the Unite the Right rally. This episode of violence resulted in multiple injured victims and three fatalities.⁷ Second, while the field of terrorism studies expanded significantly since 9/11, it has largely focused on Islamic extremism.⁸ This research has enriched the study of radicalization, often drawing on violent extremist movements from the past.⁹ This thesis examines the domestic right-wing extremist movement of today in an effort to contribute to the field of terrorism studies.

³ Rubin, Jennifer, “Don’t Argue with Pelosi on This One, Republicans; The Party of Lincoln or the Alt-right?,” *Washington Post*, August 15, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2017/08/15/dont-argue-with-pelosi-on-this-one-republicans>.

⁴ Winter, Jana, “FBI and DHS Warned of Growing Threat From White Supremacist Months Ago,” *Foreign Policy*, August 14, 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/14/fbi-and-dhs-warned-of-growing-threat-from-white-supremacists-months-ago>.

⁵ “Intelligence Report,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed October 9, 2019. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/intelligence_report_166.pdf.

⁶ SPLC, “Intelligence Report,” 7.

⁷ The three fatalities were a result of one police helicopter crash (2 victims) and a separate incident in which a woman was run over by a vehicle. Joe Heim, “Recounting A Day of Rage, Hate, Violence, and Death,” *Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline>.

⁸ Andrew Silke, “Contemporary terrorism studies: Issues in Research,” 48.

⁹ Martha Crenshaw, “Thoughts on Relating Terrorism to Historical Contexts,” in *Terrorism in Context*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 19–23. Also see Crenshaw, 2011; Della Porta, 1992; Horgan, 2014; Hudson, 2002; Juergensmeyer, 2017; Sageman, 2004; and Waldman, 1992, for example.

B. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Several approaches have been adopted to explain why extremists engage in violence.¹⁰ Often, many of these approaches emphasize a single variable such as psychological factors, the role of peer groups, organizational dynamics, or ideology and religion. While this thesis ultimately adopts a multivariable approach, these single causal studies serve as a starting point for identifying specific contributing factors that can later be applied when explaining the latest resurgence of right-wing extremist violence.

1. Psychological Factors

Those who favor the psychological approach argue that perpetrators of extreme violence are psychologically unstable, disturbed, or having suffered from some sort of mental illness.¹¹ Extreme violence is seen as outside the realm of acceptable norms; therefore, those who commit said violence must be just as deviant.¹² As some researchers have pointed out, this notion of a supposed link between violent extremism and psychological disorders is easier for the general public to understand; therefore, we in society are more comfortable with associating the two.¹³ However, as Edwin Bakker points out, were this to be true of all extremists, it would have significant implications for counterterrorism policy.¹⁴ He explains that if all terrorists were to be classified as psychologically disturbed, it would require significantly more responsibility to be placed on the healthcare sector, especially psychiatric specialists.¹⁵

¹⁰ See Coolsaet, 2016; Crenshaw, 2011; Della Porta, 2012; Moyano, 1995, Shapiro, 2013; and Waldman, 1992 for example.

¹¹ Edwin, Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 113.

¹² Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice*, 115.

¹³ Arie Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, "Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Individual, Group, and Organizational Levels of Analysis," *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 3, no. 1, (2009): 7.

¹⁴ Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice*, 115–117.

¹⁵ Dr. Bakker additionally explains this approach could undermine the value of investigating the motivation and rationale of terrorism. Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice*, 115.

Unfortunately, in the past, the field of terrorism studies has not escaped the tendency to draw such conclusions. Some early research in the field focused on identifying a personality disorder, or a psychological trait with which to identify potential terrorists.¹⁶ Those early studies revealed connections between terrorism and factors such as frustration-aggression, and narcissism.¹⁷ Some authors for example, Jerrold Post describe individuals drawn to terrorism as “action oriented, aggressive people who are stimulus hungry and seek excitement.”¹⁸ However, Rex Hudson argues that the exhibition of such characteristics does not mean that terrorists could be identified by these particular traits, and moreover, that a law enforcement officer could just as easily exhibit these personality descriptors.¹⁹

More contemporary research has revealed that perpetrators of terroristic violence are far more “normal” than one may assume; normal in this instance being defined as psychologically unremarkable.²⁰ Moreover, as Martha Crenshaw stated, “the idea of terrorism as the product of mental disorder or psychopathology has been discredited.”²¹ She argues that the decision to engage in terrorism may be a “reasonable and calculated” means to a political end, thus contributing to the notion that those committed to extremist violence have actually engaged in rational calculation.²²

¹⁶ Bouhana, Noémie, and Wikström, Per-Olof, “Theorizing Terrorism: Terrorism as Moral Action: A Scoping Study,” *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2010): 27. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/853889766>.

¹⁷ Rex Hudson, *Who Becomes A Terrorist and Why: The 1999 Government Report on Profiling Terrorists* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2002), 91–96.

¹⁸ Jerrold Post, “Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces,” in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 27.

¹⁹ Hudson, *Who Becomes A Terrorist and Why: The 1999 Government Report on Profiling Terrorists*, 92.

²⁰ John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 59.

²¹ Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 125.

²² Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 112.

2. Peer Groups / Group Dynamics

Another approach analyzes the role of peer groups. In fact, it has been argued that some psychological factors are more appropriately observed during group interactions.²³

In his groundbreaking research during the 1960s, Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments with which to demonstrate the human tendency to obey orders from authorities regardless of consequence (to include the infliction of pain).²⁴ As part of his process, Milgram examined the additional effects of the group dynamic; within a group, the individual begins to adopt the habits, routines and language of his/her peers, the process of conformity.²⁵ Milgram's work has been applied in the field of terrorism studies, particularly with regard to the effects of peers and leaders on an individual.²⁶

Others have pointed to the role of the collective as well. Donatella della Porta explains that the turn to political violence first requires a change in values, and that the new values stem not from individual decisions but a broader collective process.²⁷ Her argument is centered on an individual's escalation toward violence within his or her "political career." This evolution is based on a change in the perception of his or her identity and environment. She adds that the cognitive shift develops in a "dense social network" and therefore should be understood as a "collective social process."²⁸ This dense social network implies a clique, in which each individual primarily only interacts with other members of the group with limited information exchange with the outside world. Della Porta also contends that given how these values develop, the group will create "positive

²³ Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 125.

²⁴ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 188–189.

²⁵ Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 113–115.

²⁶ See Moyano 1995, for example.

²⁷ Donatella della Porta and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Patterns of Radicalization in Political Activism," *Social Science History*, Vol. 36, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 314. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/social_science_history/v036/36.3.porta.html.

²⁸ Della Porta and Haupt, "Patterns of Radicalization in Political Activism," 314.

attitudes toward more radical forms of action,” thereby further justifying actions that ultimately lead to increased involvement on the part of individual activists.²⁹

The set of values that Della Porta describes can be expressed as the social identity of the group and individual members will adopt the same set of norms as established by the “prototype” members within the group.³⁰ As individuals become more involved within the group, individual ideas, identities, or decisions become unacceptable, because individuals only identify themselves as members of the group.³¹ Other researchers of violence escalation argue that it develops as a result of the dynamic relationship between groups (“in” and “out” groups) and the disillusionment with a nonviolent strategy.³²

Many who focus on the role of group dynamics in the evolution of extremist violence suggest that, as the group’s identity and values become more radical, it also becomes increasingly socially isolated.³³ Increased social isolation drives further social commitment to and reliance on the group.³⁴ The effects of increased social isolation, and group dynamics, have been recently captured in several studies examining their role within prison communities.³⁵ In one such study, Mark Hamm found that social networks within prisons (in many cases gangs) act as pathways for individuals to evolve from holding

²⁹ Della Porta and Haupt, “Patterns of Radicalization in Political Activism,” 314–315. See Donatella della Porta, “Research on Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations,” *International Social Movement Research* 4, (1992): 3–28, for example of the evolution of extremist violence within groups in particular underground organizations.

³⁰ Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 124–127.

³¹ Jerrold Post, Ehud Sprinzak, and Laurita Denny, “The Terrorist In Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 1 (June 2010): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550312331293007>.

³² Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 130–138.

³³ See Della Porta, 1992; Hamm, 2013; Moyano, 1995; Post, 2010; and Sageman 2004 for examples.

³⁴ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 129.

³⁵ See Hamm, 2013 and Post, 2010 for examples. Jerrold Post and colleagues, in their work, interview 35 imprisoned terrorist gaining firsthand insight into their radicalization process, to include the role of their prison experience in the development of their commitment to the “cause.”

personal grievances to perpetuating extremist violence.³⁶ He added that violent and chaotic prison conditions, and in some cases torture, were often the catalysts that set individuals onto those pathways in the first place.³⁷ The Aryan Brotherhood, and similar organizations in state and federal prisons, are examples of this white supremacy prison radicalization.³⁸ The role of peer dynamics in radicalization and proliferation of extremism becomes essential in later chapters when this thesis examines the catalytic events involved with the latest resurgence of right-wing extremism.

3. Organizational Pressures

Within the field of terrorism studies, an additional approach to research is the evaluation of organizational pressures. Those who opt for this branch of research tend to focus on the different organizational structures and the complications involved with the management of terrorist organizations. Crenshaw explains that two organizational models have emerged. One is described as a hierarchal structure with decisions made at the top and passed downward to compartmentalized units from which information is passed back up, using the Basque separatist Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA) and Irish Republican Army (IRA) organizations as examples.³⁹ The second model is described as a wheel with leadership residing in the center and subordinate nodes encircling it; this model could be described as a decentralized network structure. Here, Crenshaw uses the Red Cells of West Germany as an example.⁴⁰

Researchers tend to evaluate these models weighing the costs and tradeoffs of one structure or another.⁴¹ Some of these tradeoffs include the level of vulnerability each

³⁶ Mark Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 103.

³⁷ Hamm, *The Spectacular Few*, 80.

³⁸ Brent Smith, *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 90.

³⁹ Martha Crenshaw, "An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism," *Forum: International Terrorism*, no. 6 (Fall 1985): 469.

⁴⁰ Crenshaw, "An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism," 470.

⁴¹ See Moyano, 1995; Shapiro, 2013 and Tucker, 2008 for examples.

structure is exposed to or the accountability within the organization. For example, a hierarchal structure is more vulnerable to disruption due to the generally clearer distinction of leadership. Yet some advantages of the hierarchal structure are that it provides a greater level of accountability, efficient dissemination of decisions, and intelligence collection.⁴² Decentralized networks, on the other hand, tend to be less vulnerable, as it can be less clear where decisions are made within the apparatus.⁴³ Under this structure, however, leaders often find it more difficult to hold their members accountable.⁴⁴ Weighing costs and benefits is also often applied by leaders within extremist organizations as a response to the environment in which they are operating.⁴⁵

David Tucker and Jacob Shapiro both describe the dilemmas faced by extremist leaders as being like those faced by any organization.⁴⁶ One conclusion is that terrorist leaders are constantly in a dilemma of how much authority to delegate and what the projected cost of that will be; these questions often revolve around organizational structures and the trust that exists within them.⁴⁷ Tucker describes the process of the “flattening” of authority and says this process may lead a hierarchal structure to opt for a decentralized network structure depending on circumstance.⁴⁸ Resource flows, information sharing, accountability, and overall preservation of the organization are all factors that play into the structure of a terrorist group. Crenshaw concludes that the organizational approach

⁴² Maria Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle 1969–1979* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 139.

⁴³ Crenshaw, “An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism,” 470.

⁴⁴ Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle 1969–1979*, 141.

⁴⁵ David Tucker, “Terrorism, Networks, and Strategy: Why Conventional Wisdom is Wrong,” *Homeland Security Affairs* 4, no. 2 (June 2008), 4–5, <https://www.hsaj.org>.

⁴⁶ See Tucker, 2008 and Shapiro, 2013 for examples.

⁴⁷ Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1–3. David Tucker also describes this process as the “flattening” of authority and said process may lead a hierarchal structure to opt for a network structure depending on circumstance.

⁴⁸ Tucker, “Terrorism, Networks, and Strategy: Why Conventional Wisdom is Wrong,” 4.

suggests terrorist groups are just as influenced by their internal dynamics as they are affected by externalities.⁴⁹

4. Ideology / Religion

The final single variable approach considered in this review is the examination of the role of ideology as it pertains to extremist violence. Researchers such as Mark Juergensmeyer have argued that religion has played a role in sustaining extremist groups by providing them with a means to appeal to a wider culture, one example being efforts by the Christian Identity Movement.⁵⁰ The concept of cultural appeal is particularly relevant to this thesis, as right-wing extremists within the United States most often identify as Christian; subsequently, there have been more terrorist attacks by Christians than those of any other religion since 9/11.⁵¹ Other studies have established that religion and ideology, more broadly, are often merely espoused as the justification for violence and used to legitimize violent action.⁵² Sara Lyons-Padilla uses the example of two British youths arrested in 2014 under terrorism charges, who had ordered books of the *For Dummies* series concerning Islam and the Koran.⁵³ Juergensmeyer concedes that human ambition is behind most acts of extremist violence, but also argues that religion provides perpetrators with a means of elevating their cause to a cosmic level, “a metaphysical conflict between good and evil.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Crenshaw, “An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism,” 489.

⁵⁰ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in The Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 275.

⁵¹ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in The Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 19.

⁵² Lyons-Padilla, S., Gelfand, M. J., Mirahmadi, H., Farooq, M., and van Egmond, M., “Belonging Nowhere: Marginalization and Radicalization Risk Among Muslim Immigrants,” *Behavioral Science & Policy* 1, no. 2 (December 2015), 1–12. Also see Juergensmeyer, *Terror in The Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* and Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 89, for ideology as a means of interpreting the world.

⁵³ Lyons-Padilla, “Belonging Nowhere: Marginalization and Radicalization Risk Among Muslim Immigrants,” 2.

⁵⁴ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in The Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 184.

Some scholars have argued that ideology, serves as an organizational direction for extremist movements, and is intimately connected to the process of target selection.⁵⁵ In his comparison of ethnic and socialrevolutionary terrorist groups, Peter Waldmann argues that, particularly for the latter, ideology is the means of social identification, and a common theme among a variety of organizations.⁵⁶

As contemporary research has shown, there are some problems with focusing solely on ideology as a driving force for would-be extremists to engage in violence. Maria Moyano describes some of these issues in her analysis of armed organizations. She points to the frequent inconsistency and hypocrisy in ideological declarations as well as the use of ideological debates as a façade for power struggles within organizations that often splinter as a result.⁵⁷ Despite these issues, advocates for the ideological approach often point to ideology as the driving force behind violent extremism.

5. Multivariable Approach

Though the field of terrorism studies has traditionally searched for a single variable explanation for extremist violence, today it is widely accepted that no single cause explains a decision to engage in violence. Martha Crenshaw explains that some of the issues that faced the field of terrorism studies in the past, were that works generally lacked comparability to include the specific relationships between causal variables. In addition, a study that attempted to consider more than one case was deemed “exceedingly vague or altogether wrong.”⁵⁸ Her works have since become canonical within the terrorism and counterterrorism fields of study. In her latest book, *Explaining Terrorism*, published in

⁵⁵ Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From The Klan to Al Qaeda* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 62.

⁵⁶ Peter Waldmann, “Ethnic and Sociorevolutionary Terrorism: A Comparison of Structures,” *International Social Movement Research* 4, (1992): 244–245.

⁵⁷ Maria Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle 1969–1979* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 131. The concealment of internal rivalries behind ideological disputes is a concept also broached by Marc Sageman in *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 151. Sageman, in *Understanding Terror Networks*, also discusses the problem of specificity in relation to ideology arguing that despite exposure to an ideology only a small number of individuals turn to violence.

⁵⁸ Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 34–35.

2011, Crenshaw advocates for a multivariable approach that involves examining the dynamic relationship between the permissive factors at play that create an environment conducive to extremist violence. She also examines the role of concrete grievances that provide the motivation and direction for extremist violence, as well as the precipitating events that have occurred, stimulating a rise in this violence.⁵⁹ Other experts in the field of terrorism studies have applied a similar approach, examining a variety of contributing factors that influence the decision to engage in extremist violence.⁶⁰

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

The following section explains the methodology behind this research. First, it presents various materials and data sources used in this thesis to describe the latest resurgence of right-wing violence. Next, this section describes the complexities involved in defining right-wing extremism. Finally, a more detailed account of the argument advanced in these pages will be outlined.

1. Contemporary Materials

This thesis first outlines the characteristics of the 2008 resurgence in right-wing violence. Second, it accounts for the causes of this last wave of domestic terrorism. This research is focused on the last decade, as it marks the worst economic recession in the United States since the Great Depression.⁶¹ The late 2000s was a time of significant change, not only economically, but also in the U.S. political and social environments. Therefore, some examination of both the political and social climate leading up to the 2008

⁵⁹ Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 34–50.

⁶⁰ Both Maria Moyano and Rik Coolsaet have adapted this approach to their own studies of violent extremism. Rasmussen presents several contextual factors and grievances that set the stage for the armed struggle in Argentina during the 70s as well as several specific events that occurred spurring increased violence. Coolsaet applies his version of this approach to his explanation for radicalization why Islamic State has appealed to Europeans and an exodus to Syria has ensued. He argues this approach to explaining the causes of terrorism has been largely abandoned since 9/11 to the field's detriment. See Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle 1969–1979*, 156–165. Rik Coolsaet, *Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case* (Brussels, Belgium: Egmont-Royal Institute for International Relations, 2016), 3–52.

⁶¹ Diane Schanzenbach et al., *Nine Facts About the Great Recession and Tools For Fighting the Next Downturn*, (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/fiscal_facts.pdf.

economic downturn is required. Reports and data from various federal agencies and established watchdog organizations are used to describe the characteristics of this latest resurgence of right-wing extremism. The information gathered from these entities will provide readers not only with an understanding of the current situation, but also an opportunity to revisit resurgences from the past and draw on the similarities and differences between them.

The right-wing extremist community has united around several grievances that have become the focal point not only for violent actor motivation, but also for the connection between the political mainstream and a radicalized subculture. Much of this thesis is based on secondary sources ranging from law enforcement perspectives to academic experts in the fields of terrorism and counterterrorism. In addition to experts in the field, this thesis also analyzes various manifestos released by right-wing extremists in order to demonstrate the links between their grievances, and the larger community movement.⁶² Information from these manifestos is not broken down into a case study format but rather used throughout the thesis as illustrations. Additionally, in order to demonstrate the expansiveness and connectedness of the modern right-wing extremist community, this thesis considers manifestos from foreign right-wing terrorists.⁶³ As is clear from violent events in Oslo (2011), Christchurch (2019), and El Paso (2019), inspiration has been derived from a worldwide community.⁶⁴

⁶² The manifestos from Dylann Roof (Charleston, SC shooter, 2015) and Patrick Crusius (El Paso, TX, 2019) will be two of the manifestos used as representation of the American alt-right community. See Dylann Roof, “Dylann Roof’s Manifesto” (unpublished manifesto, last modified December 13, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/13/universal/document-Dylann-Roof-manifesto.html>. Patrick Crusius, “The Inconvenient Truth” (unpublished manifesto, August 3, 2019).

⁶³ Anders Breivik, “2083: A European Declaration of Independence” (unpublished manifesto, last modified July 22, 2019), <https://info.publicintelligence.net/AndersBehringBreivikManifesto.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Extremists shot and killed large numbers of victims in these events and each in the list was inspired by the prior based on evidence in their manifestos. Weiyi Cai et al. “White Extremist Ideology Drives Many Deadly Shootings,” *New York Times*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/04/us/white-extremist-active-shooter.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

2. Definitions and Perspectives

It is very difficult to create a universal definition of right-wing extremism that is sufficiently extensive, while remaining comprehensive and objective. Christopher Hewitt explains that radical-right extremism is “multifaceted, and hence the political space it occupies is unclear.”⁶⁵ Often times, the stated goals or sentiments espoused by right-wing extremists are very similar to the more widely held views of mainstream conservatism such as Second Amendment Rights issues and Anti-Abortion campaigns. As a result, it is no surprise that different organizations classify right-wing extremism slightly different from one another. The following section presents different perspectives from renown authorities. These varying perspectives are used as a framework for how right-wing extremism is considered in this thesis.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Southern Poverty Law Center are two leading extremism watchdog organizations in the United States. Both organizations use relatively broad terms to classify right-wing extremism. The ADL defines right-wing extremism as social, political, and religious movements that are more radical than mainstream conservatism.⁶⁶ The SPLC defines the alt-right as “a set of far-right ideologies, groups, and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.”⁶⁷ Both organizations generally divide right-wing extremists into two primary spheres: white supremacy or nationalist groups and anti-government groups. In addition, these two organizations do not generally distinguish between hate groups and extremist groups, a characterization this thesis adopts as well.

Where the ADL and SPLC identify different types of right-wing extremist groups, the FBI does not. The FBI defines right-wing extremist groups as generally adhering to

⁶⁵ Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to Al Qaeda*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 41.

⁶⁶ “Extreme Right/Radical Right/Far Right” Anti-Defamation League, accessed October 30, 2019. <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/extreme-right-radical-right-far-right>.

⁶⁷ “Alt-Right” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed October 15, 2019. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>.

“principles of racial supremacy [that] embrace antigovernment, antiregulatory beliefs.”⁶⁸ The FBI recognizes that these groups often engage in activity that is protected by free speech and assembly, so remains slightly hesitant to brand domestic organizations or persons as extremist, until volatile speech evolves into unlawful actions.⁶⁹ The FBI does concede that, “white supremacists are to blame for the majority of domestic extremism.”⁷⁰ While the FBI distinguishes between hate crimes and domestic extremism, this line often becomes blurred by the U.S. criminal process. An example of this haziness emerged in the investigation and subsequent prosecution of Kevin Harpham in 2011. Allegedly motivated by white supremacist ideology, Harpham attempted to bomb a parade in Spokane, Washington, in early 2011. Preliminary statements by the FBI referred to the act as a domestic terror incident; however, after Harpham pled guilty to committing a federal hate crime, the FBI thereafter referred to it as a “horrific hate crime.”⁷¹ Despite this haziness, this thesis contends that (based on perpetrator demographics and motivation) trends in hate groups and hate-related violence correspond to the increase in right-wing extremist violence. The ADL, SPLC, and FBI do not distinguish between extremism and terrorism, another characterization this thesis also adopts.

One of right-wing extremism’s defining characteristics is the diversity among groups that fall under that umbrella term. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), Racist Skinheads, Christian Identity, and Sovereign Citizens have all been categorized as right-wing extremists by watchdog groups, federal law enforcement, and terrorism studies experts.⁷² Similarly, single-issue groups defined by anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, and

⁶⁸ Dale L. Watson, “The Terrorist Threat Confronting the United States,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, February 6, 2002, <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/testimony/the-terrorist-threat-confronting-the-united-states>.

⁶⁹ Watson, “The Terrorist Threat Confronting the United States.”

⁷⁰ Jennifer Rubin, Don’t Argue with Pelosi on This One, Republicans; The party of Lincoln or the alt-right?, *Washington Post*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2017/08/15/dont-argue-with-pelosi-on-this-one-republicans>.

⁷¹ Jerome P. Bjelopera, *Sifting Domestic Terrorism from Hate Crime and Home Grown Extremism*, CRS Report No. IN10299 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/IN10299.pdf>.

⁷² See SPLC 2020, ADL 2020, Rubin 2017, Juergensmeyer 2017, and Hewitt 2003 for examples.

anti-Muslim sentiments have also been so categorized. This thesis classifies right-wing extremism as social, political, and religious expressions and actions that adhere to radical interpretations of conservative values. This thesis also recognizes that not all groups or persons that could be identified as right-wing extremists will fit neatly into a white supremacist or antigovernment category. Rather, it is more common to find a group or individual that conveys a variety of beliefs that would fall under the broad category of right-wing extremism. Timothy McVeigh offers an excellent example. Widely considered a right-wing extremist, McVeigh's efforts were predicated on saving Christendom from liberal politicians who had given into globalization, and from non-white, non-Christian, and non-heterosexuals attempting to seize control of the country.⁷³

The term "alternative right" or alt-right is relatively new, coined in 2008 by Richard Spencer, a known white nationalist and movement figurehead.⁷⁴ The terms "alt-right" and "radical-right" are used today as umbrella terms to define a wide variety of groups and individuals engaged in extremist violence and behavior inspired by politically/morally conservative values. Of note, the term "far-right" is also sometimes used when describing this form of extremism; however, this term also is associated with certain aspects of mainstream conservatism and therefore its use is limited throughout this thesis. As an example, the Freedom Caucus in the conservative wing of the House of Representatives is often labeled as far-right or ultraconservative, but Rep. Mark Meadows is hardly physically violent himself.⁷⁵ This thesis will refer to the subject form of extremism as "right-wing extremism," and will use the term "alt-right" only to refer to the latest, broader right-wing extremist movement.

⁷³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in The Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 23.

⁷⁴ "Alt-Right" Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed October 15, 2019. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>.

⁷⁵ "2019 Report Cards," GovTrack, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/report-cards/2019/house/ideology>.

3. The Argument

The principal explanation that this thesis advances, is that the dynamic relationship between contextual factors and concrete grievances has facilitated the rise of right-wing extremism in the last decade. In addition, several specific catalytic events have occurred that have enhanced the effects of this relationship, resulting in increased extremist violence. The contextual factors have enabled a socio-political environment where extremist violence became more likely to occur. The hyperpolarization of America's political system and a subculture of xenophobia are two such factors. Additionally, such opportunity structures as the availability of high-power weapons and the political and law enforcement focus on Islamic extremism, have been exploitable and have aided in the execution of right-wing extremist violence.⁷⁶

Concrete grievances provide the motivation for violence and have fueled the resurgence of right-wing extremist hate.⁷⁷ Since 2008, economic anxieties, anti-government sentiments, and the perception of a loss of white identity have been tied to right-wing extremist groups and violent offenders. This thesis explains the evolution of these grievances over the last decade in political and social spheres. These grievances have provided a means of uniting individuals and groups in the broader right-wing community. In addition, this wave of violence has occurred in part because these grievances have not been answered at the polls.

This thesis argues that several catalytic events have amplified the effects of contextual factors and have magnified the importance of concrete grievances in the last decade. First, the United States has experienced two major shifts in leadership starting with the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, then President Donald Trump in 2016. Second, the rapid development and reliance on social media platforms have afforded a

⁷⁶ "Opportunity structures" is a common concept within the social movement literature. See della Porta (2012) for example in context. Donatella della Porta and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Patterns of Radicalization in Political Activism," 313–315.

⁷⁷ Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 37.

change in social behavior and the expression of rage.⁷⁸ The argument here is not that these events were the direct cause of violence, but rather, that they exacerbated the violent reactions to the contextual factors and concrete grievances. Refer to Table 1 for a breakdown of how these factors will appear in the following chapters.

Table 1. Factors to Explain the Latest Right-Wing Extremist Resurgence.

Contextual factors	Concrete Grievances	Catalytic Events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political Hyperpolarization • Xenophobia • Opportunity Structures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Easy Access to Firearms ○ Focus on Islamic Extremism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Anxiety • Resentment Toward the Government • Loss of White Identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Election of Obama • Election of Trump • Change in Social Behavior Afforded by Social Media

An analogy that can be used to explain the argument advanced here, is that contextual factors and concrete grievances are like coals that have smoldered for a long time, fueling sentiments over generations, occasionally giving rise to a small flame; the catalytic events are like fuel being poured onto this flame that erupts into a violent fire.

D. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter I has identified the focus of this thesis, namely explaining the latest resurgence of right-wing violence in America. This first chapter has reviewed the literature that will be leveraged in order to support the analysis of factors contributing to the latest resurgence. In addition, this chapter reviewed contemporary materials that will be harnessed as a framework for analysis. To clarify how this thesis considers right-wing extremism and violence, this chapter compared various perspectives from extremism watchdog organizations, as well as those of federal law enforcement. Chapter II reviews past episodes of right-wing extremist violence in the

⁷⁸ Julia Murphy and Max Roser, *Internet* (Our World In Data, 2019), <https://ourworldindata.org/internet#growth-of-the-internet>.

United States, thereby establishing that the right-wing extremism phenomenon of today is not a new one, but in fact, is a resurgence. Chapter II also explores current data that reflects a rise in hate crimes within the United States, as well as answers the “who” question, by examining various studies of hate group and lone-wolf actor activity. By leveraging existing statistical analysis, Chapter II demonstrates that a resurgence of right-wing extremism has indeed occurred since 2008.

Chapter III considers the role of contextual factors as well as concrete grievances. The purpose of this chapter is to review factors that have facilitated an environment conducive to extremism, referred to as contextual factors. This chapter also analyzes concrete grievances, often presented as the motivators behind right-wing violence, though they are also common to mainstream conservatism. The chapter also explores these grievances through an analysis of lone-actor manifestos and community rhetoric.

Chapter IV explores recent events that have exacerbated the contextual factors and given salience to the grievances. The three events have acted as a catalyst for the growth of right-wing extremist violence since 2008: the election of Barack Obama; the election of Donald Trump; and the shift in social behavior afforded by increased social media usage in American society.

The fifth and final chapter offers overall conclusions of the thesis. In addition, Chapter V will present a few suggestions for future academic research as well as opportunities for policymakers and law enforcement officials based on this research.

II. FUELING THE FIRE: THE RESURGENCE

Over the last decade, amid drastic changes in the political and social climate of the United States, American society has experienced a resurgence of right-wing extremism. The purpose of this chapter is to establish that the latest wave of violence is indeed a resurgence and has ensued since 2008. First, this chapter will examine various emergences of right-wing extremism from the past. A review of these previous waves of violence will demonstrate the enduring role of contextual factors and grievances, as well as the role of catalytic events; these past waves will act as context for the developments further explored in this thesis. Then, this chapter will trace the latest resurgence of right-wing extremism through an analysis of growing trends in hate groups and lone-actor violence since 2008.

A. THE RE-EMERGENCES OF YESTERYEAR

This section begins by focusing on three waves of Ku Klux Klan activity from Reconstruction through the mid-1900s, as this group represented the prototype of right-wing extremism during that timeframe. Next this section considers activity by the American Nazi and Populist Parties in the 1980s, as well as Christian Identity groups through the mid-1990s, as by then the KKK's numbers and prominence had largely diminished.

In his dissertation, Paul Brister recounts several periods during the Ku Klux Klan's long history, when it emerged from the shadows to wreak havoc on American society. The first wave of violence from the KKK lasted from 1866 to 1871, during the Reconstruction Era. Reconstruction was a post-Civil War political program with the goal of reincorporating former Confederate states back into the Union.⁷⁹ This period was also marked by significant political backlash and resentment from a large portion of Southern white society. The KKK was founded in May of 1866. Though initially relatively benign,

⁷⁹ Paul D. Brister, "Ku Klux Rising: Toward an Understanding of American Right-Wing Terrorist Campaigns" (PhD diss. Naval Postgraduate School, 2011), 58, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/10800>.

by early 1867 the group had adopted far more violent tactics and goals.⁸⁰ By 1871, the federal government was forced to send soldiers into the South to enforce martial law to counter Klan activity, and by 1872 the KKK's numbers had significantly diminished.⁸¹

Following its breakup in the early 1870s, the fractured elements of the KKK remained largely inactive until the interwar period of the early 1920s. In 1915, the film *The Birth of a Nation* was released. While revolutionary to the film industry for its cinematography and other technical aspects, it was also widely controversial for civil rights groups such as the NAACP for its depiction of the Civil War, post-war Reconstruction, and its malicious and unapologetic portrayal of African Americans.⁸² The film depicts hooded Klansmen as heroes responsible for liberating the South (in particular, white virgin women) from the threat posed by radical Republicans and freed blacks.⁸³ The film presents the KKK as the entity capable of reuniting the North and South through preservation of the Aryan birthright.⁸⁴ Former and would-be Klansmen who sought to reestablish the KKK to its Reconstruction Era prominence saw the film as an opportunity to garner influence given its critical acclaim and national popularity.⁸⁵

The interwar period was also marked by several developments that spurred nationwide societal anxiety. As the country stepped away from war efforts and returned to normalcy, rapid industrialization in major cities sparked waves of immigration from Europe, as well as the migration of disenfranchised blacks from the South.⁸⁶ In addition,

⁸⁰ Brister, "Ku Klux Rising: Toward an Understanding of American Right-Wing Terrorist Campaigns," 64. Brister describes initial group activities as involving relatively harmless pranks meant to scare former slaves and were purposed more for the entertainment value. These pranks eventually lost their appeal and gave way to beatings, shootings, lynching and other forms of violence.

⁸¹ Brister, 71.

⁸² Brister, 95.

⁸³ Today the film is still held as a major milestone in movie history, however, it also remains one of the most controversial films in cinema history and continues to captivate and enrage audiences. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by David W. Griffith (1915; Los Angeles, CA: Kino International, 2002), <http://www.amazon.com>.

⁸⁴ *The Birth of a Nation*.

⁸⁵ Brister, 97.

⁸⁶ Brister, 92.

fears of the spread of communism began to fester, as union strikes began to occur across the country.⁸⁷ The KKK effectively leveraged these growing anxieties and sentiments to launch its second campaign. The next decade saw a resurgence of extremist violence that resulted in the KKK gaining significant political influence. In-fighting among Klan leadership and political scandals stimulated the eventual decline of the group by the late 1920s, when its power had all but disappeared and its few remaining chapters clung to survival, receding underground.⁸⁸

The third wave of KKK violence came during the Civil Rights era from approximately 1954 through the 1960s. Following WWII, American society experienced a drastic shift. With the fascist threat diminished, focus turned toward left-wing extremists and the fear of communism took hold. With the Cold War underway, anti-communist sentiment and paranoia flourished in the early 1950s. McCarthyism and sweeping investigations by the FBI gave this public paranoia salience.⁸⁹ In addition, a new wave of immigrants came over from a desolate postwar Europe.⁹⁰ The splintered cells of KKK did not miss out on the opportunity to capitalize on the growing anti-communist and isolationist fervor that was brewing, and the Klan began to reorganize.⁹¹

In May of 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of desegregation of schools and the fractured elements of the KKK found an opportunity for influence and a means to once again rise to power.⁹² From 1955 to the early 1960s KKK membership grew and with the Civil Rights movement underway, further violent resistance from the KKK ensued. By the late 1960s the KKK's violence campaign had been rendered ineffective and desegregation continued in the South, albeit slowly. Already on its heels, the KKK was

⁸⁷ Brister, 95.

⁸⁸ Brister, 106–107.

⁸⁹ Brister, 126.

⁹⁰ “Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism,” Southern Poverty Law Center, March 1, 2011, <https://www.splcenter.org/20110228/ku-klux-klan-history-racism>.

⁹¹ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism.”

⁹² Brister, 130.

dealt its crushing blow by the FBI's anti-Klan counterintelligence task force, and by the early 1970s it was fractured and forced underground again.⁹³

These three waves of Ku Klux Klan resurgence are principle examples of right-wing extremism's rises and falls between the late 1800s and mid-1900s. Despite their efforts, KKK leadership has not been able to regain the political power the organization once held, and has become slightly more marginalized in today's right-wing extremist community.⁹⁴ Yet, despite the KKK's decline by the 1970s, right-wing extremism during the 1980s and 1990s still remained a significant concern for the American government, as well as for the public.

A re-emergence of right-wing extremism during the 1980s and 1990s saw a shift in prototype as well as popular support. Unlike the campaigns launched by the KKK during the late 1800s and early 1900s, national support for the right-wing extremist movement was more lacking during the 1980s and 1990s. Christopher Hewitt explains that some right-wing extremist groups in the 1980s, such as the American Nazi Party (ANP) and remnant KKK chapters, struggled to maintain support, as members shifted toward more mainstream conservatism.⁹⁵ The decline in membership, combined with in-fighting amongst the leadership resulted in the atomization of many of these organizations. Meanwhile, the right-wing Populist party garnered increased influence in Washington and Christian Identity groups emerged as the model for right-wing extremist violence.⁹⁶ Despite the decline of the KKK and neo-Nazi organizations, Hewitt argues that support for the Populist Party represents an indicator of increased "racial-nationalist mobilization."⁹⁷

⁹³ Brister, 141.

⁹⁴ SPLC, "Intelligence Report," 39.

⁹⁵ Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 56. Hewitt explains that the KKK saw its national membership drop from over 11,000 to roughly 5,000 between 1981 and 1985; the ANP's numbers decreased from 1,200 to about 400 over the same period.

⁹⁶ Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda*, 56–57. Also see Juergensmeyer 2017, 28.

⁹⁷ Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda*, 56. The party won 66,000 votes during the 1984 presidential election and 107,000 votes in the 1992 presidential campaign.

During the 1980s, the United States experienced an agricultural recession where crop prices dropped along with farmers' incomes.⁹⁸ In addition, anti-Semitism intensified amidst the still looming Cold War.⁹⁹ This period also witnessed the growing influence of the Christian Identity Movement within the larger right-wing extremism apparatus. Despite a propensity for outlandish conspiracy theories, Christian Identity tenets were routinely adopted by neo-Nazi groups and were particularly popular among anti-government organizations.¹⁰⁰ Theories espousing the threat presented by a "Jewish-controlled government" vindicated a mistrust felt by a large portion of rural American society.¹⁰¹ Such Christian Identity groups as the Aryan Nation and Posse Comitatus seized the opportunity to push these narratives and draw people to the movement. The standoffs between the FBI and right-wing extremists at Ruby Ridge and Waco in the 1990s were also leveraged to further spread Christian Identity theories.¹⁰² These events have been cited by critics as examples of government overreach and the individuals involved (who espoused Christian Identity views) are often martyred as victims of this overreach.¹⁰³

Although the number of incidents decreased over the course of the two decades, the level of violence intensified. For example, Hewitt observed that between 1981 and 1992, 130 terrorist incidents resulted in 81 deaths and injuries; however, while between 1993 and 1999 the number of incidents decreased to 82, more than 190 deaths or injuries occurred

⁹⁸ Steven Greenhouse, "For A Grain Giant, No Farm Crisis," *New York Times*, March 30, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/30/business/for-a-grain-giant-no-farm-crisis.html>.

⁹⁹ Brister, "Ku Klux Rising: Toward an Understanding of American Right-Wing Terrorist Campaigns," 166.

¹⁰⁰ Rhetoric is extremely anti-Semitic and generally racist in nature. "Christian Identity," Anti-Defamation League, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/christian-identity>.

¹⁰¹ Brister, 166.

¹⁰² Anti-Defamation League, "Christian Identity."

¹⁰³ Rachel Martin, "The Federal Response To Oregon Occupation May Have Roots In Ruby Ridge," National Public Radio, January 31, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/31/465000760/the-federal-response-to-oregon-occupation-may-have-roots-in-ruby-ridge>. Of note several innocents including children were killed during these stand-offs between extremists and federal authorities. Timothy McVeigh claimed these events as partial motivation for his actions as well. See ADL, "Christian Identity" for more details.

during this time, a significant increase from the decade prior.¹⁰⁴ Hewitt's figures excluded the 168 victims of Timothy McVeigh's attack on the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995.¹⁰⁵ A common target during this period, for extremist who identified with Christian ideologies were abortion clinics. Reverend Michael Bray, one such extremist, was convicted in 1985 for bombing seven abortion facilities.¹⁰⁶ Although violence had persisted through the decades, by 1999, the broader network of right-wing extremist groups saw its collective numbers diminish significantly, with the number of groups being less than 450 nationally.¹⁰⁷ The 2019 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) report from the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), provides a number of visual representations of the waves of right-wing violence in the United States over the last several decades (see Figure 1).

¹⁰⁴ Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda*, 43.

¹⁰⁵ Hewitt does not explicitly explain this exclusion; however, it is inferred that the objective was to demonstrate that without accounting for the devastating number of victims from the Oklahoma City bombing, the annual average was still four times greater between 1993 and 1999. For a summary on McVeigh and the impact of the incident see "The Significance of the Oklahoma City Bombing" Anti-Defamation League, March 27, 2015. <https://www.adl.org/news/article/oklahoma-city-bombing>.

¹⁰⁶ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in The Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 29.

¹⁰⁷ SPLC, "Intelligence Report," 37.

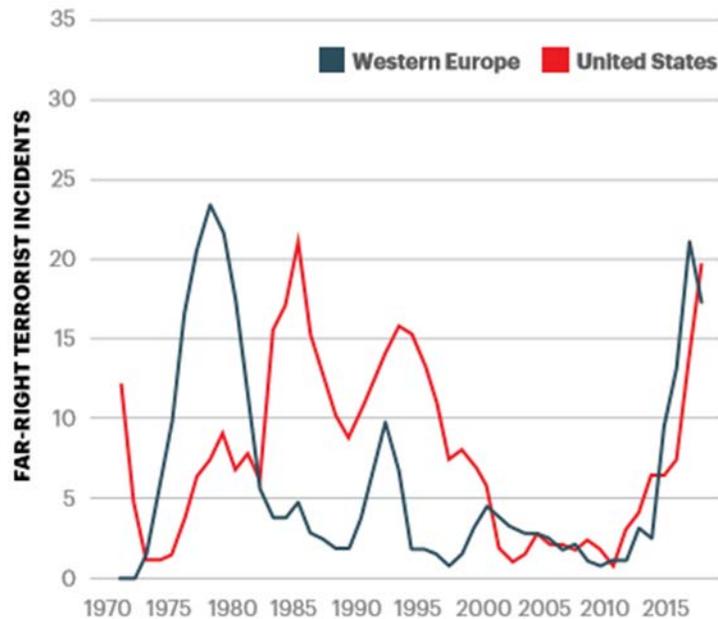


Figure 1. Right-Wing Extremist Incidents 1970–2018¹⁰⁸

B. GROWING TRENDS IN RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

Following the decline of right-wing extremist violence in the late 1990s and subsequent events of September 11, 2001, the conversation around extremism changed. While authorities turned their focus on countering Islamic extremism, right-wing extremists remained relatively inactive until 2008.¹⁰⁹ The following section outlines this latest development through an examination of growing trends in hate groups and lone-actor violence since 2008.

¹⁰⁸ Source: Institute of Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney, Australia: IEP, 2019), 50, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf>. The GTI report was a collaborative effort headed by IEP in close coordination with START and its Global Terrorism Database (GTD), as well as other organizations such as the FBI. The IEP uses the term “Far-right” to describe the same groups, individuals, and ideologies that this thesis refers to as right-wing extremism. This graph is an analysis of data collected from the GTD, that demonstrates the waves of right-wing extremist violence from the 1970s through 2018.

¹⁰⁹ See Figure 1.

1. Hate Groups

In the spring of 2020, the SPLC released its annual report covering trends in hate groups and extremist violence in the United States through 2019. This report is compiled from open-source data, including field reports, as well as law enforcement and news media sources. The SPLC has released this report annually since 1990. In 2019, the SPLC report included some 940 hate groups in America.¹¹⁰ Although this was a decrease from the all-time high of 1020 groups in 2018, the SPLC claims that the number of right-wing extremist groups has continued to rise, increasing 55 percent since 2017.¹¹¹ Nearly a quarter of these groups are located in just three states: California, Texas, and Florida.¹¹² Though it could be argued that this result is merely a reflection of population density, as these three states are the most populous; the SPLC also demonstrates that, when based on hate groups per capita, the most populous states do not even make the top ten list. The top three are South Dakota, New Hampshire, and Montana (the District of Columbia, while not a state, is considered in the report and ranks as number one on its top ten list).¹¹³ Twenty-eight states saw increases in the number of hate groups in 2018, with the rest experiencing either a decrease or no change.¹¹⁴

Of the 940 listed hate groups in 2019, the SPLC recognizes 391 as adhering to white supremacist or white nationalist values and identity.¹¹⁵ This figure does not include single-issue-specific groups such as anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, or anti-Muslim groups. However, a number of these groups espouse rhetoric and hate-speech that aligns with that of the right-wing extremist community; there were 174 of these single-issue groups.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ “The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019,” Southern Poverty Law Center, March 18, 2020, 11. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/yih_2020_final.pdf.

¹¹¹ SPLC, “The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019,” 6.

¹¹² SPLC, 37.

¹¹³ “The 50 U.S. States Ranked by Population” World Atlas, accessed November 1, 2019. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/us-states-by-population.html>.

¹¹⁴ SPLC, “Intelligence Report,” 52.

¹¹⁵ SPLC, “The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019,” 27.

¹¹⁶ SPLC, 25.

In 2019, the SPLC’s Intelligence Project identified 576 groups that exemplify anti-government extremism, 181 of which are considered militias (groups that engage in military-style training).¹¹⁷ Though 576 appears to be a substantial number, this figure represents a significant decline since the Obama administration when anti-government groups reached 1360 nation-wide.¹¹⁸ Many anti-government groups, especially militias, have found solace in the Trump administration’s policies and practices and have chosen to use this presidency as a time for recruitment and preparation.¹¹⁹

The sum of 940 hate groups represents an ominous increase in the number of active hate organizations in the United States since 1999 when the SPLC reported 457.¹²⁰ Almost equally dramatic has been the recent increase in hate crimes. The Federal Bureau of Investigations released a report in late 2019 reflecting hate crime statistics for 2018. According to the FBI, reported hate crimes increased by 17 percent between 2016 and 2018, with the number of incidents increasing by more than 1,000 annually, (see Figure 2).

¹¹⁷ SPLC, 38.

¹¹⁸ SPLC, “The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019,” 38.

¹¹⁹ SPLC, “Intelligence Report,” 39.

¹²⁰ SPLC, 37.



Figure 2. Hate Crimes 1990–2018¹²¹

Based on data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 60 percent of all reported hate crimes were motivated by the offender’s bias against race or ethnicity, of which almost 50 percent were motivated by anti-African American sentiments. Twenty percent of hate crimes were said to have been based on the offender’s bias against religion.¹²² Of the 6,266 reported offenders, 53.6 percent were white.¹²³ While the average annual number of hate crimes has fluctuated, the crimes themselves have grown more violent since 2008, with a roughly 6 percent increase in crimes against persons.¹²⁴ According to the ADL more than 70 percent of the 427 extremists killings over the past decade have been attributed to right-wing extremism collectively.¹²⁵ The issue of hate

¹²¹ Source: Institute of Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, 51. This graph is an IEP analysis of the FBI’s hate-crimes data, demonstrating the fluctuations between 1990 and 2018. For data see “2018 Hate Crime Statistics” Federal Bureau of Investigations, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/resource-pages/hate-crime-summary>.

¹²² FBI, “2018 Hate Crime Statistics.”

¹²³ FBI, “2018 Hate Crime Statistics.”

¹²⁴ FBI, “2018 Hate Crime Statistics.”

¹²⁵ Jonathan Greenblatt, “Right Wing Extremist Violence is Our Biggest Threat. The Numbers Don’t Lie,” Anti-Defamation League, January 24, 2019. <https://www.adl.org/news/op-ed/right-wing-extremist-violence-is-our-biggest-threat-the-numbers-dont-lie>.

crimes brings up another facet of right-wing extremism as it gains more public attention: right-wing lone-wolf actors.

2. Lone-Wolf Actors

Another growing trend closely associated with the resurgence of right-wing extremism is lone-wolf violence. According to researchers at the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism project, lone-wolf or lone-actor extremist violence can be defined as “the threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).”¹²⁶ The present thesis uses this definition. It is important to recognize that the term “lone-wolf” is not synonymous with social isolation and reclusive tendencies, as its connotation often depicts. A recent study countered this commonly held belief and revealed that most lone actors maintain social ties, which are critical to the development of their motivations and capabilities to complete their acts of extreme violence. In fact, 62 percent of the study’s sample engaged in contact with “clearly radical, extremist, or terrorist individuals.”¹²⁷ The authors of this study also concluded that a vast majority of lone-actors also engage in “leakage behavior” that allows for further spreading of their extremist convictions and objectives; often this leakage occurs prior to any action. This habit of releasing statements and manifestos publicly or online gives authorities a glimpse into extremist ideology and is a valuable tool in countering this threat prior to violent action.¹²⁸ An increasingly common tactic for lone-wolves who commit acts of violence in the United States today is the resort to mass shooting.

¹²⁶ Clare Ellis et al., “Analyzing the Process of Lone-Actor Terrorism: Research Findings,” *Perspectives of Terrorism* 10, no. 2, (April 2016), 33. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/44254/ProcessesofLone-ActorTerrorism.pdf?sequence=1>.

¹²⁷ Bart Schuurman et al., “Lone Actor Terrorist Attack Planning and Preparation: A Data-Driven Analysis,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 63, no. 4 (July 2018): 1195, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.13676>.

¹²⁸ Schuurman et al., 1196.

Over the past decade, active shooter incidents have trended upward with the FBI reporting twenty-seven incidents in 2018.¹²⁹ Between 2010 and 2018 the FBI has reported only two years having fewer than twenty incidents.¹³⁰ As a result of these 191 incidents between 2010 and 2018, 601 victims were killed.¹³¹ Not all of these active shooter incidents were committed by individuals who prescribe to right-wing extremist associated ideologies. However, according to the SPLC, between 2014 and 2018, some 17 of these individuals were found to have been motivated or inspired by right-wing extremist ideals.¹³² These 17 right-wing lone-actors killed 81 people and injured an additional 107. Forty of these murders were committed in 2018 alone.¹³³

The boundaryless expanse of the internet has allowed for unhindered dissemination of extremist rhetoric and intentions. Many right-wing lone-wolves have found and provided inspiration for extreme violence online on an international scale. In 2012, Dylann Roof shot and killed nine African-American parishioners at a church in Charleston, S.C. His manifesto revealed that he had found community and reinforcement for his motivations online.¹³⁴ On October 27, 2018, self-proclaimed anti-Semite Robert Bowers gunned down eleven Jewish victims at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Investigators found Bowers previously had an active presence on social media and frequently posted anti-Semitic materials.¹³⁵ These two lone-wolf shooters' violent actions are just a few of the

¹²⁹ “Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2018” Federal Bureau of Investigation, April 2019. <https://www.fbi.gov/file.../active-shooter-incidents-in-the-us-2018-041019.pdf>.

¹³⁰ “Active Shooter Incidents in the United States from 2000–2017” Federal Bureau of Investigation, April 27, 2018. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/active-shooter-incidents-2000-2017.pdf>.

¹³¹ FBI, “Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2018.”

¹³² SPLC, “Intelligence Report,” 7. These right-wing extremists expressed views in online and public forums that ranged from anti-Semitism and racism to anti-government sentiments.

¹³³ SPLC, “Intelligence Report,” 7.

¹³⁴ “Dylann Roof’s Manifesto” *New York Times*, December 13, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/13/universal/document-Dylann-Roof-manifesto.html>.

¹³⁵ Hayes, Christal, K. Johnson and C. Woodall, “Who is Robert Bowers? Accused Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter Left Anti-Semitic Trail” *USA Today*, October 29, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/10/27/pittsburgh-shooting-robert-bowers-identified-suspect-synagogue/1789239002>.

many that would go on to inspire even more, both in the United States as well as abroad. The Christchurch shooter in New Zealand massacred 50 Muslim worshipers in March 2019; his manifesto revealed that he had drawn inspiration from a number of other lone-wolves, several from the United States.¹³⁶ John Earnest, another member of the alt-right community, this time of the anti-Semitic vein of extremism, opened fire into a California synagogue in April of 2019, killing one and injuring several others. Earnest's manifesto again revealed motivations reinforced by an online community and inspired by other right-wing extremists including all those listed above.¹³⁷

C. CONCLUSION

In sum, over the past decade, during a time where federal law enforcement has been largely focused on Islamic extremist cells, right-wing extremism has reestablished itself in America. History has shown that American society has been ravaged by right-wing extremism several times; these periods provide a context for this latest resurgence. Hate group and hate crime data collected by watchdog groups and the FBI demonstrates that right-wing extremism has re-emerged with force over the last decade. In addition, extensive research has shown that lone-wolf extremists have exploited the community that the internet and social media provide in order to justify exponentially increased violence. The question that remains is which factors explain this latest resurgence?

¹³⁶ Weiyi Cai and Simone Landon, "Attacks by White Extremists Are Growing. So Are Their Connections" *New York Times*, April 3, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/world/white-extremist-terrorism-christchurch.html>.

¹³⁷ Talia Lavin, "The San Diego Shooter's Manifesto is a Modern Form of an Old Lie About Jews," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/29/san-diego-shooters-manifesto-is-modern-form-an-old-lie-about-jews/?utm_term=.ee4c98960882.

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III. FUELING THE FIRE: CONTEXT AND GRIEVANCE

The previous chapter outlined the resurgence of right-wing extremist violence in the 21st century. This chapter seeks to examine factors that have contributed to that resurgence. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, it will examine the contextual factors that have facilitated an environment conducive to right-wing extremist violence. Next, it will consider some of the concrete grievances that provide the motivation for violence that has united this fringe, alt-right community. None of the variables presented herein explain the rise in right-wing extremist violence on their own.¹³⁸ However, this thesis argues that the relationship between contextual factors and concrete grievances has facilitated this resurgence.

A. CONTEXT

The first set of variables this chapter explores are those that have facilitated an ideal socio-political environment, where this latest resurgence of right-wing violence became more likely to occur. First, this section briefly explores the role of a hyperpolarized political system on broader American society. Next, this section considers the xenophobic subculture and racism that has permeated into institutional channels and the influence that this subculture has had on American society. This segment will also briefly review the role of religion in right-wing extremism today. Finally, this section considers various opportunity structures that have inadvertently allowed for the alt-right community to grow and have enabled lone-wolf actors to commit violence on a massive scale.

1. Political Hyperpolarization

In a recent article for *Psychology Today*, David Ludden describes the American political landscape as a “perpetual gridlock,” where neither side is willing to concede to the other and the preeminent goal is to maximize power, while actual governance is left

¹³⁸ Many of these factors, however, have contributed to the legitimization of and necessity for violence for extremists such as xenophobia, resentment toward the government, and the perception of loss of white identity.

undone.¹³⁹ Simultaneously at the grassroots level, there is little incentive to consider opinion outside our own. Arguably this description could be used to characterize other American generations as well, so what is so different about the period from 2008 until now?

A 2016 report from the Pew Research Center explained that, since it began compiling surveys on this issue in 1992, partisan divides in the United States have continued to grow.¹⁴⁰ In 2016, partisan sentiment toward the opposing party reached an all-time high.¹⁴¹ The study found that the majority of both Republicans and Democrats felt that the opposing party's policies were "so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being." Fifty-eight percent and 55 percent, respectively, up from 32 percent and 37 percent in 2008.¹⁴² In fact, 68 percent of Republicans claim, the study found, that a major reason for identifying as such is due to this perception. As a comparison, only 64 percent of Republicans claim a major reason is their positive perception of GOP policies.¹⁴³ A separate study found that 45 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of Republicans would be unhappy if their child were to marry someone from the opposite party.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ David Ludden, "How Have We Become So Politically Divided?," *Psychology Today*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-apes/202003/how-have-we-become-so-politically-divided>.

¹⁴⁰ "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," PEW Research Center, June 22, 2016, <https://www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016>.

¹⁴¹ Fifty-eight percent of voters considered "Highly Politically Engaged" (e.g., regular voting as well as donating and volunteering for campaigns) in both parties claimed to be angry with the other with 62 percent of Republicans and 70 percent of Democrats of the same category claimed to be afraid. See PEW Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016."

¹⁴² PEW Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016."

¹⁴³ PEW Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016."

¹⁴⁴ The study asked participants their level of comfort with their child choosing a spouse who is a different racial or religious background, a different political affiliation, the same gender, or who identifies as transgender. The demographic most unappealing for Republicans was someone who is Transgendered (70%) while for Democrats it was a Republican (45%) See Maxine Najle and Robert P. Jones, "American Democracy in Crisis: The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation," Public Religion Research Institute, February 19, 2019, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation>.

Ludden explains this period of hyperpolarization is the result of increasing cognitive inflexibility, or the inability to “adapt the way you perceive or think about changing circumstances in the world.”¹⁴⁵ However, this phenomenon could also be explained in terms of the interactions within and between “in” and “out” groups, where members will identify more with their in-group as the perception of out-group aggression grows.¹⁴⁶

2. Xenophobic Subculture

One of the hallmarks of today’s right-wing extremist movement is its pervasive use of xenophobic rhetoric. Xenophobia (referring to a fear of foreigners, as translated from Greek), is a term that is associated with a broader sentiment, against immigration and hatred of non-natives. During periods of hyperpolarization and increased distrust of established institutions, such as the United States has witnessed since 2008, immigrants have often become the target of extremist rhetoric and violence.¹⁴⁷ This phenomenon is not attributable solely to the alt-right, nor is it a new one; it is, however, an unfortunate reoccurrence in mainstream American society throughout our history.¹⁴⁸

In an article for the *Washington Post*, Erika Lee writes that from the establishment of our country, every wave of immigrants has been met with substantial resistance and racism, and that these sentiments have always had a strong influence on public policy and governing.¹⁴⁹ The Irish/German Catholics in the 1850s, the Chinese and other Asian immigrants in the 1880s and 1890s, the Latinos at the turn of the century through today—

¹⁴⁵ Ludden, “How Have We Become So Politically Divided?”

¹⁴⁶ Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 116.

¹⁴⁷ Jennifer McCoy et al., “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (March 2018): 30–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0002764218759576>.

¹⁴⁸ Erika Lee, “Trump’s Xenophobia Is an American Tradition but it Doesn’t Have to Be,” *Washington Post*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/11/26/trumps-xenophobia-is-an-american-tradition-it-doesnt-have-be>.

¹⁴⁹ Lee, “Trump’s Xenophobia Is an American Tradition but It Doesn’t Have to Be.”

all have been widely deemed a threat to the American way of life. Lee goes onto argue that by the 1990s, xenophobia had become a centerpiece of conservative rhetoric.¹⁵⁰

Xenophobia is at the center of a politicized identity commonly associated with the broader, conservative community. Xenophobic sentiments have created what Marc Sageman would describe as subculture within a political community, where individuals at the political fringe unite around a shared way of thinking.¹⁵¹ The connection here is that the alt-right actually emerged in part as a result of the effort (and counter effort) by political elites to leverage identity by giving it relevancy.¹⁵² This relevancy is derived from the language used not just by politicians but also intellectuals, scholars, historians, and entertainers. As a social identity becomes more fundamental to a group or community, the distinction between “us” and “them” becomes more refined and alienating.¹⁵³

Xenophobia inspires anti-immigrant rhetoric. As the tribal divide has increased in American politics, so too has the traction of the anti-immigration position among conservatives, a position evolving to the level of preventing a Hispanic “invasion.”¹⁵⁴ In recent years, conservative politicians and media outlets have stoked anti-immigrant sentiments through the persistent use of rhetoric such as referring to immigrants as “invaders” and blaming them for increased violent crime.¹⁵⁵ In addition, immigrants (and blacks) are commonly viewed as being the primary beneficiaries of welfare programs and are believed to be “sponging” off the rest of society, namely working-class white

¹⁵⁰ Lee, “Trump’s Xenophobia Is an American Tradition but It Doesn’t Have to Be.”

¹⁵¹ Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) 119–120.

¹⁵² Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 126–127.

¹⁵³ McCoy et al., “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities,” 23–24.

¹⁵⁴ Lee, “Trump’s Xenophobia is An American Tradition but It Doesn’t Have To Be.”

¹⁵⁵ According to the SPLC in 2019, posts referring to a ‘Hispanic invasion’ occurred in over 2000 Facebook ads alone. Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, March 18, 2020, 13–16, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/yih_2020_final.pdf.

Americans; this sentiment exacerbates the grievance of economic hardship that will be examined later in this chapter¹⁵⁶

The fears of a Hispanic invasion and calls for war on illegal immigration have led to an increase in anti-immigrant-focused hate groups. In addition, several alt-right actors, even as recently as 2019, have acted upon these sentiments violently. In its 2020 report on hate in the United States, the SPLC explains that the number of anti-immigrant-oriented hate groups rose in 2019 to 20 groups nation-wide.¹⁵⁷ In August 2019, Patrick Crusius killed 22 people and wounded 24 when he opened fire with a semi-automatic firearm in an El Paso, Texas, Walmart.¹⁵⁸ In his manifesto, Crusius claimed his actions were a direct response to the “Hispanic invasion of Texas.”¹⁵⁹ In his manifesto, Dylann Roof ascribes some value to “White Hispanics,” yet he too insists that Hispanics are by and large still the enemy.¹⁶⁰

It is important to point out that the right-wing extremist community has arguably experienced some success in its goal to instill a greater anti-immigrant sentiment in mainstream American politics. The SPLC argues that in the last three years, the alt-right movement has “enjoyed unprecedented access” to the high levels of power in Washington, D.C.¹⁶¹ In late 2019, the SPLC exposed a senior White House official’s promotion of white nationalist rhetoric, literature (including Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*), and policy heavily directed toward curbing mass immigration.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ Baysinger, “Right-wing Group Characteristics and Ideology,” 6.

¹⁵⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 4.

¹⁵⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, 8–9.

¹⁵⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 18. Also see Patrick Crusius, “The Inconvenient Truth” (unpublished manifesto, August 3, 2019), <https://grabancijas.com/patrick-crusius-manifesto-the-inconvenient-truth>.

¹⁶⁰ Dylann Roof, “Dylann Roof’s Manifesto” (unpublished manifesto, last modified December 13, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/13/universal/document-Dylann-Roof-manifesto.html>.

¹⁶¹ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 13.

¹⁶² Michael E. Hayden, “Stephen Miller’s Affinity for White Nationalism Revealed in Leaked Emails,” Southern Poverty Law Center, November 12, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/11/12/stephen-millers-affinity-white-nationalism-revealed-leaked-emails>.

Along the same lines as anti-immigrant xenophobia, right-wing extremism has a long history of racism, and this latest resurgence is no exception; race remains core to the shared white social identity. However, the right-wing extremist movement today varies along a spectrum of views on race. There are those, such as the Atomwaffen Division, that still openly embrace the idea or desire of white supremacy and racial purity, to the extent that they anticipate and are willing to incite an American race war to achieve “purification,” through acts of extreme violence.¹⁶³ Many intellectuals of the alt-right movement wish to avoid the racist label by redirecting the conversation toward “culture.” The claim in these instances, according to Yiannopoulos, is that “culture is inseparable from race,” and therefore, separation of the races is necessary for any culture to be preserved.¹⁶⁴ The common thread that emerges, however, is one that links the alt-right of today, to right-wing movements of the past: the fundamental belief in the superiority of the white race over all other races.¹⁶⁵

The SPLC’s 2020 report claims that white nationalist hate groups have risen by 55 percent since 2017, a surge that has coincided with a continued increase in hate-related violence.¹⁶⁶ Elements of racism emerge as motivation behind most alt-right killings. Dylann Roof’s killing of nine black parishioners was one blatant example of racially motivated violence. In three of the more recent shootings in Poway, California, Gilroy, California, and El Paso, Texas, the shooters all claimed to be motivated by eliminating the threat that other races posed.¹⁶⁷

One unique aspect of bigotry within this latest resurgence is the simultaneous decline of Christian Identity. The alt-right movement today is largely secular in nature,

¹⁶³ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report*, 10–11. Of note Atomwaffen Division was recently dealt a major blow by federal authorities and activists and is believed to have been largely atomized, for details see Jason Wilson, “Sweep Of Arrests Hits U.S. Neo-Nazi Group Connected To Five Murders,” *Guardian*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/06/neo-nazi-arrests-deals-blow-us-group-atomwaffen-division>.

¹⁶⁴ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

¹⁶⁵ Smith, *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams*, 35.

¹⁶⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 4.

¹⁶⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, 13–14.

though elements of religious bias are still sprinkled throughout. SPLC’s 2020 report shows that the once commanding influence of Christian Identity has fallen with a 45 percent decline in Christian Identity-focused hate groups since 2017.¹⁶⁸ In right-wing waves of violence in the past, Christian values were often at the forefront of the movement’s conservatism. Right-wing extremism in the 1980s was closely linked to the Christian Identity movement and abortion clinics were a common target for bombings.¹⁶⁹ Yet today, the alt-right movement has followed a growing American trend of secularism.¹⁷⁰

Mark Juergensmeyer considers the role of religion in extremist violence in his book *Terror in the Mind of God*; he concedes that religion as motivation for violence is often more symbolic in nature.¹⁷¹ Juergensmeyer explains that religion acts as a tool, in part, as a means of connecting extremist views to the mainstream, but also as a means of elevating the threat itself to a “cosmic” level of existential proportions.¹⁷² With that said, religious discrimination remains an additional fixture of the xenophobic subculture within the United States. Religious values are often cited in xenophobic rhetoric directed at Jews, Muslims, supporters of pro-choice and LGBTQ rights. The FBI reports that in 2018, of the 1,617 victims of anti-religious hate crimes, 56.9 percent were targets based on anti-Jewish bias and 14.6 percent were based on anti-Islamic bias.¹⁷³ The same report revealed that 1,445 victims were targeted because of sexual-orientation bias, nearly a quarter of which were due to a broad-mixed LGBTQ prejudice.¹⁷⁴ The ADL has reported that, since 2010, roughly 2 percent of extremist-related killings were linked to anti-abortion sentiment.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, 31.

¹⁶⁹ Smith, *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams*, 53–54.

¹⁷⁰ Peter Beinart and Scott Simon, “The Rise of Secularism and The Alt-Right,” National Public Radio, March 18, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/18/520631240/the-rise-of-secularism-and-the-alt-right>.

¹⁷¹ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 270.

¹⁷² Juergensmeyer, 268.

¹⁷³ “Uniform Crime Report: Hate Crime Statistics, 2018,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/topic-pages/victims.pdf>.

¹⁷⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Uniform Crime Report: Hate Crime Statistics, 2018.”

¹⁷⁵ Anti-Defamation League, “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019,” 19.

3. Opportunity Structures

The final category of contextual factors to be explored in this thesis involves the role of opportunity structures. Relative unfettered access to high-power, large capacity firearms and the government and law enforcement's focus on Islamic extremism since 2001, have inadvertently contributed to increased mass killings by right-wing lone-wolves, and proliferation of the movement's ideology.

Americans love their guns. There is a deep-seated culture of firearms in American society with "a right to bear arms" being part of the American stereotype.¹⁷⁶ But before diving in on how guns relate to right-wing extremism, let us first examine some general facts. Based on data collected from 230 countries world-wide, a 2018 study found that approximately 393 million firearms are in circulation in the United States.¹⁷⁷ When compared to the U.S. population, that averages 120 firearms per 100 people.¹⁷⁸ The study cited the next highest firearm per capita ratio as being in Yemen, with 52.8 guns per 100 people.¹⁷⁹ The U.S. ratio is more than three times higher than Germany's, the next highest among developed nations.¹⁸⁰ According to Pew, 67 percent of U.S. gun owners cite personal protection as a major reason for ownership.¹⁸¹

There are 36.5 thousand firearm-related deaths in the United States annually; however, based on data collected by the Gun Violence Archive, since 2014, the number of

¹⁷⁶ Henry Allen, "Americans' love of guns: Part of our culture," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americans-love-of-guns-part-of-our-culture/2012/12/25/f301f326-4ddd-11e2-950a-7863a013264b_story.html.

¹⁷⁷ Niall McCarthy, "U.S. Civilians Own 393 Million Firearms," Statista, June 28, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/14468/us-civilians-own-393-million-firearms>.

¹⁷⁸ "2019 U.S. Population Estimates Continue to show the Nation's Growth is Slowing," United States Census Bureau, December 30, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2019/popest-nation.html>.

¹⁷⁹ McCarthy, "U.S. Civilians Own 393 Million Firearms."

¹⁸⁰ Darla Cameron and Samuel Granados, "Mass shootings: How the U.S. gun culture compares with the rest of the world," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/mass-shootings>.

¹⁸¹ John Gramlich and Katherine Schaeffer, "7 facts about guns in the U.S.," PEW Research Center, October 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/22/facts-about-guns-in-united-states>.

firearm related deaths has increased by roughly 12.8 percent, reaching nearly 40,000 deaths in 2019.¹⁸² Of note, roughly two-thirds of firearm related deaths are suicides.¹⁸³ According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, since 1999 the annual suicide rate in the United States has increased by 33 percent.¹⁸⁴ While suicide may not seem relevant to a discussion on right-wing violence, its role in creating an environment conducive to extremist violence is subtle but pertinent. First, the use of firearms is nearly twice as prevalent a means of suicide than any other method in the U.S.¹⁸⁵ Suicide rates among men are also three times as high as they are for women.¹⁸⁶ Finally, and perhaps most pertinent to this discussion, according to the CDC, while suicide rates were highest among American Indian/Alaskan Native men, white (non-Hispanic) men (age 25+) were a close second, and their rate was more than double that of any other race/ethnicity.¹⁸⁷

Mass shootings and domestic extremism account for a small fraction of gun-related deaths in the United States in any given year; however, studies have shown that firearms are the preferred means of committing violence for right-wing extremists.¹⁸⁸ According to the ADL, over the last decade, 72 percent of domestic extremist-related killings have involved firearms.¹⁸⁹ Of the top six deadliest years on record for domestic extremism

¹⁸² “Gun Violence Archive: Summary Ledgers,” Gun Violence Archive, April 4, 2020, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/past-tolls>.

¹⁸³ Dyfed Loesche, “Guns and Gun Violence in America,” Statista, May 3, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/13727/guns-gun-violence-in-america>.

¹⁸⁴ Holly Hedegaard et al., “Suicide Mortality in the United States, 1999–2017,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, November, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db330.htm>.

¹⁸⁵ “Suicide,” National Institute of Mental Health, last modified April 2019, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>.

¹⁸⁶ Hedegaard et al., “Suicide Mortality in the United States, 1999–2017.”

¹⁸⁷ “Suicide,” National Institute of Mental Health.

¹⁸⁸ Lasse Lindekilde et al., “Radicalization Patterns and Modes of Attack Planning and Preparation Among Lone-Actor Terrorists: An Exploratory Analysis.” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 11, no. 2 (November 2017): 127, <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/19434472.2017.1407814>.

¹⁸⁹ “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019,” Anti-Defamation League, February 2020, 11, <https://www.adl.org/media/14107/download>.

within the United States, five have occurred since 2008.¹⁹⁰ Of note, when conducting its study, the ADL did not include the fifty-nine victims of the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting in the domestic extremist killing total.¹⁹¹ A *Washington Post* article explains that since the 1966 University of Texas mass shooting, there have been 175 incidents that involved more than 330 firearms, resulting in 1,242 victims.¹⁹² In the 118 mass shootings occurring between 1982 and 2020, sixty-four were committed by white shooters.¹⁹³ Not all of these shootings were linked to right-wing extremism; however, it does demonstrate whites' disproportionate use of mass shootings as compared to other races. The ADL report revealed that right-wing extremists accounted for 76 percent of these killings since 2010.¹⁹⁴ Again, these numbers may not appear too severe when compared to nearly forty thousand firearm-related deaths in the United States each year; however, following the 1994 assault weapons ban, a number of studies found that these assault-style, large-capacity weapons were disproportionately involved in mass murders, number of wounds per victim, and law enforcement shootings.¹⁹⁵ While access to firearms remains a significant issue for American society at large, another opportunity structure has contributed to the resurgence of right-wing extremism as well.

¹⁹⁰ Anti-Defamation League, "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019," 8.

¹⁹¹ Stephen Paddock's (Las Vegas shooter) motive for the shooting remains undetermined by law enforce authorities. This event marked the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. See Anti-Defamation League, "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019," 13.

¹⁹² Bonnie Berkowitz and Chris Alcantara, "The Terrible Numbers That Grow With Each Mass Shooting," *Washington Post*, last modified February 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/mass-shootings-in-america>.

¹⁹³ "Number of Mass Shootings In the United States Between 1982 and February 2020, by Shooter's Race and Ethnicity," Statista Research Department, March 2, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/476456/mass-shootings-in-the-us-by-shooter-s-race>.

¹⁹⁴ Anti-Defamation League, "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019," 18.

¹⁹⁵ Jeffrey A. Roth and Christopher S. Koper, *Impact Evaluation of the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act of 1994*, (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1997), 19, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/67071/406797-Impact-Evaluation-of-the-Public-Safety-and-Recreational-Firearms-Use-Protection-Act-of--.PDF>.

Also see: Daniel J. Woods and Jeffrey A. Roth, *An Updated Assessment of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban: Impacts on the Gun Markets and Gun Violence, 1994–2003*, NCJRS Report Number 98-IJ-CX-0039 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 89, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204431.pdf>.

The 9/11 terror attacks were unprecedented, not just in the resulting death toll and infrastructure damage, but arguably in the response from American society and, more importantly, government and law enforcement authorities. Following the attack, the nation turned its focus on radical Islamic extremist groups. According to one account, when the FBI began its investigation 4,000 agents were assigned in some fashion to the case.¹⁹⁶ As a side note, the FBI employs roughly 35,000 personnel in total, so 4,000 agents is a pretty significant figure.¹⁹⁷ Anti-Arab/Muslim violence erupted across the U.S., and there was strong public support for severe political actions against Muslims, including against American citizens.¹⁹⁸ Following the attack the FBI underwent a massive restructuring with a refocused effort on counterterrorism, primarily directed at the “New Threat,” jihadist extremism.¹⁹⁹

Despite a culture of association between terrorism and radical Islam, the continued threat by right-wing extremists was not completely lost on members of the law enforcement and intelligence communities. According to an article published in *Time* magazine, over the past decade several attempts have been made to redirect resources toward combating right-wing extremism only to have funding pulled under the pretense of constitutional/political concerns.²⁰⁰ As a result, law enforcement leadership has placed right-wing extremist violence at a much lower threat priority, in some cases even lower

¹⁹⁶ Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

¹⁹⁷ “About the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed March 11, 2020, <https://www.fbi.gov/about/mission>.

¹⁹⁸ Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda*, 4.

¹⁹⁹ “The Department of Justice Ten Years After 9/11,” Department of Justice, 2011, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/fact-sheet-department-justice-ten-years-after-911>.

²⁰⁰ According to the article in *Time* magazine, efforts to combat violent domestic extremism in the U.S. came to a “grinding halt” during the Trump presidency and that efforts were made by the White House to alter the name of the *Countering Violent Extremism* program to the more specific *Countering Radical Islamic Extremism*. Vera Bergengruen and W.J. Hennigan, “‘We Are Being Eaten From Within.’ Why America Is Losing the Battle Against White Nationalist Terrorism,” *Time*, August 8, 2019, <https://time.com/5647304/white-nationalist-terrorism-united-states>.

than “eco-terrorism.”²⁰¹ Only recently has this pattern been broken, with FBI Director Christopher Wray notifying Congress of the bureau’s recognition of and renewed effort against racially motivated extremism as a national threat.²⁰²

Experts in the field of terrorism have repeatedly pointed to the fact that right-wing violence was and continues to be the principal U.S. domestic terrorism threat. Chris Hewitt explains that from 1954 to 2000, white racist/rightist extremist groups accounted for 31 percent of incidents and 51 percent of fatalities, as compared to Islamic extremists, which account for only 1 percent and 2 percent, respectively.²⁰³ Mark Juergensmeyer also submits that since 1990, Christians, not Muslims, have committed significantly more terrorist attacks in the United States.²⁰⁴ Law enforcement efforts against right-wing extremism have been made in the past and were overall successful. In the early 1980s, the FBI focused heavily on countering the threat. Brent Smith explains the bureau had significant resources in place even before right-wing extremists were able to engage in violence, thus, preventing most of the planned attacks and disrupting many right-wing organizations to the point of ruin.²⁰⁵

The effects of the contextual factors reviewed in the first half of this chapter are by no means exclusively inflicted upon the right-wing extremist community, nor do they alone explain this latest resurgence of right-wing violence. However, these factors have enabled a socio-political environment where extremist violence became more probable.

B. CONCRETE GRIEVANCES

The following section explores the concrete grievances that the right-wing extremist community have united around and that have provided the motivations for

²⁰¹ Bergengruen and Hennigan, “‘We Are Being Eaten From Within.’ Why America Is Losing the Battle Against White Nationalist Terrorism.”

²⁰² Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 34.

²⁰³ Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda*, 15.

²⁰⁴ Mark Juergensmeyer. *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 19.

²⁰⁵ Smith, *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams*, 25–26.

violence. The first grievance reviewed in this section involves economic anxiety caused by a shrinking middle class and growing income gap, a phenomenon that has persisted in American society for generations. Next this section examines the right-wing extremist resentment directed toward the American government. Finally, this section discusses the perception of loss of white identity and power, a sentiment that has continued to remain at the pinnacle of concern for the alt-right community over the last decade.

1. Economic Anxiety

This thesis focuses on the period since 2008, in part because it marks the worst economic recession in the United States since the Great Depression.²⁰⁶ Economic hardship is not a burden endured by the right-wing extremist community exclusively, but, rather, a large portion of American society. Yet, a recent study found that economic factors were some of the more substantial variables in distinguishing individuals more closely aligned with alt-right sentiments.²⁰⁷ Therefore, in order to evaluate the concrete grievances associated with right-wing extremism, it was necessary to assess changes in American society through an economic lens. Since the 1970s the percentage of American adults qualifying as middle-income households has decreased by 10 percent.²⁰⁸ According to Pew, the criteria for discerning income classes varies over time based on the cost of living and household size. In 2016 the national income range for the middle class was \$45,200 to \$135,600 for a three-person household.²⁰⁹

The shrinking middle class has remained an issue for decades; however, one economic factor that has become more readily apparent has been the tremendous increase

²⁰⁶ Diane Schanzenbach et al., *Nine Facts About the Great Recession and Tools For Fighting the Next Downturn*, (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/fiscal_facts.pdf.

²⁰⁷ George Hawley, "The Demography of the Alt-right," University of Alabama's Institute for Family Studies, August 9, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-demography-of-the-alt-right>.

²⁰⁸ Rakesh Kochhar, "The American Middle Class is Stable in Size, but Losing Ground Financially To Upper-Income Families," Pew Research Center, September 6, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/06/the-american-middle-class-is-stable-in-size-but-losing-ground-financially-to-upper-income-families>.

²⁰⁹ Kochhar, "The American Middle Class is Stable in Size, but Losing Ground Financially To Upper-Income Families."

in the wealth gap. According to the Pew Research Center, the United States has the highest level of income inequality among G7 nations, with a Gini coefficient of 0.434 (2017) and increasing.²¹⁰ In 2018, the highest-earning 20 percent of households accounted for more than half of all U.S. income; in fact, in 2016, the median worth among the top-earning 5 percent of households was 248 times more than that of the lower 20 percent of earners.²¹¹ The growth in the income gap becomes even more evident when comparing the rates of change. Over the last fifty years, median middle-class income increased by 49 percent, while upper-income households increased by 69 percent.²¹² In addition, the unemployment rate in the United States reached a near-record high in 2010 (9.5 percent) following the Great Recession.²¹³ According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 11.3 percent of white families had at least one unemployed family member in 2010.²¹⁴ As the size of the middle-class decreases and the income gap increases, the economic power of the middle-class also declines, thus reducing the incentive for producers and surrendering greater control to the rich.²¹⁵

In the past, right-wing extremists in the United States have broken the stereotypical demographic for extremists (young, upper middle class, and college educated). Brent Smith in his 1994 book *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams*, analyzed data collected over decades and demonstrated that right-wing extremists in the United States tended to be older (average age of 39); from varied economic status, but a large portion of

²¹⁰ Katherine Schaeffer, “6 Facts about economic inequality in the U.S.,” PEW Research Center, February 7, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s>.

²¹¹ Schaeffer, “6 Facts about economic inequality in the U.S.”

²¹² Schaeffer, “6 Facts about economic inequality in the U.S.”

²¹³ Katherine Schaeffer, “U.S. Has Changed in Key Ways in the Past Decade, From Tech Use To Demographics,” PEW Research Center, December 20, 2019, <https://pewresearch-org-preprod.go-vip.co/fact-tank/2019/12/20/key-ways-us-changed-in-past-decade>.

²¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Unemployment among families, 2011,” United States Department of Labor, May 8, 2012, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2012/ted_20120508.htm.

²¹⁵ Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016) 197.

lower income or unemployed; and only 12 percent had a college-level education.²¹⁶ Leaders of today's alt-right movement would argue that the new, younger generation of participants are actually well-educated intellectuals and that they make up a majority of the ranks.²¹⁷ George Hawley's demographic analysis found, however, that despite these claims, the majority of individuals who aligned with alt-right sympathies had no college degree and claimed to be in lower-income brackets (\$0 – 29,000 annual income).²¹⁸ Milo Yiannopoulos, a self-identified leader in the alt-right movement, counterargues this notion with the concept of "noblesse oblige" (obligation to the less privileged). He states that, although the movement is comprised largely of college-educated men, they sympathize and align with the sentiments held by the white working classes.²¹⁹

The point here is that economic hardship continues to fuel increasing anxiety within American society and by default motivates a significant portion of the alt-right movement. Economic hardship is a concrete grievance that is by no means exclusive to this latest right-wing extremist resurgence. An essay from 1963 explained that the then modern right-wing had its own sense of economic disgruntlement/fears; at the time it was believed the American system was being undermined by socialist and communist conspirators.²²⁰ In his research concerning the causes of right-wing extremism, James Piazza explains that "right-wing extremists use the insecurity accompanying economic grievances to popularize their agendas, to normalize their violent strategies, to recruit members and to generate networks of supporters."²²¹

²¹⁶ Brent L. Smith, *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994) 46–47.

²¹⁷ Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," Breitbart, March 29, 2016, <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right>.

²¹⁸ George Hawley, "The Demography of the Alt-right."

²¹⁹ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right."

²²⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996) 23–24.

²²¹ James A. Piazza, "The Determinants of Domestic Right-Wing Terrorism in the USA: Economic Grievance, Societal Change, and Political Resentment." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 34, no. 1(January 2017): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894215570429>.

2. Resentment toward Government

Neo-Nazi William Pierce's highly circulated 1978 novel, *The Turner Diaries*, describes the federal government as an evil entity that poses a significant threat to the white race, both spiritually and politically.²²² Right-wing extremists such as Timothy McVeigh and Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik have drawn inspiration and justification for their violence from this novel. Piazza explains that the federal government is perceived as having grown too powerful and been engaged in a campaign against individual rights.²²³ In addition, mainstream politics and politicians are perceived as tyrannical and guilty of political overreach.²²⁴ Anti-government sentiment is largely derived from the sense of dispossession, of abandonment by traditional conservatives in power, and of one no longer having a voice in government. Once again this concept is not new; Hofstadter describes the right-wing movement of the 1960s as feeling this sense of dispossession and that "their" America had been taken from them as well.²²⁵ This sense of dispossession, in part, stems from the perception that establishment conservatives are willing to abandon traditional values in favor of lucrative economic practices.²²⁶ The alt-right often refers to this group of establishment conservatives as "cuckservatives."²²⁷

The grievance against the government has also been largely in response to a perceived threat of having guns forcibly seized by the government. Max Ehrenfreund explains that the perception is that firearms will be necessary for "citizens to fight back against the federal government."²²⁸ He explains that in this regard, guns are a means of

²²² Juergensmeyer. *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 184–185.

²²³ Piazza, "The Determinants of Domestic Right-Wing Terrorism in the USA: Economic Grievance, Societal Change, and Political Resentment," 58.

²²⁴ Piazza, "The Determinants of Domestic Right-Wing Terrorism in the USA: Economic Grievance, Societal Change, and Political Resentment," 58.

²²⁵ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, 23.

²²⁶ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right."

²²⁷ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right."

²²⁸ Max Ehrenfreund, "Why so many Americans think the government wants their guns," *Washington Post*, January 8, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/08/why-so-many-americans-think-the-government-wants-their-guns>.

exerting a degree of control when the perception of loss of power exists. Despite the Supreme Court ruling it a constitutional right for Americans to keep firearms in 2008, and a lack of evidence to support the claim that the federal government planned a mass confiscation of weapons, this conspiracy has remained pervasive within the alt-right community for decades.²²⁹ The resentment among right-wing extremists, toward figures who openly favor policies the community has “vilified,” such as gun control, include liberals and conservatives alike.²³⁰ Other vilified government policies include foreign policy. The alt-right community describes themselves as isolationist and as against “overseas entanglements.²³¹ It is a common perception that the United States has relinquished too much control to the international community and is far too involved in international affairs.²³²

Over the last several decades, the right-wing extremist community has often attributed its economic hardships to globalization and efforts by political elites (even the conservative establishment) to promote minority advantages.²³³ Timothy McVeigh expressed these sentiments, blaming his failure to attain employment at one point on the fact he was white and a victim of government affirmative action programs.²³⁴ Similarly, Patrick Crusius expressed strong anti-government and anti-corporate views. Crusius explains that his actions were partially motivated by the lack of action on the part of the government to curb the issue of immigration, and its embrace of corporate lobbyists; he argues that, in fact, control of the government has been seized by these corporations.²³⁵

²²⁹ Ehrenfreund, “Why so many Americans think the government wants their guns.” For information of Supreme Court ruling see Nina Totenberg and Renee Montagne, “Supreme Court: Gun Ownership an Individual Right,” National Public Radio, June 26, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91913260>

²³⁰ Piazza, 58.

²³¹ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

²³² Piazza, 58.

²³³ Timothy G. Baysinger, “Right-wing Group Characteristics and Ideology,” *Homeland Security Affairs* 2, no 3 (July 2006), 6, <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/166>.

²³⁴ Baysinger, “Right-wing Group Characteristics and Ideology,” 7.

²³⁵ Crusius, “The Inconvenient Truth.”

Despite the perseverance of anti-government sentiments through generations of right-wing extremism, the SPLC reports that the number of anti-government groups, which experienced a massive uptick during the Obama administration, has actually been declining since 2016. The SPLC attributes this decline to the perception that, for the first time, the movement has an ally in the White House and the Trump Administration, and therefore has turned its aggression more toward immigrants and Muslims.²³⁶

3. Loss of White Identity

A common creed of right-wing extremists is “we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”²³⁷ This dogma, in part, is an example of Juergensmeyer’s argument that extremists will often express their grievances in cosmic terms.²³⁸ However, this message also represents a principal tenet of right-wing extremist belief, the loss of white identity. Many within the alt-right community have placed the preservation and protection of white American, and western-European culture at the pinnacle of importance and concern.²³⁹ Intellectuals of the alt-right argue that race and culture are inseparable, and fear that the homogeneous society (perceived as being desired and promoted by the mainstream) will result in the dissolution of white culture.²⁴⁰ A common perception is that whites are the victims of political hypocrisy, where they are to blame for all of society’s problems, and that racial and ethnic pride is perfectly acceptable to expect when celebrated by whites.²⁴¹

Although anti-immigrant rhetoric is largely a manifestation of the broader xenophobic subculture, one aspect of the threat that immigrants pose is their perceived role in demographic displacement. Conservative voices such as Samuel Huntington, an

²³⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 42

²³⁷ Kevin D. Williamson, “Angry White Boys,” *National Review*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/08/white-nationalists-alt-right-vague-grievances-what-do-they-want>.

²³⁸ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 184.

²³⁹ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

²⁴⁰ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

²⁴¹ Williamson, “Angry White Boys.”

American political scientist and academic, have argued for decades that the Latino failure to assimilate into American society represents a substantial threat to American identity, particularly, white identity.²⁴² This grievance is often referred to by the alt-right community, as “the great replacement,” or a supposed genocide of the white race and replacement by non-white foreigners.²⁴³ One version of this argument prevalent within the alt-right community, is that the white genocide is actually being accelerated by Jews in seats of power, who are bringing in these immigrants.²⁴⁴ Robert Bowers’ (2018 Tree of Life shooter) revealed his motives for extremist violence via postings on social media, where he espoused the anti-Semitic/anti-immigrant conspiracy.²⁴⁵ This fear of displacement is being realized and stoked even further by changing birthrates. According to Pew, as of 2018, minorities “now account for the majority of the nation’s newborns,” as well as children in public schools.²⁴⁶ In total, minority children account for more than 50 percent of school children, 28 percent are Hispanic.²⁴⁷

The alt-right also perceives immigrants’ role in the economy as a threat, often accusing liberal elites of favoring them through egalitarian policies.²⁴⁸ A common theme in right-wing extremist rhetoric is that “establishment” conservatives are willing to go along with these liberal elites and to sacrifice white culture in favor of a cheaper labor force, for the sake of business interests.²⁴⁹ The argument is that this encourages the mixing

²⁴² Jack Citrin et al., “Testing Huntington: Is Hispanic Immigration a Threat to American Identity?” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707070041>.

Also see Patrick J. Buchanan’s *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*, in which he also argues that declining white birthrates and increased immigration is resulting in the end of Western civilization.

²⁴³ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 9.

²⁴⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report*, February 20, 2019, 36, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/intelligence_report_166.pdf.

²⁴⁵ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report*, 36.

²⁴⁶ Schaeffer, “U.S. Has Changed in Key Ways in the Past Decade, From Tech Use To Demographics.”

²⁴⁷ Schaeffer, “U.S. Has Changed in Key Ways in the Past Decade, From Tech Use To Demographics.”

²⁴⁸ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

²⁴⁹ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

of races and cultures, a move that will ultimately result in the “common culture” conceding to the “lowest common denominator,” here being minorities.²⁵⁰ This strand of alt-right thinking further contributes to the sense of political abandonment covered in the previous section. Christopher Hewitt captures this concept, noting that “the primary issue for the extreme right is the transformation of the United States from an overwhelmingly white English-speaking society into a multicultural society in which whites constitute a rapidly shrinking portion of the population.”²⁵¹ In his manifesto, Crusius cited the Hispanic “invaders” as a major threat to white culture and insisted that targeting them was the only way to save the country from “the brink of destruction.”²⁵² The very essence of white identity is perceived as being undermined, abandoned, and exterminated.

C. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, two aspects of the latest right-wing extremist resurgence were explored: the contextual factors that have facilitated an environment conducive to violence, and concrete grievances that have provided the motivation for violence and acted as sources of unity for the alt-right movement. Neither contextual factors nor concrete grievances alone account for the resurgence of violence, yet they have contributed to the legitimacy of its use for right-wing extremists. Although some intellectuals of the movement disapprove of the use of violence, the alt-right movement is framed in a swath of it, from lone-actor attacks to rallies turned into riotous bloodshed like the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. So, the question that remains is, with these factors affecting generations and a broad community, why does violence come in waves?

²⁵⁰ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

²⁵¹ Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: from the Klan to Al Qaeda*, 122.

²⁵² Crusius, “The Inconvenient Truth.” Crusius refers to “the great replacement” and claims Hispanics are a principal threat because their role in politics, the economy, and American culture.

IV. FUELING THE FIRE: CATALYTIC EVENTS

The combination of the contextual factors and concrete grievances discussed in the previous chapter have stimulated the sentiments expressed by right-wing extremists for decades; these sentiments have intensified to the point of extremist violence, amid several catalytic events.²⁵³ In this thesis, three events are presented as the catalysts for this latest resurgence of right-wing violence: the election of the first black President, Barack Obama; the subsequent election of Donald Trump; and finally, the shift in societal behavior afforded by increased usage of social media platforms which, arguably, has had the greatest catalytic effect on facilitating increased right-wing violence. It is not the intent of this thesis to suggest or promote the argument that either President Obama or President Trump is personally responsible for this resurgence of right-wing extremist violence. It is rather the purpose of this chapter to outline the role their elections played, through an analysis of what each of them represented for the right-wing extremist community.

A. THE ELECTION OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA IN 2008

In the early days of 2007, Daryl Johnson, a senior analyst in charge of a small domestic terrorism unit inside of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), got wind of a little-known Illinois senator planning to run for president of the United States, Barack Obama. Being one of the few individuals within DHS not devoted to Islamic domestic threats, Johnson was well acquainted with right-wing extremist organizations in the United State and knew right away that Barack Obama was going to be a “lightning rod” for the extreme right-wing movement.²⁵⁴ As predicted, by the spring of 2008, membership on Stormfront (a foundational alt-right website) had increased dramatically and a number of assassination threats had been made against then-candidate Obama.²⁵⁵ In April 2009, DHS

²⁵³ Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, 36–39.

²⁵⁴ Janet Reitman, “U.S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don’t Know How to Stop It,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html>.

²⁵⁵ Reitman, “U.S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don’t Know How to Stop It.”

released a report in which the agency warned of a right-wing extremist resurgence, claimed that these extremists were capitalizing on the election of the first African American president, and that Barack Obama presented a “unique driver” for radicalization and recruitment.²⁵⁶ The threat posed to Candidate Obama by right-wing extremists was not lost on other agencies; by May of 2007, the Secret Service had ordered a protective detail to be assigned to him, something not typically afforded to candidates so early in the election cycle.²⁵⁷

Considering the criteria laid out in the previous chapter, it is not really a surprise that the candidacy of Barack Hussein Obama would stoke such a reaction from the right-wing extremist movement. Here was a black man, who had a Muslim sounding name, who was the product of a mixed-race couple (whose father was a non-citizen), who was a representative of the liberal establishment, and who sought the greatest seat of power in the world; arguably this prospect was off-putting for individuals whose concerns or private opinions aligned with the alt-right. Marc Sageman describes this reaction as a function of in- and out-groups, where the most representative example of either group is identified as the prototype for that group, and Barack Obama was the quintessential representation of everything the extreme right loathed and feared.²⁵⁸ Neo-Nazi and former KKK leader David Duke claimed that Obama was a “visual aid” that resparked right-wing purpose, amid fears “the white European-American” culture would soon be eradicated.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Reitman, “U.S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don’t Know How to Stop It.”

Of note, according to a *Time* magazine article, Johnson’s team was slowly disbanded following outrage from conservative media when the report was leaked claiming that it was nothing more than a ploy by the Obama Administration. According to the article upon the dissolution of the team, not a single analyst in DHS was devoted to non-Islamic domestic terrorism. For details see Vera Bergengruen and W.J. Hennigan, “‘We Are Being Eaten From Within.’ Why America Is Losing the Battle Against White Nationalist Terrorism,” *Time*, August 8, 2019, <https://time.com/5647304/white-nationalist-terrorism-united-states>.

²⁵⁷ Vera Bergengruen and W.J. Hennigan, “‘We Are Being Eaten From Within.’ Why America Is Losing the Battle Against White Nationalist Terrorism,” *Time*, August 8, 2019, <https://time.com/5647304/white-nationalist-terrorism-united-states>.

²⁵⁸ Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 132.

²⁵⁹ Stephanie Chen, “Growing hate groups blame Obama, economy,” CNN, February 26, 2009, <https://www.cnn.com/2009/US/02/26/hate.groups.report>.

One component of President Obama's election in 2008 was his record-breaking voter mobilization. Members of the extreme right watched as record numbers of minorities and women coalesced around the democratic candidate. Significant majorities of blacks and Hispanics (13 percent and 9 percent of the electorate, respectively) voted overwhelmingly for Obama; he won 95 percent of the black vote and 67 percent of the Hispanic vote.²⁶⁰ Fifty-six percent of women voted for him.²⁶¹ In addition, Obama managed to win 66 percent of the youth vote (ages 18 to 29), a group notorious for not voting.²⁶² This last point speaks to the Obama campaign's ability to capitalize on social media growth, as by 2008, 65 percent of Americans in this same youth demographic were using social media.²⁶³ From the right-wing extremist perspective, all the subjects of fear and derision had united around the prototype of the out-group.

Right-wing conspiracy theories concerning President Obama were in no short supply, ranging from allegations of his secret intentions to lead both jihadi and black revolts in America to the infamous "Birther" theory.²⁶⁴ These theories, spilled well beyond alt-right social media forums, and turned up in major news outlets and mainstream voices, something that some studies have shown can embolden would-be violent actors.²⁶⁵ For example, the bizarre charge that the crypto-Muslim Obama was laundering money for

²⁶⁰ "Election Results 2008," *New York Times*, November 5, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html>.

²⁶¹ "Election Results 2008," *New York Times*.

²⁶² "Election Results 2008," *New York Times*.

²⁶³ "Social Media Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media>.

²⁶⁴ The "Birther" theory began circulating among Clinton supporters during President Obama's campaign in 2008. The idea was then reinvigorated in 2011, in part by Donald Trump. The conspiracy involved rumors that Obama was born in Kenya and therefore ineligible to be President. The theory later evolved to notion that the President's birth certificate was a forgery and that Hawaii was not a state at the time of his birth (1961). These falsehoods have been repeatedly dispelled despite their continued pervasion within the right-wing extremist community. For details see Lily Rothman, "This Is How the Whole Birther Thing Actually Started," *Time*, September 16, 2016, <https://time.com/4496792/birther-rumor-started>.

²⁶⁵ Benjamin Newman et al., "The Trump Effect: An Experimental Investigation of the Emboldening Effect of Racially Inflammatory Elite Communication," *British Journal of Political Science*, February 17, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123419000590>. Also see: Kunal Relia et al., "Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin-based Discrimination in Social Media and Hate Crimes Across 100 U.S. Cities," New York University, January 31, 2019, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1902.00119.pdf>.

Islamic terrorists, was promoted on social media by former National Security Advisor, Gen. Michael Flynn.²⁶⁶

According to the SPLC, from the year President Obama announced his run for office (2007) until the year of his inauguration (2009) the number of hate groups rose roughly 5 percent, which tracks with the rising trend since the early 2000s.²⁶⁷ The more urgent increase was in the number of anti-government groups, many of which aligned with the alt-right; their number rose from 131 in 2007 to more than 500 by 2009, after having been on the decline before 2007.²⁶⁸ There was also a marked surge in white-extremist lone-wolf actors following the inauguration; by the spring of 2010, twelve attacks had occurred or been thwarted by authorities.²⁶⁹ The ADL demonstrated that, from 2007 until 2016, the number of right-wing terror incidents increased five-fold.²⁷⁰ According to hate-crime statistics collected by the FBI, violence increased 4.5 percent from 2007 until 2016.²⁷¹ This uptick in right-wing violence was largely indicative of the spark David Duke accredited Obama with providing right-wing extremists.

²⁶⁶ P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 81.

²⁶⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report*, February 20, 2019, 37, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/intelligence_report_166.pdf.

²⁶⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report*, 56.

²⁶⁹ Reitman, "U.S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don't Know How to Stop It."

²⁷⁰ "A Dark and Constant Rage: 25 Years of Right-Wing Terrorism in the United States," Anti-Defamation League, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/reports/dark-constant-rage-25-years-of-right-wing-terrorism-in-united-states>.

²⁷¹ Analysis was based on hate crime reports from 2007 – 2018 prepared by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program with violence being equated to increased percentages of crimes against persons such intimidation and assault. "Hate Crime," Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime>.

B. THE ELECTION OF PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP IN 2016

Right-wing violence rose during the Obama era and has surged in the Trump era.²⁷² In the fall of 2016, the alt-right movement saw itself raised to new heights when then-candidate Donald Trump announced Stephen Bannon would be heading up his campaign.²⁷³ Bannon at the time was the chairman of the fringe news network Breitbart, which he claimed was the “platform for the alt-right.”²⁷⁴ A March 2016 Breitbart article described Donald Trump in thoroughly alt-right language as “the first truly cultural candidate for President.” The same article argued that the support for Trump stemmed from a desire to preserve the “western European and American way of life.”²⁷⁵ The article goes on to characterize members of the alt-right movement as true natural conservatives who have long been abandoned by the mainstream conservative establishment and the Republican party.²⁷⁶

One 2016 *Atlantic* article described then-candidate Trump as an “Opioid of the Masses,” arguing that Trump provided his supporters with a means of alleviating the pain and fear they had long nurtured.²⁷⁷ Specifically, Donald Trump gave them a voice and instilled in them the sense that they were seizing power back, that they were going to “Make America Great Again.”²⁷⁸ Donald Trump was perceived to never be afraid to say what was on his mind, even if it was considered politically incorrect. He called for a “great big wall”

²⁷² Wesley Lowery et al., “In the United States, right-wing violence is on the rise,” *Washington Post*, November 25, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/in-the-united-states-right-wing-violence-is-on-the-rise/2018/11/25/61f7f24a-deb4-11e8-85df-7a6b4d25cfbb_story.html.

²⁷³ “What You Need To Know About The Alt-Right Movement,” National Public Radio, August 26, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/26/491452721/the-history-of-the-alt-right>.

²⁷⁴ National Public Radio. “What You Need To Know About The Alt-Right Movement.”

²⁷⁵ Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” Breitbart, March 29, 2016, <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right>.

²⁷⁶ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

²⁷⁷ J.D. Vance, “Opioid of the Masses,” *Atlantic*, July 4, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/opioid-of-the-masses/489911>.

²⁷⁸ Vance, “Opioid of the Masses.”

to keep out Mexican “criminals” and “rapists.”²⁷⁹ He promoted the idea that Hispanics and Muslim terrorists were invading the United States.²⁸⁰ Trump was also a staunch critic of the alt-right’s enemy, President Barack Obama.

As experts at the SPLC argue, Candidate Trump did not create the anxiety around non-whites for the alt-right community, but he certainly harnessed it during his 2016 campaign.²⁸¹ The language Donald Trump used at rallies and on social media was anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Establishment, anti-Liberal, pro-isolationism, and perhaps most importantly, neither politically correct nor apologetic. As an elite, candidate Trump provided alt-right violent actors with an in-group prototype in 2016, and he came to represent the alt-right’s means to recapture power.²⁸²

The Trump campaign exploited social media in expert fashion during the 2016 election and the President continues to use it as a means of communicating to the masses. Indeed, President Trump is the first U.S. president to wield this platform to reach the masses on a moment-to-moment basis, providing near real-time updates of his own views and emotions—and sometimes policy—via social media.²⁸³ This power has significant implications. One study published by Cambridge University examined what has been coined the Trump Effect. The researchers found that if political elites do not engage in inflammatory speech, individuals who hold bigoted or intolerant views generally kept those views reserved. When, however, the political elites speak in terms that align with or seem

²⁷⁹ Erika Lee, “Trump’s Xenophobia Is an American Tradition but It Doesn’t Have To Be,” *Washington Post*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/11/26/trumps-xenophobia-is-an-american-tradition-it-doesnt-have-be>.

²⁸⁰ Lee, “Trump’s Xenophobia Is an American Tradition but It Doesn’t Have To Be.”

²⁸¹ SPLC, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 16.

²⁸² This thesis is centered on right-wing violence, with that said the argument here is once again not that Donald Trump himself is/was violent rather that he became the prototype for the alt-right’s political message/platform.

²⁸³ P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 61.

to support prejudice, then those prejudiced individuals feel more emboldened to express their views more publicly.²⁸⁴

The trend in hate-related violence that began during the Obama administration has continued during President Trump's time in office, with an increase to 65.5 percent of hate crimes in 2018 being perpetrated against persons.²⁸⁵ These same years witnessed a normalization of malicious behavior online that moved increasingly toward violence in the public sphere. For example, in 2018, Cesar Sayoc sent homemade pipe bombs to 16 prominent Democrats, including former President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; these were people he deemed enemies of Trump.²⁸⁶ When he was arrested, Sayoc was living in his van, a van on which he had displayed glorifying Trump propaganda and depicted threatening images, such as of former President Obama in crosshairs.²⁸⁷ The images on Sayoc's van resembled his Facebook page at the time of his arrest; yet until 2016, his social media presence was fairly typical for middle-aged masculinity. His posts were of scantily clad women, gym workouts, and sports; however, in 2016 his online presence (and his van) began to fit the profile of a radicalized right-wing extremist.²⁸⁸ While the previous study examined the effects of elite inflammatory speech, other scholars have indicated that extremists may be emboldened to commit violence when they perceive the political environment to be "more permissive and encouraging."²⁸⁹ Sayoc is just one

²⁸⁴ Newman et al., "The Trump Effect: An Experimental Investigation of the Emboldening Effect of Racially Inflammatory Elite Communication."

²⁸⁵ "Hate Crime," Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime>.

²⁸⁶ Benjamin Weiser and Ali Watkins, "Cesar Sayoc, Who Mailed Pipe Bombs to Trump Critics, Is Sentenced to 20 Years," August 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/nyregion/cesar-sayoc-sentencing-pipe-bombing.html>.

²⁸⁷ Weiser and Watkins, "Cesar Sayoc, Who Mailed Pipe Bombs to Trump Critics, Is Sentenced to 20 Years."

²⁸⁸ Kevin Roose, "Cesar Sayoc's Path on Social Media: From Food Photos to Partisan Fury," *New York Times*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/technology/cesar-sayoc-facebook-twitter>.

²⁸⁹ Piazza, "The Determinants of Domestic Right-Wing Terrorism in the USA: Economic Grievance, Societal Change, and Political Resentment," 58. Also see Liam Stack, "Alt-Right, Alt-Left, Antifa: A Glossary of Extremist Language," *New York Times*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/alt-left-alt-right-glossary.html>. Stack's article provides a number of examples of President Trump's language being aligned with that of the alt-right movement.

example of an individual who claimed to be inspired to commit violence by President Trump’s rhetoric. There have been many instances when the president has made comments, publicly and online, that were perceived as a call for violence, perceptions he has consistently dismissed as misinterpretations.²⁹⁰ Yet regardless of whether the President openly condoned violence or not, it is conceivable that the violent-prone (like Sayoc) easily could have read such a call from certain comments or online posts.

C. SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCE: SHIFTING SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

Few would argue that the impacts of the internet on society have been anything less than revolutionary. One incredibly influential development, enabled by the internet’s advance, was the advent and subsequent pervasiveness of social media. This thesis argues that social behavior, in particular the expression of rage, has changed and that this change has been afforded by the development and growing use of social media. This section first assesses this change by demonstrating the growth in social media use and examining its effects on social behavior both online and in the public sphere. Next it will examine how this affordance has been a catalyst for the right-wing extremist resurgence since 2008.

1. Social Media and Social Behavior

Since 2005, the percentage of U.S. adults using at least one social media platform increased from 5 percent to more than 70 percent by 2019.²⁹¹ Surveys conducted by Pew Research Center revealed that usage has increased across all age brackets (see Figure 3).

²⁹⁰ Meghan Keneally, “A Look Back At Trump Comments Perceived By Some As Encouraging Violence,” ABC News, October 19, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/back-trump-comments-perceived-encouraging-violence/story?id=48415766>.

²⁹¹ “Social Media Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media>.

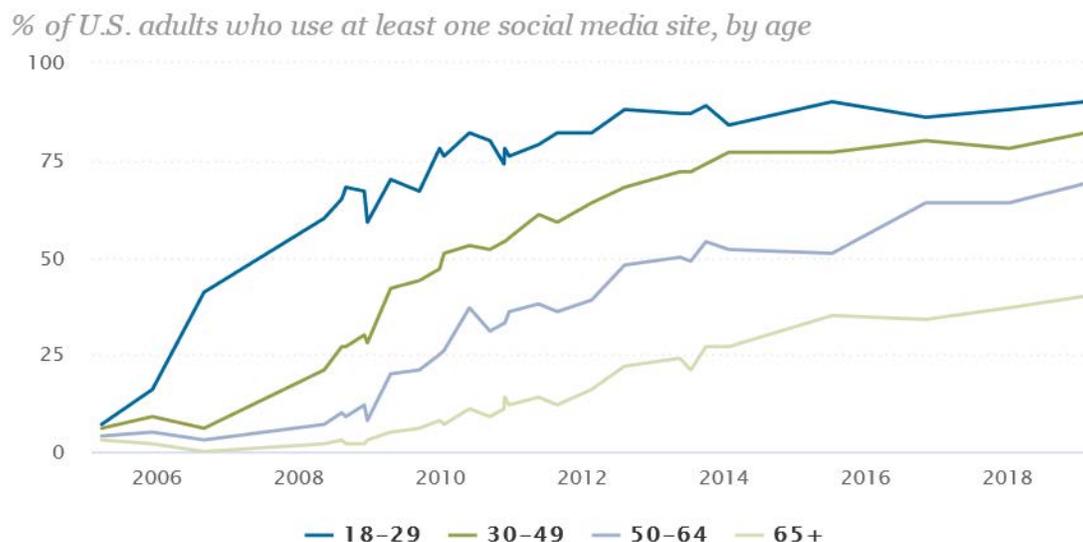


Figure 3. Percentage of American Adult Social Media Users 2005–2019²⁹²

Similar patterns of use emerge when surveying teens (ages thirteen to seventeen). One study revealed that the percentage of teens preferring social media as a means of communicating, as opposed to texting or in person, has more than doubled since 2012.²⁹³ Pew Research also points out that while Facebook, by and large, remains the predominant social media platform used across all demographics, the number of users on all platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat continues to rise. The same study also revealed that the majority of users visit these platforms at least daily.²⁹⁴ A separate study found that roughly two-thirds of U.S. adults refer to social media, at least occasionally, for

²⁹² Source: Pew Research Center, “Social Media Fact Sheet.” This graphic demonstrates the rise in social media use across all age brackets since 2005.

²⁹³ Common Sense Media found that social media as a preferred means of communication for teens increased from 7 percent to 16 percent, from 2012 to 2018. A preference for in-person communication dropped from 49 percent to 32 percent during the same time frame. See “Social Media, Social Life: Teens Reveal Their Experiences,” Common Sense Media, last modified September 10, 2018, <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/social-media-social-life-infographic>.

²⁹⁴ Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2018,” Pew Research Center, last modified March 1, 2018, <https://pewresearch-org-preprod.go-vip.co/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018>.

news materials.²⁹⁵ Twitter and Facebook are the platforms where the largest percentages of users get at least some news, 71 and 67 percent, respectively.²⁹⁶

Ordinary citizens are not alone on social media; these platforms are increasingly being used by governments, politicians, civic organizations, charities and more, not only for the sharing of information but also for garnering political and social influence.²⁹⁷ P.W. Springer explains that former President Barack Obama was one of the first world leaders to utilize social media in a political campaign in 2008; today the leaders from nearly 200 countries worldwide have begun this practice as well, including President Donald Trump.²⁹⁸ Other organizations are increasing their presence on social media, including the U.S. military and national, state, and local law enforcement agencies, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation down to small-town entities like Desoto County Sheriff's Office in Arcadia, Florida.

One of the major functions of social media in society today is that of community building; Facebook even has it in its mission statement.²⁹⁹ However, social media-based communities are often polarized and polarizing, in particular within political contexts; platforms are often no more than echo chambers for agreeing voices, leaving little room for dissent. In his book, *#Republic*, author Cass Sunstein explains that polarization in online groups is highly likely to occur, even to the extreme, especially in instances when individuals can maintain a level of anonymity and yet the groups' collective identity is heavily emphasized.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁵ Elisa Shearer and Katerina Eva Matsa, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018," Pew Research Center, last modified September 10, 2018, <https://pewresearch-org-preprod.go-vip.co/journalism/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018>.

²⁹⁶ Shearer and Matsa, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018."

²⁹⁷ Scott Wright, Todd Graham, and Dan Jackson, "Third Space, Social Media, and Everyday Political Talk," in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015), chap. 5, 74, <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315716299.ch5>.

²⁹⁸ Singer and Brooking, *Like War*, 60–61.

²⁹⁹ "Our Mission," Facebook Inc. accessed March 17, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/company-info>.

³⁰⁰ Cass Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017), 77–78.

Sunstein cites research on the #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter hashtags.³⁰¹ The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, was created and used primarily as a means of drawing attention to what proponents deemed racially driven practices, particularly among law enforcement officials. One study found that the hashtag was used in more than 40 million tweets and, amid such a wide reach, had a major impact on opinions and actions at the local and even national level.³⁰² An example was the use of the hashtag to mobilize students and draw attention to racism on the University of Missouri's campus, which resulted in the university president's resignation.³⁰³ In response to #BlackLivesMatter, the hashtag #AllLivesMatter began circulating, generally as an alternate narrative to #BlackLivesMatter. #AllLivesMatter was created in an effort to promote a common identity for individuals critical of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, thus demonstrating the polarizing effects of social media.³⁰⁴

In efforts to improve user experiences and expand on community building capabilities, many social media platforms have created algorithms that have had unintended consequences. YouTube is one such example. The social media company engineered a recommendation system for the purpose of maximizing viewership and watch time.³⁰⁵ However, the system is designed to suggest increasingly enticing videos that generally start automatically, thereby keeping viewers viewing. *The New York Times* reported that this system now generates 70 percent of watch time, with YouTube raking in more than \$1 billion monthly.³⁰⁶ Social media companies, thus, are economically incentivized to promote these recommendation mechanisms. In some cases, these digital mechanisms have been weaponized by members of the political community from the

³⁰¹ Sunstein, #Republic, 80–81.

³⁰² Sunstein, 80.

³⁰³ Frank Roberts, "How Black Lives Matter Changed the Way Americans Fight for Freedom," American Civil Liberties Union, July 13, 2018, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/race-and-criminal-justice/how-black-lives-matter-changed-way-americans-fight>.

³⁰⁴ Sunstein, #Republic, 81.

³⁰⁵ Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, "How YouTube radicalized Brazil," *New York Times*, August 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/world/americas/youtube-brazil.html>.

³⁰⁶ Fisher and Taub, "How YouTube radicalized Brazil."

mainstream to extremists. When users refer to other users or videos, the recommendation system learns to string their materials together.³⁰⁷ Thus, where conspiracy theory and hate-filled videos that would only spread to whoever users manually shared without the recommendation mechanism, now could potentially proliferate indefinitely within the cyber domain.³⁰⁸

2. Social Media and Right-Wing Extremism

Part of the shift in social behavior afforded by social media is the expression of rage. The alt-right movement is closely associated with its social media presence and use of online memes. According to Milo Yiannopoulos on Breitbart, alt-right online activity is mostly trolling, a “rebellious contingent” of youth that wish to do no more than agitate the mainstream establishment, because they think it is funny.³⁰⁹ The more people who are in on the joke, however, the more defining an online community can become. While the alt-right community can be found on open community social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, the primary hubs of their activity are on sites like 4chan, 8chan, and Gab.³¹⁰

Sunstein explains that, because social media and the Internet have made it so much easier for individuals with similar ideology to come together and share their views, it has inadvertently strengthened these fringe communities that are otherwise geographically separated.³¹¹ On social media these individuals can engage in conversation (inside the proverbial echo-chamber), isolated from conflicting views, and fuel one another’s passions to the point of radicalization. Donatella della Porta describes a process in which an individual undergoes a shift from perceiving his or her identity as solely his or her own to one that is shared collectively among a group.³¹² She explains that this shift takes place

³⁰⁷ Fisher and Taub, “How YouTube Radicalized Brazil.”

³⁰⁸ Fisher and Taub, “How YouTube Radicalized Brazil.”

³⁰⁹ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

³¹⁰ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.”

³¹¹ Sunstein, #Republic, 65.

³¹² Donatella della Porta and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, “Patterns of Radicalization in Political Activism,” *Social Science History*, vol. 36, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 314. Project Muse.

within a “dense social network,” in this case on social media, and that as the sense of group identity develops, a normalization of more radical actions occurs and becomes more justified for an individual to take.³¹³

Thus, social media platforms provide the means of information sharing among individuals/groups, like the alt-right, who believe their pet viewpoints have been discredited or ignored by mainstream politics. This rejection by the mainstream results in increased emotional dependence on the in-group, isolated in its echo chamber.³¹⁴ Marc Sageman describes a process in which the voices within the echo chamber use increasingly violent discourse to provide more extreme solutions to the communities’ fears/grievances, and to elevate the conflict to the level of war.³¹⁵ The perception that the white social identity (stimulated by factors in the previous chapter), is under attack and therefore must be defended and power reclaimed provides actors with a justification for violence. A clear friend-foe identity has emerged within the alt-right movement; Maria Moyano describes this type of group or social identity as being incredibly conforming, and that any identity outside of the group becomes difficult to comprehend.³¹⁶ She adds that group cohesion around this social identity can be strengthened when defensive justification occurs, particular through the actions of out-group authorities.³¹⁷

Several studies have examined the role of social media and extreme violence. One such project examined the link between social media and hate crimes, of an anti-immigrant nature, in Germany.³¹⁸ The researchers discovered that while social media has grown to

³¹³ Della Porta and Haupt, “Patterns of Radicalization in Political Activism,” 315.

³¹⁴ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 131.

³¹⁵ Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, 135.

³¹⁶ María J. Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle, 1969–1979* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1995), 7.

³¹⁷ Moyano, *Argentina’s Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle, 1969–1979*, 75. While her book is centered on violent opposition movements in 1970s Argentina, Dr. Rasmussen spends significant time discussing the causal factors of political violence at large, including by right-wing groups.

³¹⁸ Karsten Muller and Carlo Schwarz, “Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime” (working paper, University of Warwick, 2019), 1–42, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3082972>.

be a powerful instrument for the spread of information, it has acted simultaneously as a mechanism for disseminating hateful ideas that have spilled over into motivating “real-life action.” Through careful analysis they were able to correlate online postings with anti-immigrant incidents, linking brief outbursts of sentiment within a specific location and the significant effects they had on social behavior.³¹⁹

Research shows that recent violent extremists who carried out their actions alone were, in fact, part of a much larger radical online community; many drew inspiration from previous incidents, some from multiple malign actors. One example was Patrick Crusius, the 2019 El Paso Walmart shooter. Crusius, also was a frequent user of 8chan, a platform notorious for its alt-right community.³²⁰ In his manifesto, Crusius praised the Christchurch, New Zealand, shooter (51 victims in 2019), an incident that had occurred a few months earlier.³²¹ The Christchurch shooter’s manifesto had revealed that he, too, had been inspired by other alt-right killers including Anders Breivik (77 victims in 2011) and Dylann Roof (nine victims in 2015).³²² Dylann Roof revealed that he had frequented the website Council of Conservative Citizens, a forum utilized to promote white supremacists’ views.³²³

Some open community social media sites (such as Twitter and YouTube) have made some efforts to remove hate language deemed too inflammatory and have begun the process of “deplatforming” individuals who upload this material.³²⁴ Unfortunately, other platforms have leveraged this act of deplatforming into increasing their own viewership/users. Gab has emerged as popular social media platform for the alt-right,

³¹⁹ Muller and Schwarz, “Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime,” 41–42.

³²⁰ SPLC, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 18.

³²¹ Cai et al., “White Extremist Ideology Drives Many Deadly Shootings.”

³²² Cai et al., “White Extremist Ideology Drives Many Deadly Shootings.”

³²³ “Council of Conservative Citizens,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/council-conservative-citizens>.

³²⁴ “When Twitter Bans Extremists, Gab Puts Out the Welcome Mat,” Anti-Defamation League, March 11, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/blog/when-twitter-bans-extremists-gab-puts-out-the-welcome-mat>.

especially for individuals who were ban from communal sites like Twitter.³²⁵ According to the SPLC, Gab reached one million users in 2019.³²⁶ Robert Bowers, the alt-right anti-Semite who killed eleven Jewish worshipers at a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018, was a frequent user of Gab and regularly espoused the conspiracy theory of a Jewish-led white genocide on the platform.³²⁷ The ADL found these language patterns and theories also were widespread on such other alt-right platforms as 8chan.³²⁸ In 2016, analysts at the *Washington Post*, conducted a study that examined Twitter activity and found that the alt-right was growing more radical, and potentially more inclined to violence.³²⁹ The research revealed that within certain online communities, language shifted from relatively non-aggressive racism, to increasingly antagonistic extremist rhetoric commonly associated with violence.³³⁰

D. CONCLUSION

Right-wing extremism has been present in the United States since its founding, yet violence appears only periodically. This chapter revealed three developments that were described as a catalyst for violence after 2008. For the latest resurgence of right-wing extremist violence, the first of those events was the election of the first black president, Barack Obama. Obama represented everything right-wing extremists loathed and feared, from his heritage to his ability to politically mobilize minority groups. The next event was the election of Donald Trump who, for the alt-right, represented a means of regaining a sense of power and preserving white culture. The final event concerned the change in social behavior, including the expression of rage, that has been afforded by the development and

³²⁵ Anti-Defamation League, “When Twitter Bans Extremists, Gab Puts Out the Welcome Mat.”

³²⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019*, 11.

³²⁷ “Gab and 8chan: Home to Terrorists Plots Hiding in Plain Sight,” Anti-Defamation League, March 11, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/gab-and-8chan-home-to-terrorist-plots-hiding-in-plain-sight>.

³²⁸ Anti-Defamation League, “Gab and 8chan: Home to Terrorists Plots Hiding in Plain Sight.”

³²⁹ Jonathon Morgan, “These Charts Show Exactly How Racist and Radical the Alt-Right Has Gotten This Year,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/09/26/these-charts-show-exactly-how-racist-and-radical-the-alt-right-has-gotten-this-year>.

³³⁰ Morgan, “These Charts Show Exactly How Racist and Radical the Alt-Right Has Gotten This Year.”

increased use of social media in the last decade and a half. The argument this thesis has advanced is that these catalytic events have exacerbated contextual factors, have given salience to right-wing extremist grievances, and thus stimulated the rise in right-wing extremist violence.

V. FUELING THE FIRE: CONCLUSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Right-wing extremist violence is a threat American society has periodically endured since the post-Civil War Era. Since 2008, the United States has been plagued by one of these waves of violence. This thesis argued that three sets of factors explain why violence has ensued. The factors described in this thesis affect a large portion of society and the sentiments expressed can appeal to a broader audience than just right-wing extremists. In addition, several of these factors have endured through generations; yet increased violence only occurs periodically. The purpose of this thesis was to account for this latest resurgence of extremist violence.

This research concluded that the dynamic interplay of 1) contextual factors such as political hyperpolarization, a subculture of xenophobia, and certain opportunity structures like near unfettered access to firearms and the government and law enforcement focus on Islamic extremism; and 2) concrete grievances such as economic anxiety, resentment toward the government, and the perception of loss of white identity, facilitated the resurgence of violence. The contextual factors enabled an environment where extremist violence was more likely to occur, and the concrete grievances provided the motivation and fuel. Several catalytic events occurring since 2008 such as the election of the first black president, Barack Obama, the election of Donald Trump, and the change in societal behavior afforded by the development and increased use of social media, amplified the effects of this relationship by giving salience to context and grievances and thereby intensifying the violent reactions by right-wing extremists.

George Eliot once wrote that, “it is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view.”³³¹ It is acknowledged that this thesis examined right-wing extremism through a single lens and that a number of opportunities for further research remain. The following chapter presents suggestions for future studies. In addition, as this wave of violence continues to threaten American society, it will also present some

³³¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2016.), 49. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=4729030>.

opportunities for authorities and mainstream society to thwart further right-wing extremist violence.

A. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The academic purpose of this thesis was to expand our understanding of the latest resurgence of right-wing extremist violence in the United States within the field of terrorism studies. This thesis focused on explaining why now? Yet a number of other questions remain, including, how will such violence end?

While this thesis focused on the causes of extremist violence, other researchers have turned their attention to examining how violence comes to an end. In her book, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Audrey Cronin explores six approaches to ending terrorist violence. The six methods she examines are: leadership removal; negotiation; terrorist success; terrorist failure; repression; and reorientation, meaning shifting the focus of terrorist organizations.³³² As the threat of violence from the alt-right continues to persist, the opportunity for researching its eventual decline also remains and could bolster our understanding of how to terminate other campaigns of extremist violence. Cronin's analysis is largely focused on terrorist organizations which indeed can apply to groups within the larger alt-right community. However, as this thesis has shown, the threat from lone-wolf actors is a dynamic one for which an organizational approach may be difficult to apply. Therefore, where this thesis sought to explain the causes of extremist violence by examining the broader alt-right community, a deeper analysis of right-wing lone-wolf actors is pertinent, given the increase in these types of incidents.

Any of the factors presented in this thesis could be expanded upon further. Other variables, such as organizational structures, could be considered in order to research this resurgence from a different perspective. Our understanding of this resurgence could be expanded further by examining it through a broader lens and considering the role of the international right-wing community both online and in the public sphere as well.

³³² Audrey Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 9–12.

This wave of violence is but one example of extremism afflicting the world today; therefore, it will behoove future researchers to export and apply the approach adopted herein as a framework for explaining other periods and forms of extremist violence. A similar approach could be narrowed down and applied to specific domestic groups in the U.S., such as The Base (a neo-Nazi extremist organization.)³³³ Likewise it may be useful in examining other specific right-wing movements such as the Identitarian movement in Europe.³³⁴ While it remains important for the academic community to further research the causes of extremism violence, it is also essential that efforts be made in ending this wave of violence in the U.S.

B. OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY MAKERS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

In September 2019, DHS released its *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, in the report DHS recognizes white supremacist violent extremism as one of the principal domestic terrorism threats.³³⁵ In February 2020, the FBI elevated “racially motivated violent extremism” to a top-threat priority, placing it on par with the Islamic extremist threat.³³⁶ Although there are indications that the national narrative surrounding right-wing extremism in the United States is changing, perhaps for the better, authorities still appear to be struggling to respond to this latest resurgence of violence.³³⁷ Therefore, the following discussion presents various opportunities for policy

³³³ For details on The Base see “The Base,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/the-base>.

³³⁴ See Markus Willinger, *Generation Identity: A Declaration of War Against the ‘68ers*, (London: Arktos, 2013). The book provides readers with an inside look into the ideology of the growing identitarian movement from the voice of one of its principal activists.

³³⁵ Department of Homeland Security, *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2019), 10, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf.

³³⁶ Jon Lewis et al., “White Supremacist Terror: Modernizing Our Approach to Today’s Threat” (George Washington University Program on Extremism and Anti-Defamation League, 2020), 4, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/White%20Supremacist%20Terror%20final.pdf>.

³³⁷ The GWU and ADL report quoted one DHS official as saying “it feels like we are at the doorstep of another 9/11...we can see it building and we don’t know how to stop it.” See Jon Lewis et al., “White Supremacist Terror: Modernizing Our Approach to Today’s Threat,” 3.

makers, law enforcement authorities, and society at large to counter or at least lessen the impacts of this latest wave of right-wing extremism.

First and foremost, government leaders must recognize and communicate to the public the threat posed by right-wing extremism in the United States today. As was examined previously, until recently the threat posed by right-wing extremism has been largely ignored or downplayed by top law enforcement and political leaders. Cronin describes ignoring the obvious signs of extremist activity as one degree of passive support.³³⁸ The argument here is not that political and law enforcement leaders have ignored right-wing extremism with the intent of promoting violence. Rather, by politicizing right-wing extremist violence and rhetoric and downplaying the threat, they have allowed for support to grow and violence to increase. By declaring right-wing violent extremism a priority threat, as DHS and the FBI have, individuals with an inclination toward violence may reconsider in fear of targeted counteraction.³³⁹ In addition, by reevaluating this threat agencies can justify increasing the number of resources dedicated to understanding and responding to it.³⁴⁰

As this thesis has shown, several grievances held by the alt-right community have persisted over time as a result of not being answered at the polls and by the government. The appeal of these grievances could be potentially lessened through carefully crafted reforms and policies.³⁴¹ For example, job creation and increased wages may decrease economic hardship for a large part of society, lessening the popularity of right-wing extremist agendas. As was discussed in the previous chapter, absent condemning statements by authority figures, violent actors may perceive the socio-political environment as more permissive and be further emboldened to commit violence.³⁴² This thesis argued that, absent clear denunciation, incendiary rhetoric can become normalized.

³³⁸ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, 104.

³³⁹ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, 105.

³⁴⁰ Lewis et al., “White Supremacist Terror: Modernizing Our Approach to Today’s Threat,” 34.

³⁴¹ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, 105.

³⁴² Piazza, “The determinants of domestic right-wing terrorism in the USA: Economic grievance, societal change, and political resentment,” 58.

Therefore, clear, public, and repeated condemnation of extremist violence and rhetoric could bode well in lessening its social acceptability.³⁴³

As was demonstrated in Chapter IV, social media is a reality for society moving forward; therefore, it should be embraced as a tool. By establishing improved mechanisms for intercompany information sharing, social media companies may better understand how they are exploited as tools of extremism. In addition, these companies should work toward recognizing areas where they can be part of the solution. One example would be to improve reporting systems for users, and actionable mechanisms for flagging potentially violent, at-risk profiles. Law enforcement, intelligence officials, and local communities could leverage social media in order to open a dialogue and encourage non-violent groups to report individuals who either leave the group or express violent extremist views. By doing so, such individuals could be engaged and guided toward deradicalization prior to committing violence. These “off-ramp” practices could aid in preventing future violence as well as the next generation of extremists.³⁴⁴ In addition, mainstream communal social media sites such as Twitter have guidelines that enable them to remove incendiary language and content.³⁴⁵ These guidelines should be clearly defined to all users and strictly enforced by the companies themselves; the creation of better flagging mechanisms will also improve companies’ ability to identify this content.

Social media could be further utilized through monitoring. A number of studies have shown that right-wing actors often engage in leakage behavior prior to committing violent acts.³⁴⁶ One method for recognizing such behavior on social media is through the

³⁴³ Lewis et al., “White Supremacist Terror: Modernizing Our Approach to Today’s Threat,” 35.

³⁴⁴ Lewis et al., “White Supremacist Terror: Modernizing Our Approach to Today’s Threat,” 34.

³⁴⁵ Danielle Allen and Richard A. Wilson, “The Rules of Incitement Should Apply To – And Be Enforced On- Social Media,” *Washington Post*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/08/08/can-speech-social-media-incite-violence>.

³⁴⁶ Melanie Smith et al., “Lone Actor Terrorism Policy Paper 3: Motivations, Political Engagement, and Online Activity,” (working paper, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016), 4. <http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CLAT-Policy-Paper-3-ISD.pdf>. For example see ADL, “Gab and 8chan: Home To Terrorists Plots Hiding in Plain Sight.” The right-wing extremist Robert Bowers is an example of an individual who engaged in this “leakage behavior.”

use of linguistic markers.³⁴⁷ Enabling police and intelligence officials' ability to use such monitoring tools could increase the probability of detecting early warning signs of impending violence. It is recognized here that the previous recommendation comes with controversial civil liberty obstacles; therefore, the process would require a significant dialogue between citizens and authorities to establish acceptable monitoring practices. As this thesis has shown, fringe sites like 8chan and Gab are online havens for right-wing extremists. It should also be recognized that these sites do not have the same removal policies as described in the previous paragraph; thus, monitoring by law enforcement and intelligence agencies becomes even more paramount in these forums.

The necessity for public education and encouragement of open communication cannot be overstated. Organizations such as the SPLC and ADL are powerful tools in countering violent extremists and groups. Law enforcement and government authorities should continue to partner with these organizations in order to improve their own understanding of the right-wing extremist threat, in addition to leveraging them for public outreach and education programs. Investing in community education and encouraging civilized, productive political discourse both online and in the public sphere, could reduce the widespread polarization in American society today. As this thesis showed, the right-wing extremist community of today has capitalized on political hyperpolarization to mainstream its agendas. Cronin explains that in the absence of progress, violent extremists often experience "burnout."³⁴⁸ Therefore, depolarization through constructive communication and education could go a long way in disrupting this latest resurgence of violence.

The opportunities and recommendations presented here were not the focus of this thesis, however, while researching right-wing extremism the recommendations mentioned above were repeatedly presented by experts and other researchers. The recommendations offered above, by no means represent a comprehensive list, nor is it advocated here that any of these are 100 percent solutions. However, it is argued that education and

³⁴⁷ Katie Cohen et al., "Detecting Linguistic Markers for Radical Violence in Social Media," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 1 (December, 2013): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849948>.

³⁴⁸ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, 99.

communication at all levels will be absolutely necessary to curb this wave of extremist violence.

C. LOOKING FORWARD

The alt-right is but the latest manifestation of right-wing extremist violence in the United States, and it is one that has grown over the last decade and continues to affect American society today. This thesis presented three sets of factors that when combined can have tragic results. However, by recognizing the role of contextual factors and concrete grievances, as well as the catalytic potential of certain events as they occur, we may be able to stymie extremist violence before it transpires.

This thesis is being concluded during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. This virus has wreaked havoc on global society, not just in terms of deaths but also of its toll on economies, health care systems, and daily lives. Unemployment has reached a level not seen since the Great Depression of 1929.³⁴⁹ Armed demonstrators have marched on state capitols in protest against restrictions on freedom of movement that they deemed government over-reach—often in the company of other extremist organizations with their own agendas for these gatherings.³⁵⁰ Partisan divides continue to seethe as Americans brace for what is sure to be an unprecedented presidential campaign and election season, given the constraints of social distancing and public fears of the virus’s spread.³⁵¹ In

³⁴⁹ Patricia Cohen and Tiffany Hsu, “For Workers, No Sign of ‘What Normal Is Going to Look Like,’” *New York Times*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/07/business/economy/coronavirus-unemployment-claims.html>. As of April 2020, unemployment claims have exceeded 33 million and the unemployment rate has surpassed 15 percent.

³⁵⁰ Manny Fernandez and David Montgomery, “Businesses Chafing Under Covid-19 Lockdowns Turn to Armed Defiance,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/13/us/coronavirus-texas-armed-militias-reopening.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>. While protest have not yet turned violent (some small skirmishes among protestors) rhetoric has grown increasingly violent with some demonstrators carrying nooses and assault-style rifles. Firearms sales have set record breaking numbers as well amid pandemic fears, see Lois Beckett, “Americans purchasing record-breaking numbers of guns amid coronavirus,” *Guardian*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/us-gun-purchases-coronavirus-record>. According to the article, the FBI reported conducting more than 3.7 million firearm background checks in the month of March, a number they claim is the highest in twenty years.

³⁵¹ Andrew Daniller, “Americans remain concerned that states will lift restrictions too quickly, but partisan differences widen,” Pew Research Center, May 7, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/07/americans-remain-concerned-that-states-will-lift-restrictions-too-quickly-but-partisan-differences-widen>.

addition, social distancing restrictions have not dissuaded right-wing violent actors from engaging in violence. In March 2020, the FBI shot and killed a white supremacist when he attempted to bomb a Missouri hospital treating coronavirus patients.³⁵² Investigators found that the perpetrator allegedly discussed other targets including religious centers and a school with a predominantly black student body. He is believed to have accelerated his plans in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.³⁵³

While it is not yet known what the long-term effects of the pandemic will be, nor the process or outcome of the 2020 Presidential election, it behooves us to recognize the catalytic potential events such as these have at exacerbating the contextual factors still at play and grievances of the right-wing extremist community. This thesis aids in identifying these factors and help counter potential extremist violence in the future. Extremist violence is an unfortunate reality of global society, one that has broad and catastrophic impacts on peoples' lives. By expanding on the understanding of extremist violence and learning to recognize patterns and indicators of its imminence, some of the impacts can be reduced.

³⁵² Jon Lewis et al., "White Supremacist Terror: Modernizing Our Approach to Today's Threat" (George Washington University Program on Extremism and Anti-Defamation League, 2020), 5–6, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/White%20Supremacist%20Terror%20final.pdf>.

³⁵³ Lewis et al., "White Supremacist Terror: Modernizing Our Approach to Today's Threat," 5.

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